

Sacred Arrow



Author's Note on English Translation

'Sacred Arrow' is a third novel in my anthro cycle and was written in Russian between 2021–2025. If you like anthro lions and lionesses, or felines in general, maybe it's for you.

Everything happens in a world resembling the late Roman Empire mixed with the Middle Ages, with tiny elements of Enlightenment.

The footnote apparatus, which is absent in Russian original and added for context, which is mostly established in the first novel of the cycle, features two voices: S., and Z. They argue with each other and occasionally with the text itself. Treat them as interpretive companions rather than reference material.

'Sacred Arrow' is dense; author's translation attempts to preserve the syntactic and semantic structures of the Russian original.

A Lion Cub Named Arzis Reads a Lioncub's Book about Ashai-Keetrah

The Ashai-Keetrah are the very best Suung lionesses, chosen from birth by Vaal himself. From a young age, they study diligently to serve all Suungs well. Because they are devoted and faithful to Vaal, they can do many different things that no one else in the entire world can do.

They can make Vaal's fire appear on their hands, and this is called ignimara. This means they must be treated with reverence. They can see our thoughts, and this is called empathy. This means you cannot lie to them—they will always know the truth. Certain Ashai-Keetrah can even speak to one another through dreams across any distance, and this represents Vaal's most magnificent gift, one that serves the Empire and all Suungs faithfully. These Ashai-Keetrah are known as Messengers. This means they deserve the highest honors for such feats of the spirit, and must be protected from every evil in the world.

This is why every Suung must hold the Ashai-Keetrah in love and reverence. And they, in their devotion, serve each and every one of us. Remember: Tiamat, Vaal, Naheim.

Truebelieving, Pureblooded Daughter

Mauna tried to convince herself, kept trying, kept convincing. In her hands, a golden mirror spun feverishly—brand new, like its young mistress. She scratched at its gold with her claws. Pure gold, all of it.

One must always think well of oneself—only the very best thoughts. This isn't required of every Suung, and is merely desirable for every Ashai-Keetrah, but for her it's doubly law, because: Messenger (acolyte); patrician (seventh generation). No, she's no failure, no lazy creature, she's not weak-willed. No, she's not pretending—she is. The mentors couldn't have been wrong ten years ago, because in such matters they're almost never wrong. The stakes are too high. Not her fault! She tried, she tries, and she will keep trying; never surrender, everything steeped in the blood of victory. It just happened this way: late awakening, unthinkable difficult art, vicious circumstances—and those we should not discuss, let's not. The ideal condemns everyone—it cannot be reached.

No, not like that. Messaging is first a Craft, and then an art. This...

"I'm not a fraud... I swear it, no fraud at all."

She gazed absently out the carriage window toward the distant gray woods. Things of the world moved among the trees, and now and then the sun broke through.

"I am a Messenger, a Messenger, a Mes-sen-ger..." Mauna chanted to herself very quietly, though she was alone, like an engram^{1,2,3}. "Ashai-Keetrah, star of the sisterhood, jewel of the Suungs, scourge of enemies, I am a Messenger, bloodline of House Nakht-Serai, I am a Messenger..."

"Vaal will guide, Vaal will not fail, all for the blood of service," she breathed in through her nose, exhaled through clenched teeth and fangs.

Just a little more, and everything would be as it should: she would be haughty, caustically ironic, closed and stern, secretly passionate, with mystery and whimsy—as Messengers ought to be, as befits them. Her noble birth will finally make it all seem effortless. She won't seem to the

¹ *Hello there, dear confused reader. Since you're already stumbling through this without some little context—an engram is a word-formula, like an oral spell, for specific situations. Say the right syllables and maybe you'll summon some holy fire, banish your existential dread, poke someone distant, or finally get a decent night's sleep. The effects are about as impressive as they sound—which is to say, not very. But hey, when you're stuck in a theocratic empire run by fire-wielding lionesses, you take what spiritual comfort you can get. Try to keep up. —S., Ashai-Keetrah. Oh, and fair warning: I'm reading this text at the same pace you are. Born Suung, raised Ashai, died... let's skip that part—point is, I know how this world works. I was appointed as your guide for this entire ordeal—my condolences*

² Do not permit her irreverent commentary to obscure the sacred nature of these practices. The discerning reader will approach these matters with appropriate gravity. And it's not 'a theocratic empire run by fire-wielding lionesses'; the female nature precludes involvement in matters of Imperium and state. —Z.

³ *Oh, sweet summer child. Wait... who are you? —S.*

Fire-blessed Vaal-Amaya like an outsider, beyond the circle, alien, false, foolish or worthless. Somewhere, perhaps, her superiority will even show in something, anything at all. Yes, she's very young, she's only just passed her Coming of Age. Yes, true, there are flaws—she lags behind a little here and there. But it's all fixable. She will try harder.

She will show herself anew. Her mentor Vaalu-Nel had grown too accustomed to her, as had Vaalu-Myanfar and Vaalu-Vanaramsaya, along with Pre-Messenger Vaal-Khirana. They had known her former self, all her shortcomings, mistakes, and many flaws. They had grown used to her innate restraint and dislike of being pushy. That old self needed to be left in the dust. A whole year had passed since Coming of Age—time to advance!

It's just praxis, she waved her hand in the air, simply passing the Craft from sister to sister, polite obedience. The thought flowed quite calmly, then tragically shattered into splashes of despair: *I will learn, I will gnaw at it. Vaal, your truebelieving pureblooded daughter, in the glory of the Suungs, you are in me, I am in you, I have seen You, I...*

The carriage hit a particularly vicious rut, lurched hard, and the golden mirror nearly slipped from her hand while her ear knocked against the wall. She hissed, rubbed her ear, flicked it once, and adjusted the circlet on her head (golden, naturally).

She thought she should fall into aumlan⁴. Then she thought about it once more, and fell asleep, well and quickly, because that's exactly how Messengers are taught to fall asleep—well and quickly.

Meanwhile, in the carriage ahead:

"None of this is going to end well."

This is senior sister Vaalu-Khirana, Pre-Messenger, who is escorting Mauna: no one lets an acolyte travel alone until she's fully transformed into a true Messenger. She's past fifty. She'd spent her whole life among Messengers—she knew her business.

"None of this is going to end well, Tami. I don't like it."

Tamalu is Graph Master to the Impeccable Vaalu-Nel. This Vaalu-Nel is undoubtedly an intriguing lioness, but above all, she is Mauna's present mentor. She has accomplishments of her own, and rumor has it that during her required yearly rest period (seven days), she once slept for an entire twenty-four hours straight.

He found this journey deeply burdensome, but showed no sign of it. His presence was hopelessly unnecessary and pointlessly ceremonial, stealing incredibly precious time from a Graph Master. He'd been sent as a fake, a substitute, a mere plug—because by old tradition, a mentor transfers her acolyte personally. Acolytes training to be Messengers are precious, scarce; they're cherished and guarded. Yet it appeared obvious that Vaalu-Nel had chosen to demonstrate her (so perfectly concealed)

⁴ *Meditative state. It requires actual concentration, so don't strain yourselves attempting it. —S.*

disdain to a certain sister. Tamalu had become the tool of that disdain, representing his Mistress in gray mediocrity, nothing but her shadow.

"What exactly concerns you?" he asked cautiously, in a low voice.

"Don't lie, don't do that, none of those careful questions. Imagine you're taking an acolyte who has difficulties, and dumping her on the most unsuitable mentor of all unsuitable ones. If she can even be called a mentor at all."

Having reflected on matters and so-called politics in general, Khirana continued:

"A mentor," she echoed contemptuously.

She wouldn't calm down. That telltale pause hanging in the air, waiting for her companion's response, some kind of reaction—but silence stretched on:

"Look. Mauna is struggling. Her command of the Craft is poor—it's all gone to the tail."

"She's still learning," he parried weakly.

"It's like learning letters when you should already be composing treatises."

"She's diligent, she grasps everything," and here he parried with more strength.

"Grasping isn't enough, Tami, you have to do the work," she touched his knee with her palm—something that had become quite rare over the past ten years. She doesn't touch him anymore; she'd sworn off it.

Tamalu looked down at her swift hand, with mild surprise.

"And now they're handing her over to whom? Amaya! What's the point?" Khirana fumed at him.

What was to be done? The lion sighed. He reached for his pipe, but Khirana intercepted with words, and he froze:

"We should ask Vanaramsaya about all this. But where is she? In Naheim⁵! Myanfar abandoned her. And now we have your Mistress doing that too," the Pre-Messenger said sadly.

He finally retrieved his pipe, but set it aside on the couch.

"Listen, I've been in her very skin," Khirana persisted.

"Look at it this way: Mauna will become like you. You have to agree, that's useful too..."

"That's exactly the point! All the more reason not to give her to Amaya. Especially since she's an old-blood patrician, her father, his connections in the South, in Andaria. Ha! Hand her over to me!" She struck her chest with both fists, and Vaal's amulet with its very, very red ruby chimed (symbol of refusing patronage⁶ bonds).

"The Mistress never had enough time for her."

⁵ *Think of it as the Suung version of paradise for the faithful departed. I'm here and it's quite lovely, actually, though the company can be trying. Don't get any ideas about joining us prematurely. —S.*

⁶ *Ah, patronage. Male Suungs can sponsor Ashai-Keetrah financially in return for diverse 'services'—and I do mean diverse. Khirana's red ruby basically screams 'not for sale.' Admirable, if financially impractical. —S.*

"Then they should have cut her at Coming of Age! Said it straight: this is how it is, you won't manage, you'll be a Pre-Messenger⁷, no choice. But instead they drag it out, drag it by the tail..."

Tamalu winced at the word 'cut'—he'd always hated it. Somehow Messengers specifically 'cut' acolytes at Coming of Age ceremonies. They didn't weed out, didn't reject, didn't declare them unfit. They cut.

"You think this is all tied to whatever happened with Amaya? Should we tell Mauna the whole story?"

"Don't tell her. Nel didn't say anything—so we shouldn't either. Sheh-sheh, Khirana. You know what you said: this will all end badly. And I think that's exactly what's intended."

Vaalu-Khirana glanced at him, giving a silent nod.

Tamalu and Vaalu-Khirana used to be lovers. A great deal of time had passed since then, with barely anything left of those days—they even positioned themselves opposite each other. Yet one thing endured: they confided in each other what they could never share with another soul.

For the Silent Secrets of Messengers—shaan-shaan, sheh-sheh, SS—must be kept.

⁷ *A Pre-Messenger is an Ashai who can't master Messaging but is too far along to be 'cut' (literally or figuratively, depending on how merciful your mentors feel). They do the grunt work that keeps this whole dreamwalking apparatus running—logistics, acolyte screening, administrative drudgery. It's the last exit from the Messenger path. After Acceptance, you're a Messenger until death. —S.*

Encounter

Mauna awoke—they had stopped.

Ah, there it is. Amaya's residence, just beyond that towering fence. Bodyguards stand watch at the main entrance, waving them through. The whole place has an inhospitable air, as if the residence stood empty for years and was only recently resettled, without any affection for its surroundings.

A gentle knock came at the window. Mauna drew back the curtain.

"Young-Flawless, we have arrived," announced one of her mentor's guards with utterly redundant helpfulness.

He's probably forgotten that Mauna has long since passed her Coming of Age^{8,9,10,11}, and one should address her without any 'Young-' prefix now. What kind of inattention was this—failing to remember after a whole year? Bumbling fool, so careless. Who deserves attention if not a Messenger of the Empire? Well, almost a Messenger of the Empire?

Huntress Moon—this Messenger residence—turned out to be small. No, actually tiny. Stone hounds flanked the entrance, their carved muzzles streaked with fine rain. The bodyguards shouted orders, frantic: "Faster! Go, go!" Mauna simply sat upright and waited as was proper, like a statue, frozen in genuine anxiety. The impression she would create now—the very first one—would be the most important, and for this she needed to...

Without warning, Vaalu-Khirana threw open the door, hurried and rain-scented. This was her abrupt way—she almost never announced herself when entering acolytes' quarters. Her gaze swept over Mauna approvingly.

"Vaal leads. Dream-walking Mauna, let's go? Ready?"

"Vaal always leads. Yes, Radiant one."

Inside they went. Servants attended to washing their paws in the antechamber, and they seemed confused and flustered. Standing over them was Vaalu-Amaya's vilius—her chief steward, an aged and tired-looking lion. Though perfectly attired, he wore no brand—no personal plate with his Mistress's motto, which was surely mandatory for anyone heading a Messenger's Family¹².

"Radiant Vaalu-Khirana, Vaalu-Mauna, please follow me. The Excellent One has an urgent meeting, but it will finish soon."

⁸ *Coming of Age! And I forgot to tell you about my own Coming of Age! You wouldn't believe what happ...* —S.

⁹ Seventeen years old for Ashai-Keetrah. And all Suung lionesses. —Z.

¹⁰ *I thought you disappeared after the first chapter.* —S.

¹¹ No. —Z.

¹² *Not 'family' family. Family. Capital F.* —S.

"No. It won't do. Take us. Directly. To her. The acolyte has arrived. This is more important than urgent meetings."

Khirana spoke with such finality that no one dared raise further objections.

Their paws disappeared into the corridor's plush carpeting.

Ah, right—Vaalū-Amaya. No one would speak of her. Mauna had asked around before, but all the responses were so murky, so vague, so uncertain—everyone referring her to someone else and suggesting personal experience ("You'll see for yourself")—that... Oh. Mauna had been hoping these last moments might bring enlightenment from Vaalū-Khirana—who knew everything and had always shown her patience and favor—hoping she might finally explain Vaalū-Amaya, offer guidance about what lay ahead, share any wisdom at all.

Yet as they made their way down the carpeted corridor of this residence—tucked away in Listigia, the Empire's northwestern corner, with its cramped atriums and modest windows, its narrow passages and cramped chambers instead of proper halls and rooms, everywhere furs and hearths—Khirana provided no final guidance. They walked the whole way in silence.

Handle it all yourself. That's how it goes. This is your training, Mauna realized at last.

Khirana had lost her hidden, grumbling sympathy for Mauna, and in these final moments became utterly direct with her, impenetrable, businesslike and proper—no nuances whatsoever. Her sharp gestures said it all.

Vaalū-Khirana, Pre-Messenger. Her record is spotless. Her devotion to the Messengers' common cause—boundless. Her experience handling acolytes—immense (seeking them out, screening them, managing them, all of it). Everyone in the know understood: if you were with Khirana, everything would be done properly and you'd get whatever you needed. She had easy access to all Messengers, and any other doors in the Empire she simply kicked open. But only now was Mauna beginning to grasp that this case was special, because—obviously—her mentor Vaalū-Nel should have brought her personally. It had always been that way, both for her and for other acolytes Mauna knew. An acolyte was passed from mentor to mentor in person, only that way, because it was far too important and ritual an event. But her mentor wasn't here! Khirana was a substitute; she had no direct business here; she was plugging a gap.

Perhaps Mauna should have simply made the journey by herself. Yet Messengers strongly disapproved of solitary acolyte travel, even for those past their Coming of Age. Such things were known to end badly—everyone understood that. The rising generation must be protected.

They assembled at the door: Khirana to the right, Mauna to the left, three bodyguards (from Vaalū-Nel, her personal guard—real brutes, Nel despised small lions), Amaya's steward, and all three of Mauna's servants, who now proved to be the only solid thread connecting her to her past.

Everything else and everyone else Mauna was supposed to acquire here, for these three lengthy moons.

All ears turned toward the door. Something like a scandal was building on the other side—a lioness's voice bordering on hysteria. Whatever the door was hiding from the world felt deeply unpleasant, possibly revolting. The atmosphere was thick with it. Mauna cast a questioning glance at Khirana, who was—surprisingly—doing exactly the same. Worse still, Khirana's expression somehow made Mauna feel accountable for whatever was transpiring, as though she bore responsibility for everything.

The steward interpreted the delay in his own way and opened the doors himself for Vaalu-Mauna and Vaalu-Khirana.

"...wait, wait, wait, so... Aaaff. F-f-f. So one of them stole it, and the other helped, right? Damn your... What in the tail!"

This was said by a lioness in Ashai-Keetrah vestments, wearing a plasis^{13,14,15,16,17}, who held an extremely long pipe in one hand and an enormous ashtray in the other. At that very moment the ashtray had disgorged its contents onto the hem of her plasis, and she now stared at the bottom of this crystal ashtray, holding it before herself (why?), so that instead of the lioness's muzzle, Mauna saw an impossibly distorted geometric pattern, blackened with ash.

"Mistress, I announce: there have arrived..." the vilus began confidently.

The ashtray descended.

"Just not all at once!" came the furious snarl.

Amaya. There she is, thought Mauna.

For one thing, Mauna had expected someone older. It was embarrassing, but she had no idea of Amaya's actual age—the Book of Souls never included birth years, and she'd been too idle to consult the Book of Sisters, then forgotten entirely. For another, she hadn't envisioned her quite so... lean. Amaya had moved beyond mere slenderness into genuine thin-

¹³ *The formal dress of adult Ashai-Keetrah, featuring special straps that tie over the neck and shoulders to keep sleeves clear when wielding ignimara. You need clothing that won't accidentally incinerate itself—or you. Quite practical, really. —S.*

¹⁴ A necessary clarification regarding ignimara—the manifestation of Vaal's fire upon the hands, ears, tail-tip of Ashai-Keetrah. Despite centuries of theological scholarship and practical application, the precise mechanism remains subject to considerable debate. The prevailing hypothesis posits manipulation of the world-ether, through spiritual refinement and Vaal's sanction. Other theories involve direct transubstantiation of consciousness into thermal energy, or perhaps resonance with solar emanations. What is empirically verifiable: the fire manifests, burns with genuine heat, leaves no physical scars on Ashai herself if everything is done properly, and exhausts the practitioner considerably. —Z.

¹⁵ *Ah, now I get it—you're a scholar. Don't know how you actually stumbled into this whole annotation situation with me, but here we are. Look, the thing is, males know absolutely nothing about ignimara. You can theorize about ether all you want. And that 'Vaal's sanction' part? Lie. I can admit that here without fearing the consequences of my heretical admission—non-Ashai and non-Suung lionesses can manifest ignimara too, if they're predisposed to it. —S.*

¹⁶ Such claims require evidence beyond personal assertion. —Z.

¹⁷ *Uh-huh. —S.*

ness. Spiteful observers might even say scrawny. Yet third, Amaya proved strikingly beautiful. Her angular sharpness, those rapacious features—they suited her perfectly. She wore no circlet today, not even a simple band; her mirror had taken humble refuge beside her sirna dagger, shoved through her belt. So much for vestment, so much for distance.

"Not everyone, nope! Nermai, you just... Hey, don't, don't..." one of her bodyguard lions tried to take the ashtray away (failed—Amaya held on tight), then for some reason decided to wipe the hem of Amaya's plasis, only smearing everything worse. "Tsa, damn it," she muttered, examining the hem.

There was something off about her diction, hard to pinpoint—a slight slurring that made her words run together.

Mauna and Khirana remained standing by the door. Steward Nermai turned around, shut the door behind his most distinguished visitors, then proceeded with pointed slowness toward the middle of the room.

Khirana ran her palm over her muzzle; she made no effort to hide her irritation—she took the firra-ammau stance¹⁸, a pose of tense expectation and annoyance, the sign for 'I need attention immediately!' Almost vulgar and brazen under ordinary circumstances, it was a clear expression of displeasure. She tugged at her amulet chain (conveying the same message). Mauna simply stood straight in omraani-ammau—'I just wait here' stance. What else could she do? She needed to take stock of things. Catch some glances (no one had looked at her yet!), make that first impression.

"Yeah, there, eh... Nermai. There you are," the steward was caught by Amaya's gaze. "C'mon, help me with this mess. And what, what's that there, well they stole something, well, yeah?"

"Precisely. May I be permitted to describe the entire matter again: twelve bottles of Kafnian wine, three jugs of refined spirits, and two more sacks of quality cotton—all of this was discovered in the possession of..."

Here's what had happened: two dhaar females had either stolen or whatever, various trinkets like alcohol and stuff like that. Total rubbish that was currently consuming all the time and attention in this cramped room with the Bowl of Vaal positioned dead center. The two dhaars in question stood right in front of the bowl.

Mauna couldn't follow the touchingly petty crime of the two dhaars who stood defenseless in everyone's sight, because Khirana's immediate irritation, her demanding presence, simply overwhelmed everything else. She half-shielded Mauna by standing in front of her. Mauna could see the nervous tip of her tail, wrapped with a tail-ribbon as is usual among older lionesses who are terrified of balding tails. Her enormous sirna (distinctive of the Mastr-Fein mengir—they all carry such blades there) seemed ready to leap from its sheath on its own and cut down the dhaars and whoever else, just so they'd finally receive the very much expected atten-

¹⁸ *Forty-eight classical stances, countless unorthodox ones. Ashai usually don't just sit or stand in public—we take stances. Every body position communicates something: status, emotion, availability. —S.*

tion. It was unclear why Khirana remained silent. Perhaps Mauna should have made herself known too, but she didn't dare yet—she was waiting. Then suddenly the elderly Pre-Messenger dropped the entire charade—the posturing, the waiting, all of it. She turned to acolyte.

The shadows of Vaalu-Khirana's doubt were impossible to miss. Even that superfluous movement, the attempt to leave silently, then the instant halt. The briefest gesture of 'I will touch you,' obligatory for anyone who wished to touch a (future) Messenger, barely perceptible, the years-trained nod from Mauna meaning 'Yes, you may touch me.' Then, short and quiet, with downcast eyes:

"May Vaal protect you, Mauna. Remember: I was against this."

A sentimentally clumsy pat on the palm somewhere down there, near Mauna's pastel-beige plasis—Messengers still often call their acolytes 'little white ones,' as they are encouraged to wear very light-colored plasii—and Vaalu-Khirana left without ceremony, without farewells, without anything at all. That was the entire touch for which the quick ritual of request-and-permission had taken place. Awfully formal, with an edge of protest, no real kindness there. Mauna followed Khirana with her gaze, fidgeting with her mirror, then abruptly abandoned this watching and dared to observe the little theater unfolding before her.

"...the standard, prescribed punishment for Family members caught stealing from their Mistress is execution, except in the most trivial cases. This is a serious violation of the Sworn-Bond. Well," here Nermai made a meaningful pause. "But this is, of course, at the discretion of the Flawless One. That's why we..."

"Yeah, yeah. Oof," Amaya grabbed her head, closing her eyes. "Oooh... They need to be executed?" she asked, still with her head tilted back. And took another drag from her pipe.

"I recommend adhering to the lawful traditions. But the Mistress decides."

This meant 'yes, they should be.'

The Messenger exhaled toward the ceiling. Everyone watched the smoke except the dhaars—they kept staring at the floor, unchanging.

"Nermai, dear: give me the lion's truth, what should I do?" Amaya grabbed her temples, looking at her vilis with closed eyes, which was quite a trick since she still managed to hold her extremely long pipe. "They're, you know... but is it proven that it was them?" she grew agitated, opening her eyes. "I mean, 'confessed' doesn't mean 'proven,' or something like that, right?"

She was terribly nervous, no composure whatsoever. Mauna, accustomed her whole life to dignified things and individuals who were at least outwardly noble, watched all this with... curiosity, amazement, and caution—the way one watches an unfamiliar beast. Especially over such a trivial matter. Some dhaars. They stole something or other. Had the Family forgotten they stood before a Messenger of the Empire?

Even two already. Even two, Mauna thought about herself as well.

"Mistress, they confessed to the crime and we investigated—everything checked out," Nermai said this as if addressing a six-year-old lioness: kindly, wisely, and gently.

"Hey, why? Why would anyone confess to a crime if you actually did it? I wouldn't do that, I'd hide everything. Nermai! Maybe they, you know, got confused about something? Dhaars, they're stupid¹⁹. Or maybe I'm the stupid one?" Amaya turned her back to everyone and went to the table, searching for something there. "What do you all want from me?"

"Mistress, we need a death sentence ruling."

"Death? Sentence?"

Surprisingly, the dhaars held firm and remained silent.

"Why did you idiots confess to the crime?" Amaya spread her hands, looking at them.

"Flawless Mistress, we be guilty, we mercy beg."

"You should say: 'we beg you to spare us,'" someone corrected.

Mauna could see the holdup wasn't the Family's doing—they'd happily wrap this business up in moments, or better yet, pretend it never happened. No, Amaya had decided to make theater of the whole affair when a single word would suffice. Her quirks, Amaya's quirks, her new mentor's strange ways. Though Mauna already knows perfectly well that a Messenger without oddities is impossible.

Fine. She had to be bold—this stupid waiting was unacceptable and humiliating. Mauna needed to announce herself; it was long past time. She could interrupt almost everyone and almost anything; she could and should.

"Mistress, I humbly request attention: there has arrived..." the vilis noticed that Mauna was moving forward.

The acolyte showed him the nyah-gastau gesture, which all Family members knew, everyone who served Messengers: 'Be silent, quiet, silence.' She needed to end this farce and present herself to her new mentor, and throw everyone out of here. Get rid of everyone, the dhaars, everything, free Amaya from this nonsense that she was so obviously burdened by. What kind of fools are in her Family—can't they see this? Were are serving a Messenger for the first time?

She needs to make an entrance: sudden, brilliant, show her worth. Messengers do not censure bold actions.

"Vaal has bestowed upon me the modest gift of empathy..." Mauna began.

This was simply a lie. She was terrible at empathy, had no such Spirit Gift. Hopeless at it. She knew this. But it didn't matter.

"...and the matter is simple: these two are guilty, without question. Theft is theft, punishable by death, such is the lawful tradition, so deal

¹⁹ 'Dhaar' refers to non-Suung servant caste—foreign lionkind breeds integrated into the Empire's societal structure. Extensive observations confirm their reduced mental faculties relative to Suungs, which justifies their station. —Z.

with it," she waved dismissively at the vilus without looking. "Therefore, my mentor..."

Amaya turned around, holding the pipe to her mouth, exhaling through the nose. Licking her teeth.

Mauna raised the hand to make another gesture: 'Everyone out.' This one was also known everywhere by everyone, and no one dared disobey except other Messengers. Amaya, without moving, looked at her raised hand, exhaling smoke through her nose again; nothing changed in her posture or expression, only where her gaze fell.

A bit of theater, a bit of rhetoric. She needed to be memorable from the first encounter; it was all somewhat risky, Amaya might get angry. But unlikely. She'd probably enjoy it—Mauna knew what pleases her sisters. Mauna didn't complete the gesture, but turned around instead (very properly, she knew how, exactly as Ashai-Keetrah do), and pointed with her clawed little finger at the two standing lionesses.

"Dhaari, raise your heads. Give me your gazes," Mauna never used the word 'dhaars'—it reeked utterly of common speech.

Complete bluff and pretense. She had no gift for empathy, none at all. Looking into her eyes is useless—or rather, about as useful as it would be for any ordinary lioness. Most ordinary Ashai-Keetrah would be far better at this than Mauna. Mentors had tried several times to look for this gift in Mauna, to glimpse it, just for reassurance. Empathy is a nice addition to the Craft, but entirely optional. It will even get in the way.

They raised their heads, and Mauna's whim was instantly fulfilled—they gave her. Their. Gazes.

"They, by the fire-bright matter, are..." Mauna began.

The continuation was planned like this: "...guilty. Theft means death, exile to hard labor, or whatever. Now spare me from this nonsense. Everyone out." And the gesture. Of course, Mauna knew nothing about this case, and why should she? Far more important matters and knowledge lay ahead.

But the continuation was not destined to come to pass. The exit was not destined to take place. The knowledge and important matters were not fated to follow either.

Long ago, three years back—no, four—Mauna first saw real, thick, white snow at one of the disciplariums²⁰, in Ainansgard, and later even tasted it, thanks to one of the local stallas²¹ who lived there. By stupid coincidence, she mistook Mauna for her friend, when Mauna was exiting the doors of the hall of poses, gestures and dances—the Geleisa. A big snowball caught Mauna right in the muzzle. The stalla must have been a

²⁰ *Think of Ashai university. Only three exist in the entire Empire, and merely a third of Ashai acolytes attend—the rest receive private tutelage under their mentors. I was in one! Best and worst years of my life. —S.*

²¹ The intermediate phase of Ashai development, commencing with first moondays and concluding at Coming of Age. The proper sequence: naysi (cubhood), stalla (adolescence unit Coming of Age), acolyte (adult formation prior to Acceptance into the order). Within disciplarium walls, acolytes assume the title 'disciplara'. —Z.

skilled archer, possibly even from Yunian, because it hit Mauna quite solidly. A scandal was brewing—right behind Mauna came the Ashai who looked after her in Ainansgard. All Messenger acolytes receive such a guardian, so that the future emerald of the Suungs' spirit, the Empire's great treasure, would want for nothing.

Mauna instantly became furious and offended. She was preparing to respond fully to such insolence with all the power of status that any acolyte of the Inner Empire carries. Now the stalla would get it right in her nasty muzzle. Figuratively speaking. Or maybe literally. Too bad Ainansgard has no corporal punishment, unlike Krimmau-Ammau, where stallas can have their slender tailquarters (being non-slender is forbidden there) flogged with a special whip (applied sparingly so as not to cause physical disfigurement incompatible with Ashai-Keetrah dignity), and...

She hadn't yet managed to wipe herself off when she was enveloped in an embrace: strong, very tight, intimately close to the point of sending chills through her.

"I didn't mean to, sister! Forgive me! Sister, sister, sister!..." Palms moved across her nape with claws sending waves down her spine, hot breath on her cheek. "Sister, sister..."

Despite the cold of the snow, Mauna treasured this as one of the warmest moments of her life. No one can touch a Messenger—whether already accepted or only a future one, an acolyte—without her permission. As always with Messengers, you can even be executed for this (all they ever do is execute lionkind, no reprieve!). Oh, these permissions, a whole etiquette, a system of signs both open and hidden. This delights your little self, the little lionessy, for just the first moon. But then it kills you.

Then the stalla caught her claw on the band, recoiled slightly, and instantly realized that before her stood not just another stalla, however unfamiliar—there were plenty of unfamiliar acolytes, especially in such a world-open disciplarium as Ainansgard—no, this was a Messenger, this was completely different, this was simply... Somewhere behind, the guardian sister loomed with threats and reproaches, wanting to do something, trying to reach the insolent one, knowing her perfectly well by name (Mauna had forgotten it, though she is very strong in *mnemonics*). But Mauna didn't release this Ashai-Keetrah, and now gripped her herself, digging in with claws, shielding her with all her strength. Mauna did everything clumsily, and they both fell into the snow.

"I agree, I agree, I agree, sister!" Mauna had no idea she was yelling for half of Ainansgard to hear. And out of every word in the Suung language, this was the one: 'agree.'

She remembered it this way, that fervent: "Sister, sister, sister..."

"...sister, sister, sister. My mad Vaal," she was saying loudly now, in this room, three or four years later, exactly as then in Ainansgard—not remembering herself.

She remembered that unity of souls, that warmth. Now it spread everywhere, thousandfold, overflowing absolutely everything—this entire

room, this whole world of warm blood. These dhaari had given her their gazes, and the unity proved so terrible, instantaneous and enchanting that there was no will or desire to resist it, whatever it might be: death, disgrace, Naheim, anything at all. She didn't know what was happening and didn't want to know. Mauna became one with them, she became them: she understood their desires, open and secret; she knew their fear, so constricting, terrifying; she understood everything about them. Instead of one lioness inside her, suddenly all three found themselves there, and it was... magnificent. Mauna instantly agreed ("I agree, I agree!") to stay here forever—here, with them, inside herself, together with these two dhaar lionesses, non-Suungs, foreigners (of good and permitted breed; bad breeds don't serve Messengers).

All this happened inside, while outside this occurred: Mauna froze after her simple and confident "...fire-bright matter..." and her mirror, already beginning to rise in accusatory indication toward the dhaars, fell limply onto her thigh; only a miracle saved it from dropping onto the thick and beautiful Hustrian carpet. Her Andarian features softened into bliss, her mouth fell slightly open, and her ears pressed back. Letting out an orgasmic moan, Mauna closed her eyes, experiencing for the first time in her life—and so ridiculously late—real, heavy, and simply talented *empathy*.

Born to this, she didn't know it yet; Mauna knew nothing yet.

The dhaars dared to exchange glances, then even look at the Mistress, understanding nothing of what was happening, just like everyone else. Nermai pressed his fist to his mouth, coughed quietly into it, and also glanced at the Mistress. But Vaalu-Amaya had finally become truly interested, and stood to the side of Mauna, with curiosity, slowly appraising her like a work of art. She exhaled smoke toward the ceiling and smirked, even predatorily. Noticing some movement, she raised a finger: freeze, stay silent.

Mauna opened her eyes and looked around as if she found herself alone in a dark forest.

"All thoughts are so unclean," she said to no one in particular. "I wanted to impress my mentor, the new one, who I think is called Amaya... Show confidence, hint that I could sense souls, give myself praise. And so they'd take them away, and I could... And I could... They mustn't, they mustn't be touched. I agree that they're not guilty of anything. They had, they had something there, but they did this as sacrifice, for something, or for someone, for someone—there, there's still a young lioness," Mauna looked around as if searching for this very phantom young lioness, "but she's not here," she said in surprise, "but she exists," she said with certainty, "for her sake, everything for her life."

Nobody knew what to say.

"Leave them, don't touch them, don't exile them anywhere, they will... serve... the Flawless Vaalu-Amaya," Vaalu-Mauna was now shaking both terrified, utterly bewildered dhaars by the shoulders.

"Mistress?" Nermai asked Amaya quietly. Not too confused—over years of serving Messengers (and especially Amaya) he had seen everything. Absolutely everything.

Amaya silently pointed at Mauna, curiously so: with her thumb, and nodded her head. She looked at no one except Mauna. At the same time she routinely wiped her mouth with a handkerchief, then glanced at it for a moment (all yellow again—yellow saliva). Well, had everyone heard everything? And she showed the gesture: 'Everyone out.' The very same one Mauna had been fated not to make.

Everyone left.

"...nothing's real for you... there's no love of yours... your love is only what you need... tell me—why?... you can believe... I'll give it to you!... don't know why... and every day... woohoooo..."

Humming such a ragged song under her breath, Amaya casually took a chair and set it right in the middle of the room. Then just as languidly and with a slouching gait, she dragged over another one for Mauna, right under her, under her tail. She plopped into her own, setting aside the hand holding her pipe.

"Tsa, that thing, I see it's hitting you pretty hard, yeah?" she looks up and to the side.

"I beg your pardon?" Mauna sat down carefully, slowly, hearing her rapid breathing.

"Well, you know, your empathy. Pretty hefty gift like that, not some bullshit."

Mauna didn't know what to answer. She needed to process everything. Had Vaal actually gifted her with empathy? Just now, so late? To manifest a Spirit Gift after Coming of Age—how is that even possible?

"So what, always knocks you flat like that?" Amaya crossed one leg over the other, exhaling smoke through her nose.

Right, pull yourself together. She has to lie, absolutely. Mauna, you said from the very beginning: "Vaal has bestowed upon me the modest gift of empathy..." and all that.

"Usually everything's calm," Mauna lied excellently, well-trained in the art. "Probably because of the journey."

Her new mentor nodded and closed her eyes.

"Amaya," she pointed to herself, exhaling smoke again.

"Mauna..." she wanted to add her House name, but reconsidered, "...acolyte Ashai of Messaging, from the Radiant Vaalu-Nel. A sharp transition of metanoia^{22,23}... I..." for some reason tears mixed in her eyes, and then Mauna sneezed, and also snorted, which for a person of her up-

²² *What Messengers call their consciousness, as if regular lionkind simply bumble about in a mental fog (spoiler: they do). The term reflects their fluid awareness needed for dreamwalking—because having to slip between dream realms gives one such a refined mental state that it deserves its own vocabulary. Regular Ashai can dreamwalk too, mind you, but theirs is deemed suitable only for 'witnessing Vaal,' which is the equivalent of being allowed to watch the fine china but never actually use it. —S.*

²³ Μετάνοια. —Z.

bringing—in front of a witness who is a Messenger, and a new mentor at that—is an amazingly scandalous event.

"Uh-huh. Mm-hmm," Amaya mused easily, then looking up and to the side, "never experienced empathy myself. But I was told about it. Don't practice on me: you won't like it."

Mauna sighed, straightened up, gathered her will.

"This is unforgivable. This won't happen again, my weakness. I..."

"How could you? That's complete shit! Vaal, spare me! Oh yes," Amaya laughed and coughed hard; a spasm ran through her body.

The weight of the word sent a prickling wave through Mauna. She had never heard an Ashai swear like that, use so much vulgar language. And a Messenger—much less, never in her life.

"'Silent One'? No?" Amaya hinted at the meaning of her name, and for some reason winked, awkwardly, without grace.

"Yes," Mauna didn't know whether she should add 'mentor' at the end. She added it, belatedly: "Mentor."

Apparently some comment or joke was expected, but nothing followed.

"Those dhaari... I should say: they actually did do something. But..."

"I don't care," Amaya waved it off.

She turned the pipe in her palm, watching the smoke.

"There are other things I care about".

Silence fell. Amaya wanted some kind of answer from Mauna, this could be sensed; but Mauna didn't know what to answer, and didn't yet want to ask: what was this 'something else.' The silence stretched. Catching herself, the acolyte remembered something important—the letter from mentor Nel, which she certainly had with her, on her belt. She opened the tube bearing solar spirals and extended it to Amaya (hold the item in a fully extended right hand, keep the left palm at the right elbow). She took it even with some disappointment, reluctantly.

It went upside down, and Amaya flipped it over, nearly dropping it.

"Right. Um... Blah-blah-blah. Fine," she skimmed through the lines. She took the letter by the edge, reached for a candle, and lit it.

Mauna couldn't even imagine what terrible thing mentor Vaalu-Nel could have written to make her burn the accompanying letter outright. The letter should have explained who Mauna is—Andarian, patrician, age of entry into the Ashai-Keetrah sisterhood at eight years old, with such interesting circumstances that Vaal himself commanded they be described. How and by whom she was mentored, where she had been, everything about her. Her *mnemonics* would surely be noted, along with her solid praxis in the *Graph*—which was unusual. What she might need additional tutoring in (here Mauna could only sigh nervously and resist that terrifying, oppressive, slowly growing feeling). Mauna had imagined her new mentor would read the letter aloud. She might learn something about herself—how interesting to discover things about yourself from the written word! Questions would be asked, answers given. Mauna had been studying with Nel for three years now, Nel knew her well, and these were

surely the most important three years—she had passed her Coming of Age under Nel's guidance. Nel has such skillful handwriting, especially those symbols of the high script (simply magnificent).

Meanwhile the letter burned dangerously, and Amaya tossed it to burn out in the ashtray. Relieved of the burden, she sighed and settled back into her chair.

Now Amaya stared into her eyes. Taking advantage of this, Mauna began studying her in return. What struck her was this: Vaalu-Amaya was beautiful, very slender, but her beauty was broken. Like destroyed beautiful building—that would be exactly it. Furthermore, her eyes differed from those of all the Messengers she had seen before. Theirs are swift, commanding, hard, often mocking, sometimes endlessly capricious—a gaze directed outward. Nothing like that from her new mentor. In Amaya she read melancholy, even defeatism. A gaze turned inward.

The empathy—such a strange, unexpected, completely new gift—remained silent. Mauna didn't even really know how to summon it, how to call it back, or what to do with it.

"Tell me something about yourself."^{24,25,26}

How can one smoke so much? Mauna thought. But what she said was:

"I'll be frank."

"Fire away".

There was no point in hiding. She had to say the main thing:

"I can manage *Passage*. But I'm bad at *Search*. I'm bad at *Sister-bond*. And I'm worthless at *Messaging*. In everything that's essential to the Craft."

"Oh. Well damn. Just... Listen, your empathy seems pretty decent though."

"But I want mentor Amaya to know: I am a Messenger. The Craft is my sacred duty. I won't give up, never. I believe in Vaal, and I believe in my strength. Vaal shall guide, Vaal shall not fail," Mauna said sincerely, accepting the seriousness of her position and honestly pledging to her new mentor to be selfless.

"Yeah, yeah. 'I believe in myself!' said the Hustrian whore after taking ten clients at once. 'Wheee! Grrrrr,'" this all amused Amaya. Pleased with herself (?), she crossed her legs and now dangled her right one, flicking her tail on it.

Silence fell again; the conversation had ended before it had properly begun.

"I must admit the comparison is unpleasant," was all Mauna could manage to say—quite a sharp utterance from an acolyte.

Amaya bit her lips with her fang, eyes closed; she did this sometimes—closing her eyes, rolling her shoulders. She looked down.

²⁴ *Z., are you dead too?* —S.

²⁵ No. I am well and alive. Please refrain from personal questions. There may be some instructive value in observing such matters unfold. Thank you. —Z.

²⁶ *And I am well and dead. You're welcome.* —S.

"Anyway, here's the deal: they already threw me a Message about you, like, there's this one acolyte, she needs to, you know..." a drag, looking down. "Let her stay three moons. Anyway, I have no clue, I don't know," another drag. "I've never had acolytes before, not small ones, not big ones, not huge ones," she gestured with her palm, measuring height from the floor, "none at all, absolutely nothing. The only ones who could send me an acolyte are those who already wrote you off. Sending someone to learn from me means they've written her off."

Okay. Okay. Just like that.

"Why?" Mauna asked tragically and seriously.

Actually, she was asking about herself. Why, could it really be true that they had, as Amaya put it, 'written her off' (Mauna gathered that the phrase certainly didn't promise anything good)?

She received a different answer:

"Maun, are you blind? Look at me."

Following the advice, Mauna did exactly that—she measured Amaya with her gaze. No, this look of defeat, surrender, sadness—so unworthy of a Messenger of the Suung Empire—it was simply...

"So everything's bad?" Amaya interrupted the examination.

"Could be better. I'll put forth every effort."

"Well, finally I'm not the only one like this. Thought I was."

Amaya nervously picked at her pipe with a small spoon, giving it more attention than she gave Mauna.

"Every effort. Everything's bad. As always," she confirmed.

Mauna lowered her gaze, smoothing the patrician House insignia on her neck. She always did this when she needed to hold on and not lose heart.

"Anyway, they sent you here to dump you off and not dirty their own hides. You know, Messengers don't like taking acolytes. They haaate it!" theatrical flourish from Amaya. "It's, tsa, you have to fuss with them, you know. Especially with those who aren't doing well. If you're going to take one, take the most capable, right? So everything's clean, and so you can show off—see, there's my successful acolyte. That's much better, that's a thing, that's an excellent accessory, a stylish touch to the portrait, always fashionable."

She waved her pipe in the air, drawing something.

"You know, don't ruin my reputation, Mauna!" and now more false pathos from Amaya: eyes wider, for cheap effect. Mauna looked at her—she already noticed her expressive mimicry, which she deployed at her moments.

Ears, she reminded herself, *do not flatten them*.

Amaya took a drag.

"The sisters thought: 'Hmm, let's send her to Amaya, she doesn't give a shit about anything anyway, and a lot of other things too.' Brilliant idea, our sisters are always on top of things. Good Graph, great plan. Yum."

This somehow delivered the final blow to Mauna. Her ears pressed halfway back despite herself. Banishment. Here. To this Vaalu-Amaya.

Really? They had actually condemned her as a Pre-Messenger? 'Everyone is good in their place.' 'There are no ignoble services.' 'Tradition, hierarchy, service, Vaal.' She'd contemplated these maxims countless times, knew the *Codex*²⁷ demanded exactly this path, that *aamsuna*^{28,29,30} ordained it, yet still..

"I understand. What should I do now?"

Maybe it will be possible to leave?

"Same damn question. Every fucking day."

Philistinism. What utter philistinism. *Why didn't you just refuse to take me in the first place?* Mauna thought, but—naturally—remained silent. Her features didn't waver, her ears didn't betray her, her tail didn't twitch.

"You know, Munisha, I don't know what we're going to do, but we are going to cook up some wild crap."

'Munisha'? No one had ever twisted her name like that.

"I may well be a disappointment. But I won't dare be a burden."

Perhaps I might be permitted to depart?

"Perfect. Eat something, then go sleep. Just straight to early sleep—no aumlans, no breathing stuff".

"I'm grateful, but I already slept on the journey," Mauna dared to say.

"Then go sleep some more," Amaya wasn't impressed and didn't even notice. "Sleep while you can, because later: don't want to, can't manage it, no time, doesn't fit the schedule, then your moondays, then some other... nonsense..."

Contrary to etiquette and customs between mentor and acolyte, Mauna stood first and said her farewell first:

"May your words be kept secret."

"And may you reach Vaal," Amaya replied immediately and exhaled smoke, closing her eyes.

²⁷ *Codex of Conduct of the Ashai-Keetrah Sisterhood, Good Daughters of Mighty Suungs. Brick-thick. Two brick-thick, to be precise. Nobody actually memorizes the whole thing—we just pretend we did. —S.*

²⁸ *Aamsuna can't be explained. —S.*

²⁹ Aamsuna represents millennia of crystallized Ashai-Keetrah wisdom, manifest in tradition and hierarchy. —Z.

³⁰ *No. Just... no. Don't bother. —S.*

May your words be kept secret, and may you reach Vaal

May your words be kept secret.

Mauna wouldn't have been surprised if Amaya had simply replied: 'Later.' 'See you.' 'Good night.' 'Until tomorrow.' 'May Vaal light your path.' 'Get out of here!' 'Off you go then.' 'Until morning!' Or this Andarian: 'Farewell till dawn.' 'Sweet dreams,' which among Messengers is either mockery or a poor joke. Or however else one says goodbye to ordinary Suungs, and ordinary Ashai-Keetrah. Even Pre-Messengers.

But no.

'And may you reach Vaal'—as a Messenger should properly bid farewell to her sister, to a daughter of the Inner Empire—to another Messenger. This was the only consoling thing: here she is still being held as one of their own, praise Vaal.

But everything else looked bleak.

Mauna removed her band, gave it to Renaya. She noticed a painting on the wall, a classical subject: the pyramid of the Empire, where the Emperor sits at the top, then come the Ashai-Keetrah and patricians, then warriors, then ordinary Suungs, then dhaars. This is a simplified description; in reality, there's much more to it.

After all, she reflected, they hadn't permanently reassigned her from mentor to mentor—they'd simply dispatched her for practical training. Yet... One doesn't undertake praxis with the likes of Amaya. Proper praxis is distinguished, exemplary, luminous: placement with Messengers serving the disciplinums (all five of them), or perhaps in Marna, the capital (swarming with Messengers). There one finds everything worthwhile, everyone who matters. Or strategically valuable praxis: certain sisters are renowned for their masterful instruction in the Craft. Such placement she deserved! What she required wasn't mere 'life experience'—she needed fierce practice in the Craft, needed it like air. Mentor Vaalu-Nel knew this perfectly well. Mauna's time was running out; there was no time to waste on digressions and curious experiments with hermit sisters, Legate³¹ sisters, eccentric sisters in the dark corners of the Empire, no matter how good they might be.

And was Amaya even the best, or even simply good?...

On the second thought, Mauna actually knows almost nothing about Amaya. She heard that Amaya was 'the best' only once. Vaalu-Nel had provided surprisingly little information—almost nothing. One day Mauna simply learned, quite unexpectedly: "You'll go south to Vaalu-Amaya, it will be useful experience, you'll improve. And it's not far to travel, praise

³¹ Imperial Army. —S.

Vaal." When asked about what and how with Vaalu-Amaya, Nel wouldn't elaborate: "You know, she mostly messages for the Empire and the Legate—it's useful experience." Nel dislikes unnecessary questions and knows how to make it clear that 'doing is better than many words.' In short, Vaalu-Amaya should be 'useful experience'—her mentor repeated this several times, and that was all Mauna had received.

Mauna had also overheard conversations between other sisters. One stuck in her memory from long ago:

"With Amaya, you know, no mnemonics are needed," said Vaalu-Dayana: a fearsome Messenger, old, experienced, known for her iron will and absolute tyranny over her Family.

"You're telling me," Vaalu-Nel replied after a long pause.

Under other circumstances:

"How does she do it?" another sister either complained, envied, admired, or raged—Mauna couldn't tell which. She never managed to catch the answer to what exactly 'it' was. She didn't pick up any hints either.

Somehow they didn't bother discussing Amaya much—at least not around Mauna. A black spot, a gray mouse, a terrible subject—who was she?

Mauna hadn't looked in the Book of Sisters, and what would you learn there anyway. She'd never seen any portraits or fetishes of her anywhere. In Nel's Book of Souls there wasn't even Amaya's light-type^{32,33,34}, just a brief and generic biography that was actually embarrassing. Well, on one hand, it was forgivable: Amaya didn't belong to Vaalu-Nel's mengir³⁵ (Nel, and therefore Mauna, belonged to the Mastr-Fein mengir; Amaya belonged to the Tar-Sil mengir). But still: in her mentor's Book of Souls, Vaalu-Amaya had the most pitiful page. And her motto: empty, nothing.

Ah yes, where precisely had Mauna learned of her allegedly remarkable abilities? Not from another Messenger, but from Vaalu-Nel's Graph Master^{36,37}, sir Tamalu:

"I'm leaving the day after tomorrow for Vaalu-Amaya, sir Tamalu, for praxis," Mauna shared.

He pondered, bestowed a swift look upon her and nodded significantly, then returned his attention to the Graph.

³² A light-type—the visual capture of one's visual signature, produced through alchemical exposure of treated silver plates to the subject's prolonged presence. Akin to the earliest photographic technology in your world, though operating on metaphysical rather than purely optical principles. —Z.

³³ *Wait. You can see their world? The readers' world? You're in it?* —S.

³⁴ I perceive what is necessary for my scholarly purpose. The mechanism is immaterial. —Z.

³⁵ Sacred nexus stones anchoring the divine architecture of Messenger operations. Six primordial focal points through which the spiritual geometry of the Empire is maintained. Each mengir serves as both terrestrial monument and gateway, enabling the transcendence of mundane spatial limitations. —Z.

³⁶ *Graph Master—the lion who maintains the Graph, which is... actually, Z., you explain this one. I never fully understood what Graph Masters do.* —S.

³⁷ The Graph Master maintains comprehensive visual records of all Messenger relationships—operational partnerships, mengir affiliations, message routing. Always male. —Z.

"Mmmm... Vaalu-Amaya. The best. In her own way."

"The best is Vaalu-Saensallie, sir Tamalu."

"In her own way," he pressed and evaded. "What I wanted to say, what I wanted to say..." he took a red stylus, "...is that Bright Val-Amaya sends Messages confidently. We work little with her now. But she's easy to work with. That's... certain," he drew a line on the Graph from his Mistress, from Vaalu-Nel, to Vaalu-Vesta's mengir (the Marn-Kaar mengir, the principal mengir), and put the number '2' and the date '0111808.' "That's certain. That's certain. Good Graph today, Marvelous Val-Mauna, well-structured."

Now Mauna knew from the lips of the Messenger herself, her new mentor: she had no experience with acolytes; she had no desire for experience with acolytes; and coming here was exile and a sign, the strongest message being symbolic, as any Ashai-Keetrah knows. And with her own ears she had heard: Amaya communicated as no Messenger had ever communicated with her or in her presence before (probably this was how peddlers, market females spoke, but Mauna had never had the opportunity to converse with market females). And with her own eyes she had seen: Vaalu-Amaya, she was... somehow... somehow...

"Dirty," Mauna even said aloud.

Even her teeth were yellow from tobacco, or whatever she mixed in her pipe.

"What's dirty, Mistress?" Renaya fretted, looking around at both her and everything nearby.

"I'm dirty from the road," Mauna lied.

"We'll wash, Mistress, we'll wash."

The acolyte undressed, gave her belt to the servant.

"It seems Vaalu-Amaya has many troubles now," Mauna said colorlessly—without malice, with weariness. Then she added: "And will have many more. It looks like I'll have to manage everything myself. Where are her servants, why aren't they helping us?"

"No need, Mistress, they showed us everything here," Renaya gestured around the bedroom. Then, unexpectedly: "The Mistress may order me flogged for what I'm about to say. But I have served Messengers for many, many years. Here's the thing: let the Mistress find reconciliation... in the fact... that the mentors... perhaps... have prepared the path of Pre-Messenger for her. It may be so."

Renaya knows how to do this, understood much. She speaks directly, honestly.

"I won't give up, Renaya."

"Mistress will never give up, I know. It's Mistress's nature, I admire it. That's how it should be. Vaal wants to see effort from each of us, in our own place."

"He wants all of us to..." Mauna began, but for some reason didn't finish.

"Yes, Mistress."

"When I told mentor Vaalu-Amaya that I would never show my tail, she... she compared me to a free Hustrian lioness who decided to take... more clients. Whatever that might mean."

Renaya couldn't find an answer. But Mauna felt her anger through her fur; the plasis in the servant's hands began folding more sharply.

"This is a strange residence. There's some kind of emptiness here, and disorder. Disorder and emptiness. How can such a thing be? Both together? But I see it."

"Hamanu Renaya, I once heard that Amaya is among the best Messengers of the Empire," Mauna said very thoughtfully.

The doubt was caught correctly.

"I confess: I've never heard Excellent Vaalu-Amaya being called that."

"And what do you know about her?"

"Nothing. I don't know anyone who has served her. And I don't know any of those who are here in the Family either. They all have a bewildered look. Unforgivable!"

Renaya took Mauna's chemise, leaving her naked; she felt the bed and pillows by touch; the servant bustled behind, very close, and Mauna could sense fabric brushing the tip of her tail.

"Shameful. They should serve better," Renaya added angrily.

Now she was washing Mauna's paws, and they were silent for a long time. The servant had the habit of meticulously examining her pads, exposing her claws, searching for imperfections. Mauna stretched out on the bed, covering her eyes with her hand.

"So far I see that the customs and manners of the Excellent Vaalu-Amaya are... unusual," came Renaya's voice in the silence.

"What do you think of her?" Mauna asked, not moving from where she lay. She licked her lips. Her half-open mouth, her eyes hidden behind her hand—pure exhaustion.

"My thoughts don't matter here. I swore to serve my Mistress faithfully, and after that—any Messenger who might need it. Any at all."

Renaya was finished: she took Mauna's hands through the towel and helped her up.

"I always stand with my Mistress."

"Thank you, my Renaya."

What Mauna did like here were the carpets, and she paced in circles, stretching her legs, preparing for the Walk before the aumlan.

"It's a test, Mistress. Flawless Val-Nell wants to see how Vaalu-Mauna handles these circumstances—whether she'll embrace her teaching, her service, her duties. Mistress has to be flawless."

"I'll sit in aumlan for an hour, then—washing, and sleep," Mauna decided.

All clear, and Renaya pulled sandglass timepieces from a wooden box, from a whole set of various ones, and also took a thick blue cord for doors, which signified: 'Messenger in aumlan.' There was a hitch with the timepieces, since Renaya didn't know where Mauna would sit—the room was new, after all, they needed to find a spot.

"Just set it on the floor," Mauna said. "And we'll seal up."

Renaya did exactly that. She went to the doors and pushed back the heavy velvet curtains, then opened the door to hang the cord—only to find Vaalu-Amaya standing right there. The Messenger waited on the other side with a cold pipe in her hand, eyes closed, flanked by two bodyguards assigned to watch Mauna. Renaya had enough experience not to startle or show surprise. She simply stepped back.

"Radiant," she said with a bow.

"Don't hang it," Amaya said to her about the cord, opening her gaze, though Renaya wasn't going to anymore. "Go. Oh, yeah. Gimme the cord."

Mauna froze mid-step—she'd barely started her Walk when Amaya appeared unexpectedly in the room instead of Renaya, dangling the cord like a dead snake. She entered as though she'd left something behind, her eyes drifting around the space without settling on Mauna. Messengers have elaborate customs for entering another sister's quarters, or an acolyte's. Let's just say this etiquette had been... somewhat violated here. Not unforgivably so, but violated nonetheless.

Amaya went to the bed and fingered the blindfold and cotton batting laid out there—Renaya's preparations for sealing Mauna before aumlan.

"Nah, skip the aumlan thing. Already told you that." She pushed the items aside carelessly, treating them like something distasteful.

"Let me be forgiven, mentor. I intended to take the day off and enter sleep well," Mauna spoke evenly.

Amaya spread out a sitting mat on the floor and set up another for Mauna—southern style, the way Khustrians do it, same as in Kafna. Completely unnecessary on carpets this fine, but there it was.

"Cut it out." She propped her elbow on the bed and settled sideways, legs stretched out. "Quit calling me mentor."

Somehow not even surprised by such a turn and immediately accepting her unenviable three-moon future, Mauna calmly agreed, crossing her arms and remaining standing naked; she turned toward Amaya, but not fully, not muzzle-to-muzzle:

"Very well."

She didn't treat the spread mat as a proper invitation, so Amaya nodded—sit down, what are you standing for? Mauna settled cross-legged, draped her tail across her knee and held it steady with one hand. All her movements came a little slower than usual.

"Well then, time to weave some truth or other. So, they sent you here," Amaya established the obvious.

"Yes."

"Know why?" Amaya cupped her palm under her muzzle, making her features scrunch up amusingly.

"Not anymore."

"No point lying now. So why are you?"

Well then, everything was clear. It seemed her mentors had everything clear, Amaya had everything clear, only she—Mauna—was still trying to bite her own tail.

"Until my Acceptance, I will never abandon my sacred duty to study the Craft." No other answer is possible from her—no other answer is even allowed for an acolyte.

"Oh, they'll rush that through, don't worry," Amaya waved dismissively as soon as she heard. "Your Acceptance will be all flash and fanfare—that's how they do it for Pre-flops. You'll be drowning in ceremony. They dumped you, gave up on you. Look, if they sent you here to actually learn something, it's a shit plan. For anything else? Probably pretty clever. Bottom line: deal with it and get ready to be a Pre-fail. Especially with your kind of empathy—Vaal himself commanded it." She delivered all this quickly and matter-of-factly, like discussing the weather.

Mauna thought about how even with this newest gift, no one here would help her. If empathy isn't supported, then it can fade as sharply as it ignited. Pre-Messenger! Pre-Messenger Vaalu-Mauna. Cruelly they delivered this Message to her! Therefore it must be so. Seems such Messages are delivered just like this. She'd failed—no point choosing now.

Amaya suddenly screwed her eyes shut and sneezed violently, burying her muzzle in the bed coverlet. Then she started coughing hard, wrapping her arms around herself and ducking her head clear to her ears. Mauna rose, walked over to pour water from the pitcher into a cup, and brought it to her. Amaya showed no signs of emerging from her makeshift shelter, body shaking with coughs against the bedding. Mauna stood there holding the cup uselessly. She took a quiet sip herself, studying Amaya's back, her tail, the plasis, those impossibly long chaindrops cascading gold down her shoulders. Lightning-quick, Mauna remembered the two dhaar females, then immediately the unknown stalla from Ainansgard crying "Sister! Sister!" Somehow she thought that Amaya is that same stalla—grown up, miraculously transformed into a Messenger. The feeling overwhelmed her completely. Yes, exactly—embrace, that's what it was. The need became torment. Mauna fought it, knowing this violated everything: her patrician blood, her famous cool restraint, all the complex forms between mentor (?) and acolyte—between Messenger and acolyte. You couldn't just reach out and hold someone without proper approaches, proper warnings. But nothing worked. Her willpower lay shredded between the wolf of fatalism ('they rejected me, looking at everything') and the lioness of empathy ('I accept you, despite everything'). Mauna settled before Amaya, as before Vaal's chalice, and embraced her from behind, or from the side, she couldn't even account to herself exactly how, and she didn't think at all about the cup, and it slipped along the bed and powerlessly overturned, spilling water, and the moisture flowed under Amaya's palms.

She felt her last convulsion, and then everything quieted. It turned out that she had buried her nose, the bridge of her nose directly into Amaya's ear, and the sharpness of one of the rings burned her cheek; her right hand held her palm, and the left simply spread across her back. Very slowly, Amaya turned around, their complex embrace underwent metamorphoses, and in the end they sat very close facing each other. Mauna's

right palm was atop her left, on the bed. Now they looked into each other's eyes.

Vaal..., thought Mauna.

Not even knowing what to do, she took the fallen cup from the bed, in which, surprisingly, a little water remained. Having sipped from it a bit (as it should be: even a Messenger must taste what she gives to another Messenger, at least a little), she gave it to Amaya, and she weakly accepted it; Mauna didn't let it go, and it turned out that she was giving Amaya drink.

"Thank you," she licked her lips, eyes closed.

Now Amaya opened her gaze. Something had to be done. Something to ask. Something to say. *Vaal...*, Mauna thought again.

"Does it interfere with your Messaging?" Mauna tried for pleasantness, a light touch of humor, but it came out odd. Really odd.

"The cough? Nah." Amaya shook her head, voice still rough. "Nothing interferes with me doing my service. Not even my recent adventures."

She continued shaking her head minutely, as if to say, no-no, it doesn't interfere. Mauna didn't ask about 'recent adventures,' out of caution and the habit of not asking extra questions; you learn this skill very quickly if you're an acolyte of the Inner Empire.

"Thank you for your candor, Exalted Vaalu-Amaya. I understand—I haven't quite fulfilled my duty. Vaal grants different things to each of us." Mauna tried for a perfectly ordinary tone, as though nothing had happened. Her usually reliable control over expression and voice utterly failed her, refusing to cooperate. Nothing came out as intended. Not ordinary, not casual—not at all.

"Different things... That's for sure," Amaya knocked the cup against the floor. "You've lost your mind. No pre-addresses. And no nomens. Just Amaya. Lio-ness A-ma-ya."

Why 'lost your mind'? Mauna wondered. But couldn't pursue the thought because:

"Hey, seriously—are things really that bad with your training?"

Mauna twitched her ears and nodded. Obviously, yes.

Amaya suddenly took her muzzle in her palms. Usual thing: began searching in her gaze. Mentor Nel was never satisfied with the result of this searching.

"Complete bullshit. Can't be. Nyah, I don't believe it, they wrote nonsense. Look at that gesture, what a little gift of theirs."

Mauna was losing the thread of what Amaya was saying.

"Why'd they dump you? What the..."

Thinking about what Amaya meant—she constantly had to puzzle out what Amaya meant—Mauna replied:

"My mentors devoted enormous attention to me. So much time was spent. I received even more than I deserved."

"Fuck them and their time. They spent more bricks on pretty frippery, that's what they spent on."

It wasn't that Amaya's harshness frightened Mauna. She just didn't know what to do with it.

"What's a brick?" she asked carefully, even meekly.

"Gold ingot," Amaya continued searching in her eyes, then abruptly dropped that. She began desperately gnawing her claw, her gaze wandering around the room, the claw actually clicking against her teeth. "You're a good weapon, how... " she spoke quietly and feverishly, not caring at all about Mauna and her understanding. "How could they... Tail with me, do what you want... even follow the tail... and her... Well, let it be. Yeah, whatever. Yeah, screw it. Maybe it's even better this way."

She hid in her palms.

"Bitches, bitches, bitches, bitches."

A pause.

"Fuck them. All of them. Probably. Take it. Look. Devour."

Suddenly remembering Mauna was still there, Amaya asked in a perfectly ordinary tone:

"How are you with mnemonics? Also bad?"

"Good," Mauna protested.

At least no one could fault her there.

"Remember this. Ready? Remember: from Mauna to Ketira. From: First Legion. To: Thirteenth Legion. We see movement: Helsia border, five thousand three hundred forty-seven and a half heads south of position seven. Observed firrans in armor, ugly aash dancers and Fire-cult priests with figurines. Composition: northern prides, draags, Khustrians, Mstvaashi, southern Sitts, possibly—ex-Suung mercenaries. Traders saw supply carts. Message forty-five confirmed. Reinforce positions five and nine. Signature: Raven-Moon-Sword-forty-seven."

Her manner of giving a Message, even here, in the world of warm blood, turned out to be terrifying. She didn't play, didn't care, didn't flow almost in a singsong (like Vaalu-Nel, Mauna's current mentor) or dryly transmit words, one after another, calmly and properly (Vaalum-Myanfar, Mauna's previous mentor). Amaya (not-mentor of Mauna, nah, doesn't want to be) hammered words like iron nails into consciousness, better to say—like arrows. She didn't allow Mauna to tear her gaze away, there was nowhere to hide.

Mauna without embarrassment traced mnemonic gestures, it helps her.

"From Mauna to Ketira. From: First Legion. To: Thirteenth Legion. We see movement near Helsia border, five thousand three hundred forty-seven and a half heads. South of position seven. Observed firrans in armor, ugly aash dancers and Fire-cultists with figurines. Composition: northern prides, Khustrians, draags, Mstvaashi, southern Sitts, possibly—ex-Suung mercenaries. Traders saw supply carts. Message forty-five confirmed. Reinforce positions five, nine. Signature: Raven-Moon-Sword-forty-seven."

A somewhat ridiculous and largely absurd Message, but Mauna didn't let it show. Actually, she didn't find it particularly funny. Something about Amaya's delivery style unsettled her.

"That was simple, Amaya," she flicked her ear and shoulder, boasted.

"How many of those can you cram into yourself?"

"About six, in an hour. I'm weaker by ear, from text would be better."

"Nyaaah, everyone's like that."

"North, southern Sitts and Khustrians together?" Mauna smiled very carefully, just with the corner of her mouth. "Only missing the Melanhlens."

"Everyone in one pot. We'll boil them all. And devour them."

Amaya mimed tossing everyone into the pot and stirring. Mauna pressed her nose, cutting off her air to keep from laughing—all very discreetly. She considered laughter something barely acceptable for herself, even in private.

"Oh, and don't Message five-nine together. Five and nine. Otherwise these rams will reinforce the fifth, sixth, seventh, eighth and ninth."

Stretching, Amaya stood up clumsily. She flexed her leg—obviously had been sitting too long.

"Get up tomorrow at eight, come to my bedroom at nine," she went to the exit without turning around.

"Routine is at six," Mauna simply noted.

And regretted it. Really. What did it matter? She'd been told—at nine.

"I'll be damned. What's your routine?" Amaya turned around.

"Six and twenty-one."

"Damn you. Shift to eight-twenty-two," she pointed a finger at her.

"Very well."

"Let all the sisters hear you," the finger still on Mauna.

A sardonic smile flickered across the Messenger's muzzle—hard to read the meaning behind it. Mauna responded perfectly, with a nod:

"And may you reach Vaal."

Surprisingly, Amaya took the blue door cord with her.

How Mauna Shoots the Bow

Mauna observed everything, and simply slept, in accordance with all the rules of good sleep for Messengers. She couldn't help but rise at six o'clock—jumping to a different time schedule can't be done overnight—so until nine she had any worthy acolyte's free activities awaiting her, such as: a morning walk (preferably—with an episode of Walking on grass), archery, perennial literature of the Suungs, the corpus of texts by Messengers and for Messengers; she could also saddle a horse, but the residence was new to her, this would require some logistics and acquainting herself with the place. All of this is better to be done during the day.

And no breakfast, because she eats from midday.

Today she chose the bow, and, due to the mysterious absence of targets in this residence (well, this would be quickly corrected), shot at a tree (seemed to be cherry); the weather was awful, fine rain, terrible sky, but no matter—the hood saves. She threw off her *knemids*³⁸, for she was taught: to walk barepaw on wet grass is very beneficial. To carry arrows and such, she arranged to be given someone from Amaya's Family. Her own servants had volunteered, but Mauna assigned them elsewhere—setting the chambers and bedroom to rights, as both had certain deficiencies.

She was given for some reason a young dhaar female, about her age. Odd, but whatever.

"Beautiful morning, Flawless one," she met Mauna with everything needed at the back exit to the garden.

"Let's go."

The dhaar turned out to be decent: quick and silent, no nonsense. Mauna doesn't tolerate when servants start being clever and chattering.

What a disgrace. Nel decided my cause is hopeless after all, she released an arrow.

She calmly thought that right at the Acceptance she should poison herself. Death at Acceptance is always dignified death, there will be no reproach, in this there's no pretense and showing-off of ordinary suicide. Or not give up and worthily bear service as a Pre-Messenger? It's very needed service, actually, rare and unique; no one connects the Inner Empire with the outer world so trustedly, firmly, practically, as they do.

No, Mauna thought with the same composure. *Any fool can poison herself in a fit of pique.*

"Go tell the residence: when the ninth hour strikes, have them summon us."

³⁸ Pawwear. —Z.

The dhaar vanished, leaving the quivers on the wet grass. Mauna bent to retrieve her arrows, then the dhaar returned.

"Radiant, I am endless in gratitude."

"What cause?" Mauna asked in Andarian style, adjusting the glove on her right palm. The dhaar tried to stand before her, in the line of fire, and Mauna unhurriedly moved her aside with an arrow she drew from her belt.

"For cause the Excellent one," she stepped to the side, recognizing her mistake, "save aunt Selestina and aunt Bastiana. I know all-all. Everyone know."

The acolyte pondered, drawing her bowstring. The arrow flew.

"Are those the two dhaari who stole sacks, or what was it?" she reached for a new arrow, without emotion.

The dhaar nodded minutely, looking down, though Mauna didn't see this, because she was aiming again. So for the acolyte it came out that the dhaar was simply silent.

"And did they steal? What exactly did they do?"

After a long hesitation, dhaar replied:

"They nothing-nothing did. It's all because of me."

Mauna looked at her. Again this, like yesterday. The dhaar in terror. Vaal, what fear she was in. It simply became her horror, for a moment; but Mauna managed, examining what was happening in her, and hurried when the dhaar looked down again, and took her by the chin—look at me. It turns out, this helps empathy, Mauna discovered for herself; another's gaze is needed, without it almost doesn't work. The dhaar settled in her, not all of her, but partly (her terror); but now Mauna could separate herself and her, in unity there are two parts, and these two parts—it turns out—can and should be separated, not be absorbed. Look through it like smoky glass at what happens in another's consciousness (simple lionkind has consciousness; Messengers possess metanoia). What a thing this empathy was. What a discovery. Listen, this is Vaal's gift, one must look closely at it, he doesn't give Spirit Gifts just like that...

"Vaal..." Mauna couldn't help murmuring aloud—all these revelations.

Naturally, the dhaar interpreted this as directed at her, like a harsh rebuke.

Honest, Mauna suddenly realized. *Interesting*.

"They covered me-me, my guilt," she quickly confessed, though there was no need at all for this confession, from any side; it only harmed her.

"You stole nothing," Mauna declared—not a question.

"No. Never-never. Stealing is forbidden."

"You didn't steal. Neither did they. So what happened?"

She prepared to utter some terrible confession; her perfectly gray features, gray eyes, prepared for a mad leap of faith that could utterly destroy her; actually, Mauna understood, she was confessing from unexpected, even foolishly naive trust, but also—surprisingly, as it happens—from honest, real sense of duty, from noble motive (in a dhaar?).

"What's your name?" Mauna didn't let her speak.

"Toamlia, Bright-flamed one. Everyone says 'Toya'. Toya."

"Flawless, it's almost nine!" Amaya's bodyguard hurried toward them.

"And what's your name?" Now Mauna asked him. She always memorizes names permanently: both useful to know everyone in any Family by names, and entertainment in mnemonics. It's important to keep servants on a short leash, and a name is also a good collar for the leash.

He smirked for some reason. Such a one. That sort. You can feel it.

"Tai, Excellent Vaalu-Mana."

"Mauna, that's my name. Go."

"Deepest apologies, Excellent Vaalu-Mana," he made a half-bow, keeping his hand at his sword.

Mauna tossed him the bow, he caught it without difficulty, she nodded to him—move.

"You'll take it to my servants, it's a good bow. Let's go, Toya."

"Yes, Fiery Vaalu-Mana," Tai replied.

They walked back to the residence, and silence settled. Well?

"Answer. When a Messenger asks, one must answer."

"What happened was?" the dhaar's Suung broke down from great agitation. And off she went: "We arrived week ago, all hurrying, we all here hurried very-very, in basement placing chests, then came lady-hamanu Khizaya, and ordered as fast as possible putting clothes from chests, and in chests Mistress's dresses; turned out, all went out, and I did this, I regret-regret, I took, I took-took and put on Mistress's dress, and looked at myself in it in mirror in basement, there was mirror, it too was brought, and then came in, then came in..."

Ha-ha-ha. So much for 'honest.' Lie! What a gift! Is this really what *Truth-Seers* feel? Lies can be caught by the tail like this, like a cat catches a mouse? The problem turned out to be, Mauna noted, that it was impossible to say what exactly in Toya's word-flow was a lie. Probably... probably one could ask questions, and it would become clear? She had to master all this on the fly, Mauna found everything interesting; this is benefit, how much benefit for serving Vaal, the Empire and the Suungs!

Hey, wait, she really is honest.

And lying.

Hm, thought Mauna. Strange things. How can empathy say one thing, then—immediately another?

Empathy wasn't supposed to lie, yet here it was. Honest lionkind don't lie, yet here she was. Everything tangled together: Toya was lying, empathy was lying, both were lying, nobody was lying?

"What kind of dress?"

"Like the Flawless one wears, but longer and with sleeves like that, had collar too, and trim. Only-only dark red."

Mauna was currently wearing svira³⁹, not plasis.

"With such a belt?" Mauna tugged at her Ashai belt.

³⁹ *Ashai travel dress.* —S.

"With belt-belt."

"Plasis, then. This is..." Mauna recalled, closing her eye, how it went there in 'Regulations on Crimes Against the Ashai-Keetrah Sisterhood and Toward Faith-breaking, and the Merciless and Inevitable Punishments for Such Crimes and Those Similar.' "This is: 'Pretense, committed by any lioness, in belonging to the sisterhood of Ashai-Keetrah or possessing Spirit Gifts.' This is much worse than any sacks. This is death penalty even for Suungs, Toya. This is one of the few things for which a lioness in the Empire is executed."

She halted them on the residence steps. Obviously, Toya knew that wearing any Ashai dresses was bad, just as stealing from the Mistress was too. And obviously, she didn't suspect that for a dhaar to put on plasis, or even svira—was much worse than stealing bottles, even a hundred bottles, or a thousand. And mysteriously, here's the thing: how exactly did Toya's crime of pretense suddenly transform into something completely different, into the crime of theft by two dhaar lionesses?

"Any Ashai-Keetrah can kill you right now," Mauna showed her thumb toward her sirna. "This is approved by the Codex."

This matter deserved certain interest. This was a huge lever. This wasn't even a leash, this was—an iron chain. Such iron chains with huge spiked collars are very useful, Mauna knew this—she too had been taught this. What do they bind with? With feelings of honor and duty, love, money, deadly knowledge.

"I accept death, let Ahey receive me. Let it be quick."

Well now, Mauna hadn't expected such an answer. In these cases dhaar should beg for mercy, all that sort of thing, since they don't understand honor, just as they don't understand suicide, and much else besides.

"Ahey? You're Mramri?"

"Yes, Flame-blessed," she folded her hands at her forehead.

Mauna reached behind her collar. Everything was true—the symbol of Ahey was on her, the world saw what had been hidden by the collar until now.

Something genuinely strange was happening in this residence. Everyone seemed... on edge somehow. Shrouded in some dark mist. Dhaar lionesses confessing to capital crimes. What was going on?

Toya looked into Mauna's eyes. So, a new wave of empathy; Mauna began to notice this important thing—the gift wasn't given just like that, for free, no, empathy took strength from you by the bucketful. Mauna knows this, any Spirit Gift devours powers, even a naysi knows this; but before she knew it like this, with her mind, and now—she felt it. And now came strangeness: she developed a connection with this lioness; in some measure even outrageous, but it was so. What kind of connection exactly? Completely unclear. A connection, you know, it's for your sisters only. That's it, exactly such a connection Mauna had felt toward Amaya then, yesterday evening, when she saw her back and the chaindrops streaming down her shoulders. What is this, does empathy throw connections with-

out discrimination: does it not care at all whom to connect to itself, is that it?

Toya seemed to try to say something else, but now Mauna knew she couldn't let her speak further, she would talk herself to death, to ten deaths, this couldn't be allowed, not for anyone. Mauna, half-consciously, very quickly and suddenly, covered her mouth with her palm, completely; this is how all the mentors always did when Mauna practiced *myein*⁴⁰, the vow of silence, and suddenly dared to forget about it. They would approach, even jump up, and forcibly impose *myein* on her; Vaalu-Nel would even threaten with her finger. Apparently, the young dhaar decided that this was exactly how execution should begin, and only closed her eyes and breathed hotly into Mauna's palm, hands relaxing limply, and the quivers freed themselves from arrows, which rolled down the steps. Mauna began a battle with herself, and very quickly lost, her own (now foreign to her) will proved too strong, and she embraced Toya, very tightly. They were the same height, and Mauna buried her nose in her ear with iron dhaar rings (three of them); she couldn't see that the golden streams of the Messenger's chandrops had covered the dhaar's muzzle, and even flowed into her open mouth; a mixture of scents: Toya herself, soap, kitchen, barn, cellar, blood. With detached concern for the collapse of such enormous distance of their statuses (and other such trifles) and infinite, still so unfamiliar (and at the same time eternal, like Tiamat) bliss of empathy, Mauna noted that she was almost kissing where Toya's ear began, through which she heard the world, while her strong archer-patriarchian hands dug into Toya's shoulders.

Having done its work, empathy faded, and now Mauna discovered that she, an acolyte of Messengers, was embracing a dhaar in the most incomparable manner on the steps of a Messenger residence (Huntress Moon), and this was truly a scandalous situation that one couldn't really justify or explain to anyone. Accustomed to pulling herself out of all altered states, Mauna, still embracing Toya, evaluated how best to get out of all this. She shouldn't look surprised or confused. She shouldn't look agitated. Only the calm severity befitting a Messenger. Expressions, yes—like that.

Mauna stepped back, strongly so, two steps, maybe even three. She never could describe Toya's expression, but it truly remained in memory. One detail: one quiver Toya still held in her hand, and it swayed, back and forth.

Waving at the scattered arrows, Mauna began to leave silently, because she needed to hurry to Amaya's bedroom.

"Mistress! Paws!"

Mauna stopped, turned around. What about paws?

"Paws. Wash-wash."

⁴⁰ Μυεῖν. —Z.

She glanced down—muddy, of course. She remembered leaving her knemids behind in the grass. They moved to the paw-washing basin by the entrance.

"Paws wash-wash," Mauna repeated absently for some reason; she was simply an echo, and there was no command here. She remembered an interesting treatise 'On the Meaning of Echoes,' where the author said, among other things, that without echo there is no space and no love.

"Already, already," Toya rushed.

The paw-washing became surreal: Toya kept dabbing at her muzzle with her free hand, wiping her sleeve across her eyes, ears flattened as she stared fixedly downward. Mauna reflected that before this no one had ever washed her paws—or anything else, for that matter—with tears.

"I ask for tail, Mistress."

Mauna turned around. No need to wash the tail, she was in svira with a tail pocket after all, but fine.

"Excellent Vaalu-Amaya is your Mistress," she said, standing with her tail toward Toya. "To me only the pre-address and nomen."

"Yes-yes, Perfect Vaalu-Mauna. Yes," Toya agreed with yet another of her crimes.

When the washing finished and Toya stood before her with head bowed as low as possible, sir Nermai appeared at precisely the right moment:

"Excellent Vaalu-Mauna, it's almost nine."

"Sir Nermai, assign this dhaari to me for morning archery." She gestured toward Toya with her hand mirror, and he nodded.

Mauna reflected that she desperately needed an Ashai who could help her manage this empathy. Only two days in, and already chaos. But where would she find such guidance here?

The Futility of True Resistance to the Finest Daughters of the Suungs: Yesterday, Today, Tomorrow

"Your name?" Mauna gestured with her mirror toward the right side of the door.

"Khagal, Radiant."

"Yours?" Now indicating left.

"Tavu, Excellent." This mane from the bodyguard was absurdly oversized—as if his father had been a *firran*⁴¹ rather than a lion.

Catching two more names in memory, Mauna entered, confidently opening the door (yellow cord on it: 'Messenger delivering').

What she saw didn't exactly knock her off her paws, but everything clearly differed from all those Messenger bedrooms Mauna had visited, and there had been quite a few—in her eighteen years she'd traveled around the Empire and been a guest of many sisters in many residences. It must be said that bedrooms are always different, sometimes with incredible whims of their Mistresses, but all contained common elements, obligatory attributes: skillful and enormous portraits of sisters, especially sisters from the Mistress's mengir, a portrait of the High Mother, a portrait of You-Know-Who, endless lunar symbols and patterns, all the flags of the Empire (they try to tuck the War Banner^{42,43,44,45} somewhere less noticeable—it interferes, everyone knows this), fetishes of sisters by the bedside, huge calligraphic mottoes of sisters, a complex set of pillows, multiple bedding items here and there; boards right by the bed where they write important anchors for Messages in chalk—names, numbers, places, dates, units and formations, signatures. Some hang little flags on strings above the bed or herbs, sometimes very exotic ones. Precious stones of very different kinds, especially moonstone—how could you do without it—and pearls (but never ruby, everyone knows it ruins any dreamwalking). Sometimes it's complete chaos, sometimes merciless order; but there's always plenty of anything that might help dreamwalking, and then Messaging. No one places Vaal's chalices, much less burns them:

⁴¹ *Think: if regular lions were horse-sized and rideable. Male firrans are the fancy transportation. Showing up on one is a flex—everyone knows you've got money and status. Female firrans are too aggressive for riding, so they're just for making more firrans. Want to impress a lioness? Offer her a ride on your firran. Classic move. —S.*

⁴² The War Banner of the Empire features the sun with arrows as rays—the most potent solar iconography in Suung heraldry. Such imagery counteracts the lunar symbolism essential for dreamwalking. —Z.

⁴³ *Z. explaining dreamwalking like he has any idea what it feels like. Males can't dreamwalk. Can't give birth either. —S.*

⁴⁴ Theoretical comprehension does not require experiential participation. —Z.

⁴⁵ *Your theoretical cubs must be adorable. —S.*

they also interfere, Vaal's fire interferes. The Book of Souls⁴⁶, or even several such books. And maps, maps, maps—maps of the Empire, provinces, all the rest of the world. Without fail, there should be a desk with today's Graph; more precisely, that part of it directly concerning the Mistress for tonight.

Therefore Mauna was struck by the asceticism. Of all this—quite expected abundance—Amaya's bedroom contained only a wall map of the Empire, decent but not very large. She also discovered: Amaya herself, and two *Graph-scribes* very close to the bed—a lion and a lioness (unusual, lions should be perform scribal service). For some reason there were no Welcoming servants, not even one; yet at least one is always present when a Mistress delivers Messages, except in the most extraordinary cases.

A Messenger delivering Messages should be found in bed, looking drunk or dying, often with eyes covered by cloth, and with the delicate help of a Welcomer she tries to give all of herself to the final effort in today's Craft session, fearing to disturb the balance between waking and dreaming from which she has just emerged, to 'frighten away the memory,' as they say. They give her various things to smell; they may feed her from a spoon like a child—they did this for Vaalu-Nel. Vaal, they did this for her, Mauna, when she once (once!) managed to enter connection and could receive fairly well (and transmit nothing). The blindfold and cotton in the ears often remain, and the Messenger lies vulnerably—blind and half-deaf.

But what about Amaya? Her frivolity and impunity were striking: she lay on her side in a nightgown, one leg propping up the headboard, while the other stretched across the pillow. She swished her tail and lazily chewed something dark red—raisins or cranberries, it seemed—from a deep wooden bowl, very plain. Palm under her muzzle, which twisted again just like during their first evening meeting, showing her fang. Seeing Mauna, she waved at her with a carefree gesture: come in, sit on the bed.

"Twelfth. Eh, what do we have here..." she spat out a bad raisin and threw it in the bowl. "Inliramia for Amaya. From: Marna Second Trade Guild. To: Listigia Trade Guild. Year 807, debtors and creditors—balanced. Expected deliveries year 808 from current date: seven thousand five hundred stones coffee, twenty thousand five hundred stones black Kafna tea. Break down by tri-moon periods. We demand cancellation of bad debt, collect by all measures: Valrr, of Astal. We expect no later than year's end: representatives—tea, coffee, cotton, precious stones, master-work pottery. Signature: Star-Raven-Hand-sixty. Underline 'black.'"

⁴⁶ *Book of Sisters—the Empire-wide registry of all Ashai-Keetrah. Massive, impossible to keep current, honestly kind of absurd. Sisters die, leave the order, move around—the thing's always out of date. Book of Souls—that's Messenger-specific. Each mengir maintains its own. Detailed profiles of every sister in the mengir: biography, motto, habits, light-type (usually), handwritten personal notes. It's for Sister-bond—the spiritual connection between Messengers. —S.*

Mauna approached but didn't sit on the bed, because that wasn't proper etiquette or custom among Messengers during such a vulnerable, intimate time. She simply settled on her legs beside the bed.

"Thirteenth..."

What? it dawned on Mauna. *Thirteenth?*

Fourteenth.

Vaal, didn't she close the queue after the seventh or eighth? she looked at the scribes, then at Amaya, very composedly, showing no emotion; but inside her—a chasm of amazement. *How is this possible?*"

Amaya held something orange right under Mauna's nose, and in a moment Mauna found herself obliged to eat dried apricot, barely covering her mouth with her palm; she even forgot to press her ears back at least a little in gratitude for the treat.

Fifteenth.

What is this?! Mauna was genuinely astonished now, and swallowed the apricot.

"Fifteen out of fifteen," Amaya summed up. "Check it."

The scribes settled closer, following the Mistress's command. The lion traced his finger along the lioness's lines.

"What's this supposed to be?" the lion asked.

"Three hundred thousand, three hundred and twenty," the lioness replied, then added unnecessarily: "Imperials."

"Your twos look like threes," the lion muttered.

Meanwhile, with a wink, Amaya offered Mauna more dried apricots; a half-bow from Mauna, she thanked her (hand on chest), a polite declining gesture—all conducted in silence, 'no need, thank you'. Amaya rolled onto her back and lobbed an apricot at the map of the Empire, which was studded with numerous multicolored flags (each marking a Messenger). She hit the capital, Marna, directly, and Mauna observed this flight; the apricot knocked down one of the nine flags clustered in Marna.

The scribes didn't let themselves be distracted by this, and signed beneath the accepted Messages. Mauna noted: the two scribes worked somewhat poorly together, many unnecessary movements, uncertain glances at the Mistress.

"Mistress, the *Stamp*," requested the lion. That was all.

"Stamp it yourselves, like I've told you before."

The scribes looked at each other, and the lion, with a heavy, almost resentful sigh, pressed Amaya's personal seal to both stenographs. He gathered up the remaining documents while the lioness settled back and adjusted her sleeves. When Mauna glanced her way, the lioness offered a small bow and mouthed silently: "Flawless one." Every Family member knew the rule—no idle talk while the Mistress is giving birth to Messages.

"So, nine have been Messaged, Mistress," the lion continued, twirling his stylus.

"Nine Messaged, jus' like wanted. Ten didn't work out, seventh one's a bust. Tried getting through to Shiala, but nobody was home in the hut," Amaya continued lying on her back, beating her tail against the bed.

The lion cleared his throat and ventured:

"So, a non-Message—the seventh, Mistress."

"The seventh, yeah," the Messenger confirmed melancholically.

"The reasons for non-connection... are they known?" he asked cautiously.

The Medium's lioness shot him a look, then dropped her gaze to fuss with her sleeves again.

"Like I'm sayin'. She shit herself," said Amaya, then hiccuped. "Damn, Maun, get me water, over there."

5th d. 3rd m. Waters 808 y., seventh, signature: Raven-Ruby-Hammer-nine. NON-MESSAGE. Reason for non-connection: inability to accept Message by s. s. A. M. Vaalu-Shiala for undetermined reason, the lion recorded.

Meanwhile, Mauna fetched water but made the error of bringing both pitcher and cup. Amaya immediately snatched the entire pitcher, leaving the acolyte holding the empty cup she hadn't even taken the proper ritual sip from. Mauna turned it over in her hands, examined the bottom, then sat back down by the bed, still clutching it uselessly.

5th d. 3rd m. Waters 808 y., seventh, signature: Raven-Ruby-Hammer-nine. NON-MESSAGE. Reason for non-connection: DQ: 'Vaalu-Shiala shit herself.' EQ," the lioness wrote.

The lion stared at the lioness's entry. Then at her.

"Primacy of direct speech," said the lioness in her defense, and glanced sidelong at the Mistress, but she continued devoting all attention to the pitcher, holding it with both hands.

The lion sighed once more.

"Protocol's complete, Mistress," he declared.

Amaya stopped drinking and grunted, wetly sucked air through her mouth and hiccuped again.

"The Messenger has returned, by Vaal's will." Amaya sat there, puzzled about what to do with the half-empty pitcher, then handed it off to Mauna.

"By Vaal's will, in the Empire's name, in the glory of the Suungs, Mistress," the scribes chorused as they rose, gathering their materials and documents. "Beautiful morning, Fire-blessed one," the lion said. The lioness murmured something too soft to catch, then quickly moved to take the cup and pitcher from Mauna.

"Vaal in the day, Medium. My gratitude for your service. I would welcome your names," Mauna said, indicating them with her mirror.

"Markh, Exquisite one," from the lion.

"Mizuri, Radiant," from the lioness.

"A pleasure to make your acquaintance."

The Graph Master and Graph-scribes—collectively called the '*Medium*'—are Family elite. One has to handle them properly. Mauna knew this well.

Markh lingered his gaze on her, nodded once more.

When they left, Mauna again sat down beside the bed, arranging the hem of her plasis (she'd barely managed to change after the shooting). One cannot simply sit on a Messenger's bed, an invitation is needed. It followed: Amaya, lying on her back, turned her head toward her and with a gesture smoothed the bedding. Mauna sat, concealing the mirror in her belt. Well, she had revealed herself, now it was for Amaya to lead—what, where, and how—she was the one in charge here, she was the Messenger here; whatever anyone might say, between them lay a steep gradient of power, an acolyte—even after Coming of Age—is in no way equal to a Messenger.

Especially a mediocrity like me, Mauna thought, though she buried it deep, hiding it even from herself. The thought grew stronger after what she'd just witnessed. Nine Messages delivered—ten attempted—and fifteen received. That was substantial. Extraordinary, really. Vaalu-Nel had never achieved anything close, nor had any of Mauna's previous mentors. Anything above ten marked you as preeminent—envy here would be only natural. And Amaya had done it all without portraits, fetishes, or Welcomers. Mauna had honestly never heard of anyone practicing the Craft this way. She was beginning to understand why sir Tamalu had rated her so highly, and felt a smoldering resentment that this particular Messenger refused to be her mentor ("Don't call me mentor!" and all that).

Nevertheless, nothing happened. Amaya continued looking at the ceiling, now at the window, in the opposite direction. She reached her hand into the plate and took the same piece of dried apricot, brought it to her muzzle, and then her hand fell weakly onto the bed, not completing the journey. She threw it back. Then took it again. Mauna looked at the window, now at her, studying. Thin, sunken cheekbones, calm golden fur. Probably she was Ashnarian or Denenayan by pride, though hard to say.

Amaya turned to her, looked at her. Mauna nodded and smiled slightly, and this gesture meant nothing other than recognition of her mastery in the Craft; my Vaal, at least someone has mastery in it... In it—both pride for the Inner Empire, and for suungmara⁴⁷, and for all the sisterhood, and envy, and sadness that they'd exiled her here, as a future Pre-Messenger. Then she looked slightly aside, detached. She was suddenly taken by the hand, Amaya was smiling, much wider than she, but it proved to be the saddest smile Mauna had ever seen in her life. Amaya gestured again at the bed—stretch out, all of you.

"What, Munish? Draw a house—and call it home?"

Mauna lay down properly, mirroring Amaya's position on her side. Something eased immediately—remarkably so for such a small shift. What had eased? Everything had. Mauna desperately wanted to ask about the missing tools supposedly essential for proper Messaging, about their plans (if any) for the day, about why exactly she was here. Practical ques-

⁴⁷ The transcendent essence of Suung civilization. The sacred synthesis of Vaal's divine order, Imperium, and cultural supremacy that elevates the Suung above all lesser ones. —Z.

tions tormented her, but none of them felt right, and instead she heard herself say:

"Or perhaps the sea instead? And we'll drown in it."

Vaal, forgive me, what have I said... the thought flashed. A meta-thought covered it: *Empathy, you really are a bitch.*

"Amaya forgives me. I am acceptable at drawing, but my teacher was critica—"

"Speak to me as 'you,' only so. You empathic bi—" Amaya didn't finish the last word, and laughed, looking down. "B-s-s-s. Subversive."

'Subversion, suggestion, sublimation', Mauna's mind supplied—the trinity of covert Ashai influence, as Boesius defined them in his only treatise, 'The Futility of True Resistance to the Finest Daughters of the Suungs: Yesterday, Today, Tomorrow' (all his other works were poetry).

"What will you assign me, Amaya? How can I serve here?" Mauna posed her practical questions. An Ashai must serve somehow, otherwise things are bad. Amaya is not going to teach her, and learning is the greatest service to Vaal-Suungs; so it must be something else.

"Oh, plenty of orders. First: lie around here in bed and do nothing."

"Otium," Mauna concluded after a moment's thought.

"Opium? No-no, stay away from that stuff. Absolute nightmare to kick."

"I said o-ti-um. Relaxation and reflection, tranquil contemplation."

"Oh, that thing... Well, skip the contemplation part."

"Then it's aumlan," Mauna wouldn't let it go.

"Just lie around, will you?"

Amaya weakly flicked her tail, it fell.

"Stay in bed awhile—helps with remembering. Actually, never rush after Messaging. You need to re-enter the world properly, or you'll muddle what's what and where."

"I'm skilled at grounding. That's never been an issue for me."

"Oh, I'm sure. If you're struggling with Messaging, it's probably because you ground yourself too damn well."

Amaya touched her plasis, even scratched at something there with a claw.

"Lie still, do nothing—it's important for the Craft, and for everything really. Think about whatever you want, or nothing at all. Eat some apricots, raisins. Nothing matters anyway, might as well not care."

Then she yawned.

"Later today, you'll be receiving clients. I almost never see them, so you will."

"Why?"

Mauna had meant 'why me?'—but as before, Amaya took it her own way:

"Why bother? It's almost always pointless gossip. They deliver their Messages in writing anyway, the Medium processes them regardless. They just come to gawk at me and preen, then casually mention later: 'I was at the Messenger's today.'"

"But doesn't that help with remembering—having an anchor point? And maintaining client relationships, surely that matters..."

"I don't need anchors. I just drift."

"The clients will expect you, not me. Won't they be surprised?"

"Tsaaaa, I'll sit nearby, read a book. And you... you make things up on the fly. Clients never say anything important. Everything they need, they've already written. The rest is nonsense."

"What time are clients scheduled?"

"Eh... who cares, the Family will come kick us when it's time."

They lay in silence. Mauna gave it proper consideration.

"Amaya, if there will be clients, then I must go and add *distance*."

"Oh come on, what do you lack, you have everything with you," Amaya waved her off.

"No," Mauna cut off. "I must."

Clients

Renaya fussed over Mauna's shawl with exacting scrutiny, examining it from every angle. She adjusted the band on her head—not yet the circlet, she hadn't earned that status—then the long, sweeping chaindrops that were properly suited to her rank.

"This shawl... The way it sits around your ears bothers me, Mistress."

"You say that every time. I've never seen the issue."

"Good. You're ready, Mistress," Renaya concluded, though her expression remained skeptical—she perpetually doubted whether she'd achieved perfection in dressing Mauna.

"Load some *handouts* on my wrist."

"How many?"

"Two. Actually, make it three."

If there was anything Mauna had been properly trained in (and there was plenty), it was *distance*—creating the external impression of a Messenger; all her mentors had paid this monumental, staams-like^{48,49,50} attention. There exist numerous rules, details and tricks, for instance for the muzzle: black dots under the eyes, in a row; thin vertical lines, above the eyes, below the eyes; (a)symmetrical half-moons around the eyes; regular tentush for the eyes, as ordinary Ashai and ordinary Suung females do, only stronger; shattered glass patterns (Mauna doesn't like); very expensive tentush that glows at night, briefly; complex lunar patterns (time-consuming, but good). Plasii and chaindrops, oh, plenty of them, various, for all occasions. The hand mirror, and how it's held in the palm. The position of the sirna on the belt.

'You are us. We are you.' The entire *Inner Empire* is already in her. No need to go anywhere or travel or fly—it's already in you, as long as you're a Messenger, or a Messenger's acolyte, and it doesn't matter how old you are. As long as you're one of us, you're inside the Inner Empire—you are everyone, and everyone is you.

Mauna left her chambers and came to where Amaya had determined she would receive clients; surprisingly, Amaya for some reason did this in the library. They ought to be received in the designated hall, the most im-

⁴⁸ *Staams—the massive ceremonial main building at a disciplarium. Tall enough to make your neck ache looking up. Using them as measurement ('monumental as a staams') is Imperial equivalent of saying 'solid as a mountain,' except mountains don't have inscriptions carved into their bases declaring 'Vaal-Simira survived the Acceptance, 776. GV!'* —S.

⁴⁹ That is absolutely preposterous. No disciplara would defile staams with carved inscriptions. —Z.

⁵⁰ *You literally cannot comprehend what happens inside disciplariums. Young females. Hundreds of them. I'm not elaborating, but use your imagination—then multiply by ten.* —S.

portant ones—in the designated room; there one could make walls with listening holes, and other interesting things, if required. But Amaya was the Messenger here, and she—only an acolyte.

Amaya sat in a deep, soft armchair, having thrown her paws up on a small library stepladder.

"Whew," she said, taking in Mauna's appearance.

Mauna looked around: there's a library table (will do), there's a chair (needs to be higher, and would need a pawrest). That's for Amaya. By tradition, she should sit alongside, but slightly to the side (acolyte). What else is there? A solar symbol of the Suungs behind the armchair, but for some reason only one, when there should be two. A Graph-scribe stands here, not far from the table, two bodyguards, the third (head of bodyguard) sits in the corner, arms crossed. He watches Mauna intently.

"Should I order another armchair brought?"

"What for?" Amaya spread her hands, and nearly dropped the book. "There, sit down."

"We won't be together, Flawless one?"

Mauna cannot address her as 'you' informally in front of everyone. That's not allowed.

"Nope, I'm gonna read. Funny book, this one..." She flipped back to the title page. "'Dreamwalking,' it's called."

None of this matched Mauna's preferences or training. Clients should be received in proper patrician fashion: a low table, yourself seated on massive floor cushions, the client across on significantly smaller ones—each client positioned at their precisely calculated distance.

Carefully sitting down, with the Graph-scribe's assistance, Mauna took the client list:

'1) Sire Sarkhan, milliar of Legate, drengir of special assignments. 2) P. sire Ottal-Ansuz with son. 3) Sire Kiritz, honor of the Suungs.'

Naturally, she knew none of them. The second item promised a local patrician, very good. The third item made her completely stunned: a judge requesting an audience with a Messenger? A lion sticking his tail in a hornet's nest? Extraordinary.

Kiritz, um, how did this Mstvaash end up as a judge in Listigia? occurred to Mauna.

"Vaalü-Amaya, I request the Stamp of the Fire-blessed," Mauna said evenly, searching the table with her gaze.

"Where'd that thing go... Kharg, go fetch the Stamp from the bedroom. Tell Tayra to grab it."

Mauna's ear twitched. If she had forgotten the Stamp in the morning, Nel would have simply killed her with a sirna, no options. The other mentors would probably have thrown her off a cliff or a tower. Also, bodyguards shouldn't 'run for stamps': this was so wrong, in so many ways, that... Mauna sighed. While waiting, she addressed the Graph-scribe:

"I request the sire's name," she indicated with her mirror.

"Dreamwalking one, I am Akhas, of the Sirsamm, Naysagri."

She checked her reflection in the mirror, then glanced over at Amaya—leg dangling, completely engrossed in her book. She wasn't even feigning attention; she'd genuinely checked out. Mauna studied the Graph-scribe: an aging lion with a sickly pallor. He met her gaze—exhausted but determined, maintaining his dignity. She signed her approval: 'I acknowledge, well done, confirmed'. She wondered if he'd recognize the formal gesture. He did, immediately signing back: 'Thank you'. Actually, Mauna reflected: taken individually, Amaya's Family was competent enough—each member knew their role. They just didn't mesh as a unit, everything slightly off-key.

"Send them in," she commanded once Amaya's Stamp arrived.

What entered was military and gleaming—a Legate officer in full parade polish. Broad smile, northern bloodpride evident.

"Heeeey, hey-hey-hey."

Mauna noted how everyone except Amaya looked at her. The northern drengir approached, and approached ever more slowly, looking now at Mauna with obvious bewilderment, now to the right, where Amaya had vanished behind her book in her armchair; she had reacted to his entrance only by lighting up a smoke.

"Amaya?"

"What?" came even timidly from the right after an awkward pause.

"Who's this?"

"This is Vaalu-Mauna," Amaya never looked up from reading, but now there was no pause in her answer, "brilliant acolyte, currently the best in the Empire." Added wearily: "Don't disturb my reading."

"But..." He gestured helplessly, looked around.

He dropped into the chair across from Mauna, scabbard clanging, fist planted on his thigh. There. Now he studied Mauna, attempting something like a smile but clearly uncertain—unsure if this was wise or where it might lead. Mauna remained perfectly still, letting the tension build. More. Still more. She positioned her mirror at chest level, horizontal, its surface facing him—no longer addressing a guest but marking an opponent. Tilt it further, hold it handle-up, and you're declaring an enemy, possibly ordering an execution.

Seeing this, Graph-scribe Akhas scratched his nose and looked at the head of bodyguard, who stirred and shifted from his right side to his left. Mauna didn't see and couldn't see how the corner of Akhas's mouth twitched in a suppressed victorious smirk.

Amaya continued to be absent, exhaling smoke through her nose.

"Did the Medium inform the sire how one properly enters a Messenger's presence?" Mauna indicated the drengir with her mirror in a very straight arm; this happened immediately when he glanced away toward Amaya.

He pondered and simultaneously ate something sour:

"I don't follow. What's this about?"

Another beat of loaded silence.

"Escort the sire to the exit," Mauna dismissed with her free hand.

"Uhuhuhoo," Amaya laughed with a hint of menace, absorbed in reading, turning a page. Whether she was laughing at something she'd read or at the scene unfolding was anyone's guess.

The bodyguards reacted instantly: both lions appeared at the visitor's sides, the head of bodyguard materialized behind him.

"What's the meaning of this?" the drengir stood, and rising, made a terrible mistake, likely not even intentional: he placed his hand on his sword hilt. Almost certainly he did it for convenience. But the bodyguards didn't forgive him this, they didn't buy the 'almost' here: they half-drew their weapons, one bodyguard stepped between Mauna and the client. He froze, and the head of bodyguard silently, with a finger, pointed to the cause: 'Remove your hand from the hilt.' Which he slowly did. Then turned and began leaving, quickly.

"Stop."

The drengir halted only because he'd walked into the security chief's outstretched hand. He didn't turn around, but then Mauna wasn't speaking to him:

"Sire Ahas, please remind our client privately of proper entrance. No doubt this misunderstanding stems from road weariness."

The bodyguard chief, first client, and Akhas left.

I did everything as proper, Mauna reassured herself. *I did everything as it should be. As it should be. As it should be.* And what pleased her: Amaya's bodyguards had done everything as it should be.

"Well I'll be damned, Maun—love at first sight."

Sarcasm, thought Mauna, and gave Amaya an expressive look: really, it was inappropriate. Amaya smiled and waved it off, something between 'forget it' and 'you don't understand yet,' shook the book in her hand and continued reading.

"Amaya..." She stumbled over the informal address, still uncomfortable with it. "Do you know him?"

"Yeah," Amaya replied breezily, offering nothing more.

Outside the door it was quiet, even suspiciously quiet. Then they returned to the library: Ahas, then the client, then the head of bodyguard, sire Uruz. Ah, yes, of course—Mauna had already learned his name from the Family.

The second attempt went flawlessly: "In the Empire's name, in the glory of the Suungs, Flawless Vaalu-Mauna." "By Vaal's will, Suung-milliar Sarkhan." She rose and indicated his seat. He approached, kissed her silver sisterhood ring, and they both sat.

"May I ask who'll be transmitting this message?" He offered her an envelope with visible reluctance.

"The Flawless Vaalu-Amaya will handle the Messaging."

"Then I must speak directly with her. This is an important and secret Legate dispatch."

Mauna cut the envelope with a small knife, unhurriedly.

"The sire's concern is acceptable, but unnecessary: I have the right to be burdened with this secret, as does any Messenger," she didn't look at him, but opened the message.

"The fewer heads involved, the better."

"A perfect secret no one will betray, because no one knows it."

Any educated lion would have completed the exchange with the next line from the sentencias: "Thus the ultimate truth forever eludes us."

But not today.

"Understood."

Mauna's eyes swept across the text:

5th d. 3rd m. Waters 808. From: 1st Consol., Northern Listigia. To: 13th Imperial. Deploy via: orig. dis. point — Fort-Shatt — pos. 73. Deadline: 10th d. 3rd m. Waters 808. Full unit strength required.

Whoever drafted this clearly lacked experience. Messengers shouldn't receive military abbreviations, but the Medium would sort it out—hardly their first time dealing with this.

"By Vaal's will, we shall Message."

Stamp.

"How else may I serve the sire?"

"That's all."

Mauna stood, extended her hand for the kiss. He kissed it coldly.

"May Vaal remain with you, strong Suung."

"Praise Vaal. All the best, Reverend."

Want to sting an Ashai-Keetrah, particularly a young one? Call her 'reverend.'

When the drengir left, Mauna looked at Amaya, but she said nothing. Really, what an interesting book!

"Please, let the next enter."

The next turned out to be two: a patrician and his son, about twelve years, maybe fourteen—his mane just starting. These entered flawlessly, and there were no surprises. The patrician wished to send something business-private.

"Grateful to Vaal for this day: I am exceptionally glad for the opportunity to meet the Flawless Vaalu-Amaya. The opportunity kept slipping away, unfortunately, but here we are."

Mauna understood that the patrician had confused her with Amaya; he was bewildered—one Messenger was declared in the residence, but here for some reason were two.

"Father, there's a mistake here. This is the Flawless Vaalu-Mauna. And there is the High Vaalu-Amaya," his son corrected.

"He's right, there's definitely a mistake here. This is Vaalu-Mauna, brilliant acolyte. Currently the best in the Empire," Amaya immediately responded from her armchair.

"My deepest apologies..."

"No need for concern. Besides, your son demonstrated admirable perceptiveness," Mauna noted.

"It's simple, Father. Fire-blessed Vaalu-Mauna has no Amulet of Vaal, while elevated Vaalu-Amaya does."

"Ta-da! Flattered, but I'm too old for an acolyte," Amaya waved the amulet, it swung back and forth; Mauna slightly clenched her teeth—really now, Amaya, this is incompatible with Ashai-Keetrah dignity, such exercises.

"Oh... Good that my son is so fascinated with everything concerning the finest daughters of the Suungs and Vaal's faith. Extraordinary! He corrected my profanity."

"Does the sire find the sisterhood worthy of particular attention among his interests?" Mauna asked the young lion.

"Yes, very much so," he replied instantly, with fervor.

"He's an extremely enthusiastic young lion, perhaps excessively so..." his father started to apologize.

"I find this enthusiasm quite delightful," Mauna said, saving the young lion. She acknowledged him with her mirror: a sweep downward, catching his reflection momentarily, then drawing it back to herself.

Encouraged, he launched in—the way one does when finally given permission to expound on their obsession that somehow bores everyone else, who somehow judge their knowledge inadequate and their age—blast it all—too young for such discussions.

"Let father see," the young lion spoke quickly, unerringly catching Mauna's gesture. "This means approval," in his haste he even missed clarifying what exactly 'this' was, and the entire context escaped the father. "And the mirror carries a 'transcendent function,'" he recited with closed eyes, "it should reflect not the world, but hidden order, the idea. When the Flawless Vaalu-Mauna looks into it, she sees not herself, but all Messengers. On it, on it, dad," he got completely carried away, while the father was just waiting for a convenient moment to somehow intercept, stem his son's stream of consciousness, "there should be an engraving: 'Vaal's will: she who sees herself sees everything.' It says so there... Should..." he shrank slightly under his father's promising gaze.

Meanwhile Amaya fooled around: she looked at herself in her own mirror, sighed and exhaled through her mouth, as if seeing there either something disappointing or strange. And then just waved her hand and continued reading.

The mirror cannot be given into the hands of non-Ashai, especially not a male. Therefore there's no other way, and Mauna stood, then knelt beside the young lion, and held the mirror before him; the patrician observed this with extraordinary surprise.

"What does the young-sire see?"

"A true-faithful Suung of the highest stratum," the young lion answered thoughtfully.

Opposite them—just conveniently—the Empire's Banner on the wall, and Mauna reflected it; her hand touched the shoulder, chest of the

young lion, while her left palm grasped the chair's back. Close presence, no distance! Distance exists to be broken at the right moment. Nel knew this art, Nel taught Mauna well, she generally taught Mauna very well; it's all lies that she abandoned Mauna to herself, complete lies.

"And now?"

Mauna expected simply 'Empire' or 'Suung Empire.' But no, the young lion pronounced:

"The highest source of authority—Imperium."

Mauna rose, spreading her hands in surrender.

"I am conquered, young Suung."

"Pleasant to hear," said the patrician.

"Because everything depends on who looks in the mirror, sire Otall," said Mauna, and helplessly added: "When a lioness surrenders, she must give. Such is the nature of things, which we thus see in the mirror."

She removed one of the thin bracelets from her left hand, a handout, seemingly discreet, but (actually)—so demonstrative. This isn't common practice, this trick is known to sisters of the Mastr-Fein mengir—the mengir of her mentors. Moreover, Nel taught her to remove it quickly, to become skilled at this.

"Let the young-sire accept."

Lionesses receive bracelets on their wrists. Lions receive them in their hands. Simple trick, works every time.

"I advise the young-sire to gift it in the future to whomever he chooses as his spouse. And definitely mention all the circumstances," she gave him the bracelet, solar symbols on the clasp. "It's from Marna, there's this Khrams workshop there, very famous."

That is actually true; Mauna isn't embellishing.

"Wow. Damn, Maunish, you're something else," was Amaya's only comment after the thoroughly satisfied patrician and his awestruck son departed.

"Clients need connection."

For some reason all this lifted Amaya's mood, she began softly singing to herself. She smoothed out the book, ran her claw along it, laughed for some reason; surely, a good passage.

So, the next client.

"Elevated one, the local judge is next," Ahas announced.

Mauna looked at him, then at Amaya.

"Well, well, well," Amaya turned the page. "This will be amusing."

"Is the Flawless one acquainted with him?" she asked Amaya.

"No idea who he is."

The Graph-scribe bent close to Mauna's ear.

"Fire-blessed, I should inform you: Va-Amaya almost never sees clients herself."

"Mhm," Mauna nodded slightly, unperturbed.

"The client has brought a companion," he said more anxiously, meaningfully. "This wasn't anticipated. Should I order both admitted, or according to what was declared?"

"Who's his companion?"

"We..." he stumbled, then seemed to surrender: "We haven't yet managed to find out."

Mauna thought, turning the hand mirror.

"We'll find out. Admit both."

The clients entered. On the right—a towering lion, in official robes, with a rod (the judge). On the left—his opposite, heavy-set and short; Mauna noted his toga didn't sit right on him. Stocky, very compact, mane all in braids. At his belt were empty scabbards for a short sword; unusual, because weapons are almost always surrendered with their scabbards, except for military—they're allowed not to surrender them.

Everything as usual: they approached, kissed her ring, and took their seats—the second chair having materialized instantly. Oddly, neither male even glanced at Amaya—unlike all the others. Nor did they seem surprised that Mauna was conducting the audience.

"I'm pleasantly surprised to see two Suungs instead of one," Mauna began after greetings.

The lion on the left smiled, he had a gold fang. Mauna looked at him, then into his eyes; the gaze lingered; and didn't shift immediately, when the judge had already begun:

"I bring apologies, Flawless Vaalu-Mauna. My friend and partner... My friend, he joined me at the last moments, and we decided together that he might also... So to speak, establish acquaintance with the Messenger who serves in our region."

"Satarin," the other introduced himself.

"I'm obliged to clarify that it's Vaalu-Amaya who serves the Suungs in this residence, while I am an acolyte."

"Vaalu-Mauna, brilliant acolyte. Currently the best in the Empire," Amaya chimed in from her chair, drawing contentedly on her pipe.

The lion on the right scratched his cheek, the judge didn't react at all.

"My service?" Mauna continued.

"I need to transmit this. Very urgent. I know, I spoke with the servants..."

"With the Medium," Mauna helped.

"Yes. They told me everything, that urgent matters of message priority can be resolved by... the Radiant one."

"That's correct."

The Graph-scribe bent to whisper in Mauna's ear. The judge politely angled his ears away, but his stocky companion made no such gesture, maintaining his faintly ironic expression throughout.

"We're at capacity for today and tomorrow. Can't grant priority without criteria. Would need Va-Amaya's authorization." The Graph-scribe smelled oddly pleasant—Mauna found herself wondering what it was.

"Hey, Ahas, it won't fit in the Graph?" Amaya cut in.

"By standard, no."

"That's not a problem. Vaalu-Mauna will Message, she has her whole limit free."

No one saw how Mauna's tail betrayed her with a twitch.

"Really?" the judge even asked naively, looking at the acolyte.

What else could she answer? Of course, only one thing:

"Yes, honor of the Suungs. We shall exert all efforts as Vaal wills."

"Oh, marvelous. Thank you very much. Delighted."

"Honestly, I'm surprised too," his stocky companion responded. "Thought there was one Messenger here."

"I thought so too, but as always, I was wrong. There's also Vaalu-Mauna, brilliant acolyte, currently the best in the Empire," Amaya inserted her remark.

Not knowing how to react to the eccentricities of the thin Messenger with pipe, book, legs crossed, in the armchair, with smoky gaze, in her favorite position (palm under cheek for muzzle asymmetry)—the judge smiled weakly, glancing at her, a little.

"Never seen Messenger acolytes before," Sire Satarin shrugged. "Everything happens for the first time. Well, here goes nothing."

So, Mauna watched as one after another, unhurriedly, from Sire Satarin's breast pocket appeared long thin gold ingots with Imperial hallmarks; there were three. The Graph-scribe stood unperturbed. The bodyguards too, but they're always supposed to, except for moments when someone disturbs the Mistress's security, also other Messengers, also Messenger acolytes, and—naturally—Messengers' beloved cats. The judge simply collapsed into horror, simple and artless, grayness washed over him, his whiskers drooped. Amaya craned her neck, looking at the table with curiosity.

After a calculated pause, Mauna signaled 'stop, freeze, hold, stand down, no interference, stay calm'—though unnecessarily, as the Family hadn't moved.

"Sire Satarin, might I ask something?" she inquired evenly.

"All ears," he replied, relaxed, hands clasped over his belly, thumbs circling each other—one thumb cut off at the middle.

"These are called 'bricks'?" Mauna touched the rightmost ingot, aligning them neatly.

"Yes, bricks," Sire Satarin confirmed with dignity.

She looked at him. Empathy, this thing, she was beginning to like it; and who cares that it eats strength like a hungry pregnant bitch. The main thing, Mauna was beginning to understand, the main thing: don't let yourself fall into the monument of another's soul too deeply, you need only to dive, and then—instantly to the shore; otherwise you'll end very quickly, and there'll be little use except bestial ecstasy, unity with the world of warm blood, you'll become not one, but two will settle in you, or several there, or everyone generally, and other nonsense. Mauna tilted her head slightly to the side, not noticing this. The main thing is not to fall, not to sink into him, no-no. Surfacing, Mauna couldn't help but briefly close her eyes; what came out was: *No great deception, just smaller ones. He likes me. And how heavy he is, criminal, barely fearable, immovable, and multitudes of females around, yes hundreds, damn them!*

Amaya stared, unblinking, mouth ajar, frozen with her pipe extended comically like someone mesmerized by carnival performers. She didn't intervene at all—pure audience.

"What else do they call gold ingots?" Mauna asked, placing her mirror on the table, reflection down.

Amaya shifted her gaze to Sire Satarin as well, changing nothing about herself.

"If it's Imperial, cast—that's a brick," he scratched his brow. "If it's cast bootleg but decent—a pig. If it's a plate, that's a pancake. Forged ones are 'simpleton' or 'knocker,' don't know why. Haven't seen forged in ages. Underweight or dirty-cast gets called different things: duffer, slag, shitling, dickbar."

"Thank you very much. So many terms."

"I can repeat, or throw in more," he said. Then clarified: "Terms."

"No need, I've memorized them."

In truth, Mauna had a general sense of what this all meant. Nel had prepared her for exactly this. This is how 'business lions,' as Nel called them, initiate their first connection with someone of importance—which certainly included any Messenger of the Suung Empire. They never come alone; it is established ritual. This one had chosen to bring a judge—significant, that. Perhaps signaling local influence, or displaying rather sophisticated irony. But Mauna couldn't afford to analyze too deeply right now what bringing a judge specifically signified.

Maybe he just happened to be nearby.

"This is great generosity, and the sisterhood will remember it," Mauna didn't even think, accepted the entanglement, and her mind was frightened by such thoughtlessness. "Let the sire advise, seeing my youth: how should such wealth be disposed?"

"Put it toward Vaal-pleasing and generous deeds."

Yes, approximately such a response. That's it.

"I'll continue imposing on the sire's goodwill, as is my nature. May the sisterhood rely on the sire's assistance in certain matters?"

Mauna hadn't merely accepted the entanglement—she'd pulled the knot tight. She knew she needed him. Why? She couldn't say why she needed this connection. Just that she must have it. She had to! Insight and empathy were howling their demands. Her rational mind cowered, terrified, babbling about 'infinite foolishness, inappropriate to her station, acting blind without knowing the situation or consulting Amaya' and countless other objections, hoping desperately it wouldn't be completely crushed...

"Of course. I'm a lion of business."

"That feeling when thoughts align with reality in waking. The sisterhood serves the Suungs."

Mauna outwardly calm (but actually enveloped in fog) stamped the message. Moreover, she committed an unthinkable, monstrous error, not immediately realizing it: she placed her own stamp on the judge's Message, not Amaya's, and that means untying it from the belt, removing the

guard (a stamp doesn't have a lid, a stamp has a guard), it's not an instantaneous action.

She has no right to do this, impostor! Since ancient times one of the worst crimes among Suungs—imposture. Only Messengers can stamp Messages. After. Acceptance. Full sisters of the Inner Empire. The clients hardly grasped such nuances, but the Graph-scribe grasped it, glanced askance, but didn't dare.

Amaya said nothing, but saw everything.

"I'm glad to make acquaintance. Sire Satarin. Honor of the Suungs, Sire Kiritz. I'm pleased you found it within yourselves to approach us in your time of great need. But we all serve the Suungs."

Sire Satarin nodded, smirking.

"Completely agree," was all the judge said, neither alive nor dead. He certainly hadn't been warned about all... this. And he was glad to get out of here without scandal, or something far worse, and forget everything.

Mauna stood, the clients stood as well.

"Vaal in the strong day, Suungs."

"Best wishes, Flawless one."

Kiss of the ring, their exit, and immediate question from the Graph-scribe:

"How should this be handled?" He looked from Amaya to Mauna.

"By tradition," Mauna began, though she knows the iron rule 'don't needlessly explain your decisions to servants,' and gave the Graph-scribe one ingot. "Part goes to the Family itself, divide it. These two..." she spread her hands. "Add to the balance."

"Whose, Flawless one?"

"Not mine, surely. I don't have one."

Any acolyte belongs to her mentor, and she has no money of her own nor can have any, except for small change.

"Are we done with clients?" asked Amaya.

"Yes, Mistress."

"Alrighty. Everyone out."

Everyone vanished, Amaya approached. Having hidden the mirror in her belt, Mauna stood and for some reason thought she would scold her now, even hit her or something would start; something would happen now. She circled the table, ended up somewhere behind the acolyte; Mauna tried to turn her muzzle toward her, but in vain—she kept circling, always ending up behind her tail.

"Munisha, well done. Beautiful," hands were placed on Mauna's shoulders.

"Amaya, I..." great weariness was felt.

"Maun. You handle clients in one day better than I have in all my years," Amaya peeked out from behind the acolyte's shoulder.

"I was taught," Mauna justified.

"I don't doubt it. You were amazingly prepared! Maun, stop this nonsense, you're very good. You can do it. You'll show them all. We'll show them."

Who's 'them,' I wonder? thought Mauna. But, as always, didn't ask, being herself.

"Thank you, Amaya... Though not good at everything." Mauna picked up the judge's Message bearing her illegal stamp. Perfect. What a sham. She tossed it back halfheartedly. The Graph-scribe wouldn't touch it—couldn't, obviously. Amaya had to decide what to do with this, because wh...

Amaya hit her with the book on the chest. And then, placing it on the table, attacked: hit her on the shoulders, again, and again. Mauna didn't resist, though all this was rather strange, but simply pointed with a claw at her guilt—the judge's Message with her stamp. Amaya looked at the paper, took it in hand, then rang the bell deafeningly, and the Graph-scribe appeared with bodyguards who began shuffling at the door.

"Ahas, why didn't you take this Message?" Amaya demanded, and immediately didn't let him answer: "Take it to the Medium, come on."

"Yes, Mistress," he didn't argue, and quickly departed.

Silence settled: Mauna didn't know what to say; Amaya was thinking who knows what, tapping the book's binding on the table, then began emptying her pipe, cursing under her breath and nervous; Amaya jabbed at it with something resembling an awl, launching into some creative profanity about everyone's parentage. Mauna tactfully turned her ears aside.

"What's the book, Amaya?" A careful question to move things along, sideways, anywhere.

"I told ya, 'Dreamwalking,' by Malielle," with a busy air Amaya lit her pipe, sat in the armchair by the table, her hand in a beautiful dark-green plasis spread across the table. "Funny book, but harmful for us."

"How so?" Mauna maintained perfect posture, standing at attention.

"We," she pointed at herself, at her, "need to practice the Craft: roam in the henhouse and present ourselves to the rooster. In the henhouse are hens, they lay eggs. But this," she pointed at the book, "is escape from the henhouse. Out there, in the fields, you'll lose all your eggs. There are foxes, wolves... All that. I heard Dayana once gave such book to her acolyte. What's her... Amarelle."

"The one who died in the East last year?"

Amaya looked at Mauna.

"Yeah. Retard," the Messenger looked aside. "I'd never do that."

Amaya's speech had this remarkable quality: beyond constantly leaving thoughts unfinished, you could never pin down exactly what she meant or what her words referred to. Even when you caught the context perfectly, Mauna always harbored doubt. Who was the 'retard'? Dayana? Amarelle? Mauna herself? Someone else? Everyone together?

"Would you share it with me to read, if possible? I'm unfamiliar with this work."

"You don't know about it?" Amaya was surprised. "Nah, won't give it. I'm telling you: harm-ful, especially for an a-co-lyte."

Fine—redirect the conversation, plenty of day left. She could manufacture tasks for herself. Mauna was just talking them both through the

moment, actually relieved she hadn't gotten cuffed for her infractions—and she'd earned it. But this gift, this empathy... it had turned ravenous, always hunting. Mauna felt it consuming her, pulling her further from the already distant hope of somehow learning the Craft. You can't sit on two chairs, can't have your cake and... well... eat it too.

Mauna was already beginning to understand several more things: you can't dive into another Ashai like you can into a secular soul, nope; but the longer you communicate with someone, the better you know them, if there's a bridge between you (Mauna had already named it exactly that to herself—"bridge"), and the bridge between her and Amaya had already built itself, long and extremely delicate; there she sits, looking at you sideways, and seems to already suspect that you're not following advice and are practicing empathy on her. No, diving won't work, but what will work is to take from nowhere and shoot an arrow of words, very-very precise, as long as the bridge itself:

"I'm not your acolyte. They sent me here to warm eggs in the hen-house—I lay nothing."

This offended Amaya! No empathy needed—it's all written on her. She sharply grabbed the book, pointed it at Mauna, and it looked like 'here, take it!'; but this proved an illusion:

"You know, Munisha, you... You're either very cunning, or... very-very cunning," she shook 'Dreamwalking,' pointing at her, accusing.

Amaya left with the book, Mauna watched after her, then adjusted the sirna-dagger behind her, which had uncomfortably dug its hilt into her back, because her sirna was large, because Vaalu-Nel didn't recognize small ones and had given her exactly such a one at Coming of Age.

Now Everything is Clear; and Once More About How Mauna Shoots the Bow

Late lunch that same day, and at it: Vaalu-Amaya (Mistress, Messenger), Vaalu-Mauna (Messenger acolyte), sire Nermai (vilius, meaning steward, again for some reason without the brand with the Mistress's motto), sire Melim (the Mistress's Master of the Graph).

Amaya struggled through financial discussions with sire Nermai—a tall, elderly lion with melancholy eyes and an impossibly lustrous black mane (had to be dyed, surely). The conversation went nowhere, as Amaya failed to grasp even the most basic concepts that sir Nermai patiently attempted to explain.

Mauna was served rabbit, easy on the stomach and thus suitable for Messengers. She offered her servant a bite from her fork—the required poison-testing ritual—then drifted into her thoughts, since no one addressed her and she addressed no one. Amaya had personally invited her to lunch, true, but apparently wanted no further interaction. None at all.

To sum up: she'd done decently, following what she'd been taught, and in many ways reflecting Nel's style, and it had even been simple; she'd accepted an entanglement with an unknown business lion, without sanction from even one sister, not even Amaya (but better—sisters of her mengir), and having no idea about local power balance and who's who (just wonderful); and she'd stamped a Message, which she has no right to do, even if she'd been brilliant at the Craft and could go to Marna for Acceptance tomorrow.

All these important things and bold mistakes of youth seemed not to worry Amaya at all. It seemed she was occupied regarding Mauna only by some incomprehensible offense, and Mauna couldn't for the life of her grasp what exactly. At the empathy exercise, probably.

And yes, Mauna didn't believe Amaya's praise. Sarcasm was suspected, or indifference, or both together. The client reception itself might also be a mocking move—what clients could a Pre-Messenger have? She doesn't have any and can't have any.

The idyll of trivial monetary affairs was cut by lightning strike of sire Nermai's sudden, tearful petition. He literally interrupted himself mid-word:

"Mistress," he set aside his fork, knife, and ran his hands through his mane. "Mistress. What I'll say will sound... bad. Treacherous. But I can't anymore. I can't, I can't..." closing his eyes, he shook his head.

"What is it?" Amaya's eyes darted across all present, and she even looked at Mauna, which she hadn't done for the last half-day.

Mauna sipped water from her cup.

"Mistress, I ask to be released."

Amaya went rigid, silent. Sire Melim braced against the table, fists pressed to his mouth, staring straight ahead.

"I can't do this anymore. My family—my wife, three children. I fear... I'm terrified that we'll... If the Most Elevated Mistress would permit... I need to be released."

"Look, we could send your family to Bash if you'd like," Amaya gestured toward him, hand waving.

"No. That's not it. That's not a solution," he shook his head.

"Don't go. Stay at the residence, Nermai. You're safer here," Sire Melim interjected quickly.

"What, are you, are you not managing them?" Amaya nodded to the side.

Mauna maintained her composure while desperately trying to catch the threads of their conversation, to piece together the puzzle.

"No, the Family is quite... They meet all requirements. The bodyguards are very good, actually... I only have serious questions about the dhaars, but that's my personal view."

Amaya slumped back in her chair. Mauna observed her complete confusion.

"Throw them out then, if that's it, if it's your view, if there are questions," she said even helplessly, even more bewildered.

"It's not about them or any of that... I'm frightened, Elevated one. I request release from service. And I can—I know someone who could replace me. The Mistress won't be disappointed."

"Where will you go?"

He hesitated before answering:

"Home. To Sarman."

"You're certain?" Sire Melim asked, though it was pointless.

Amaya crumpled the napkin in her hands, then threw it right onto the food, also leaning on the table and hiding in her palms. Mauna turned the cup on the table by its stem, not letting anyone or anything out of sight. Sire Melim gave her a look. Mauna shifted her gaze to Amaya. To him.

"Bring me the paper today, we'll make you a Departure."

"Thank you, Mistress. I'll leave in about a week. I'll arrange everything with the new vilus. It will be si..."

"I don't care. Bring it today."

They were silent. Sire Nermai carefully stood:

"Well... I suppose... Thank you. Thank you for lunch. Mistress?"

"Go, Nermai, go."

"Radiant," this was Nermai to Mauna.

Mauna nodded to him, and he carefully left; first slowly, then faster and faster, and then disappeared.

"Maun, what about you—at least you're enjoying the food?" Amaya gestured weakly, giving her a weary look.

"Yes, thank you, Flawless one," she answered evenly.

Amaya smirked for some reason, which Mauna caught. That smirk carried fresh offense piled atop the earlier slight. Then she stood abruptly and walked out. What was wrong now? Obviously Mauna couldn't use informal address with Family members present—only in private. *Vaal, is that really the problem?* Mauna narrowed her eyes, watching Amaya's plasis sweep away.

They—Mauna and the Master of the Graph—remained alone. A servant entered with a tray, Mshani (curious: her servant, one of Mauna's servants. Just second day, and they already completely settled in), bustled about.

"Ah, the Flawless Vaalu-Amaya wanted baklava."

"No entry," Mauna ordered, and understanding everything, Mshani quietly withdrew.

Mauna placed her hands flat on the table, mirror set deliberately beside them.

"Sire Melim, let the lion shed light on what's happening."

Despite her formal approach, Melim lounged back, arm draped over his chair. He fidgeted with his mane-braid ties before pouring wine-juice and taking a sip. Not a young lion—fifty years, thereabouts. His mane showed remarkable graying patterns: streams of pure copper alternating with completely white strands. The pattern of those who'd weathered many hardships, she'd once heard. He grabbed the candelabra to light his pipe—short and thick, unlike Amaya's long, thin one. Mauna didn't protest despite her distaste for smoke and substances: the path requires inhaling or swallowing worse things anyway.

"Flawless Val-Mauna. Does the lioness see... We have here..." he rubbed his forehead with a finger, squinting hard, pipe clenched in teeth. "Everything went sideways after recent events. Even before it was difficult, but we managed. Didn't manage..." he looked aside, at the window, and smoked.

"Which events do you mean?"

He shot her a sideways look, frowning. His gaze darted around as if seeking help.

"Wait. The lioness doesn't know?"

"Know what, Sire Melim?"

"Your mentor Val-Nel didn't inform you? Or... anyone? About the tragedy from two weeks—fifteen days ago?" He counted on his fingers. "Every Messenger has known for at least a week now."

Mauna shook her head—no. She slowly interlaced her fingers.

"That's surprising," he looked at her, and yes indeed, really meant it. "Two weeks ago the Mistress was returning from the Fifth Legion. We were stationed there four moons. The Fifth Legion, it's in Helsia, scattered near Nasar..."

The capital of Helsia.

"...fortress Had, that's the position. We've done this for years. Either here, in Huntress Moon, or in Helsia. Huntress Moon, Helsia, Hunter's

Moon—Helsia again. Back and forth. The Mistress, she's a Legate flag, meaning a Messenger, Messenger..." he waved his pipe apologetically.

"I understand 'flag.' I've spent considerable time with Graph Masters." Mauna was familiar with their habit of calling Messengers 'flags'—forgivable from them, as was much else.

"Yes," he agreed heavily. "So, it happened that Va-Mainuna arrived. It was highly irregular—the Mistress departed with her, in her cortege, back to the Empire. Back here to the residence. I accompanied her with all the documents, the complete Graph, as did Sire Nermai. Everything else—everyone else, the whole Family—would follow the next day. We left at midday; the Family would depart at dawn..."

"Forgive me, but how could a Messenger arrive here with only a vilium and Master of the Graph, and be without Family for a whole day, alone?"

"Ahh..." He exhaled slowly. "She wasn't alone—Va-Mainuna's Family was here, her bodyguards, everyone. But here's the crucial part: two units of Chamber Guard escorted us. Two." He held up two fingers. "So foolish... I wasn't tracking the all of that. Don't know what our bodyguard chief argued. I know Va-Mainuna's chief called it moronic. But the Chamber Guard stuck to protocol, terrified to break it: one Messenger traveling outside the Empire requires one Guard unit. Two Messengers, two units. One for our Mistress, one for the other Messenger. Simple math. Our cortege had two Guard units. The Family's cortege had"—he made a zero with his fingers—"nothing."

"So ask your head of bodyguard what he said."

"I'll ask him in Naheim. He's dead. Along with the entire Family. Except myself and Sire Nermai's household—they traveled with us, praise Vaal. Actually, not everyone died—two cubs are missing, probably taken for slaves. The other children were mercifully here in Bash. Orphans now. Everyone else was slaughtered, even the young serving lionesses. They didn't bother taking them to sell. Our former Family was all Suung, no dhaars. Suungs are trouble to traffic—too much hassle, Helsians won't buy them since it's too risky. We have many legions in Helsia, and more coming now..." Melim caught himself digressing. "Halsidic fire-cult extremists. They're swarming through Helsia now, apparently allied with Helsian insurgents. They ambushed the cortege, overwhelmed twenty-one swords. Not a Guard unit—just regular bodyguard. How did they know? How did they know? How did they know?"

"Accept, Naheim, your Suungs. Vaal, guide us to vengeance," Mauna bowed her head, pressed her ears down. She looked at Melim from under her brow: "And what of Vaalu-Amaya? Why didn't she intervene from the very beginning? She can order the Guard anything."

"She got drunk and high on arra, and slept the whole way. I don't know how else to say it, may the Radiant one forgive me."

"Alcohol is very bad for Messengers."

"Bad," agreed Melim and puffed. Then again couldn't find his place, squeezed his eyes shut, rubbed his temples: "She's lost her will... Does the Radiant see, things with our Vaalu-Amaya weren't very simple even be-

fore this, but after this incident... There was 'before,' now there's 'after.' I think... something in her... is falling apart. The world has become too complex for her, she doesn't understand it. And it's absolutely certain that the world doesn't understand her."

They were silent.

"There's one blessing: her Messaging hasn't suffered. What she can do, she does brilliantly." He brightened slightly.

"So the entire Family, everyone here... they're all replacements?"

"Yes. Sisters across the Empire immediately sent whoever they could spare, emergency deployment. Mostly from our mengir. Quality individuals. Skilled Graph-scribes. The security detail's absolutely vicious—they sent their most ruthless manes. Vaalu-Dayana contributed four dhaar servants, Mramri breed, for basement work and housekeeping. Hamanu Khizaya speaks well of them, but sire Nermai couldn't stand them. Petty conflicts arose, but that's irrelevant now. The dhaars stay while he leaves."

"Now everything is clear."

He spread his hands.

"And yes, I'm the one who got the Mistress hooked on the pipe. My fault. Let her try once, long ago."

"But sire Melim, this should be thundering across the Empire—a Messenger's Family slaughtered. The entire Empire should be in uproar."

"Oh, it is. Everyone who matters has already stood up. Some stood up very quickly indeed... Everything's in motion. They'll probably deploy more Legions to Helsia. Or crush it entirely and impose dominatum—Marna's been contemplating that for years."

"Those rebels, of course, weren't found."

"How would you catch them in those forests. But the fire-priests in Nasar, I think, have already lost sleep. They've been twisting all these years, like fish, licking any ass, and all in vain. Now they'll step on their tails, or even their throats. The pretext is simply excellent. Well... Had there been Guards, they wouldn't have dared, these rebels or whatever they are, never in life. How badly everything turned out..."

Mauna decided only one thing: she would need to ask Amaya about all this. And second: why hadn't they told her?

"In the sire's opinion, how does the Radiant Vaalu-Amaya differ in the Craft from others?"

"Quantity. Quality. What else can I say here, as Master of the Graph? With her you're proud of your work, she... how to say... don't give a damn about anyone. It's pleasant when your Mistress is not giving a damn, at least in the Craft. Mastery, you know, Flawless one, commands respect. Good that I didn't die, she needs an approach, not every Graph Master suits her, I've been with her since Acceptance."

He thought.

"Incredible stability in difficult conditions," he spoke vividly, inspired. "Amazing. No nonsense, none. She's a Legate Messenger, from Acceptance itself. Why are the Legates always glad to take her to any field? The Legates adore her! She won't complain. She won't need this, that, plus

this and that; she won't have hysterics, hesitations, all these... quirks; there won't be bad weather or the 'wrong' moon. She... simply... will do it."

He looked at Mauna.

"You understand what I mean, Flawless one?"

"Yes. And she said she won't teach me," she gazed at him unwaveringly.

He waved it off, even laughed.

"The Mistress never says what she thinks. Not because she's false inside, or something like that, or planning evil. She simply can't: her thoughts slide apart like paws on ice. As my wife said, 'The Mistress doesn't know how to speak, only to Message.' May Naheim accept her."

"The sire's wife was also in that cortege?"

"She was," he said very calmly. But the stoic facade crumbled, he completely softened in the chair and dropped his hands, then, barely moving, laziest movements, drank the entire cup of wine-juice. "She was..."

Mauna said nothing, absorbing everything.

So. Amaya's Family was killed. For some reason they hadn't told her, though Nel must have known. The entire Family here is new. Oh yes, were the Chamber Guards punished for such a monstrous oversight? She must ask Amaya, who also kept silent, not a word. By the way, where is she?

"She's been gone long. Where did she go?"

"Not sure I can answer, Flawless one," Melim replied with the smile of a deeply weary lion, eyes closed.

"I'll risk finding the answer."

He nodded instantly, as though he'd been waiting for exactly those words, and gestured toward the door. As Mauna departed with her hand mirror, she missed his continued slow nodding: yes, yes, yes. Go to her.

Mauna went to Amaya's quarters. On the door—a red cord ('No-entry'), and two from the bodyguards: Tai and another one, whose name Mauna didn't yet know. For some reason they weren't on both sides of the door, but on one side, and one of them was propping up the wall with his shoulder.

"Fire-blessed," greeted the unknown one.

Mauna touched the cord, it swayed. One can enter, but only if really necessary. As always: mirror, question:

"I request the sire's name."

"Manaru."

She studied them both—an amusing exercise in looking up, always up, craning her neck. Such was a lioness's lot, particularly a shorter one like Mauna. Khustrian belief held that the shorter the lioness, the more promiscuous and vicious her nature, but Mauna was Andarian. And that's the complete opposite to Khustrians.

The manes stared at her muzzle painting, at the very neat tentush dots under her eyes, at her distance—so it seemed to her.

"What are your thoughts on the Family's murder?"

Tai smirked and immediately answered:

"Only an idiot would travel with a convoy without a pack of Guards, and through Helsia, whether the convoy was empty or with the Mistress. That's not how it's done."

"The head of bodyguard is guilty. He should've... stayed there and demanded another pack of Guards, or taken a piece of the Legate with him."

"We won't make that mistake, Decisive one."

"Perhaps he thought that since the convoy was empty, he could manage with his own forces," Mauna mused aloud; more precisely, she wasn't even musing, but giving them reason to object to her naivety; even more precisely: she was simply declaring aloud that he really was a fool if he thought that.

"That's stupidity. A convoy, empty or full, always travels under reinforced guard through dangerous places, and it doesn't matter, in the Empire or outside. That's one-two," answered Tai, scratching his cheek.

"Doesn't matter if the Mistress is there or not. There are decoys, after all," added Manaru.

"Decoys?"

"Empty convoys. For example, three convoys: in one the Mistress, in two—nothing."

"Good. May Vaal guide your swords."

"We serve, Fire-blessed."

Having occupied them with conversation and forestalled any half-hearted attempts to block her—they couldn't forbid entry but could demand explanations—thus preventing delays and awkward challenges about urgency and necessity, Mauna entered. Leaving behind her tail these small games of mind, communication tactics and information gathering, Mauna also left behind a trace of scent. Tai pricked his ear, made sure the acolyte wasn't standing at the doors and wouldn't suddenly jump out, and quietly uttered the notorious:

"I'd hit that".

"Andarian," Manaru mused.

"Seems so," agreed Tai.

"Be careful, or she'll hear, and then *devour* you."

"They don't snack on bodyguards."

"What? They do indeed. When I served Umalla, she ate one of ours. Not that we were very against it, he was an idiot and constantly shedding—fur from him just everywhere."

"Pffft," Tai found it truly funny, and again propped up the wall, legs and arms crossed.

"Show the thing with the knife," Manaru boredly handed him a small dagger he'd pulled from his knemid.

"Nah, come on," Tai waved lazily.

But Manaru decided to advance the matter: handed him a plug of chewing tobacco from his pouch.

"Here. Come on, don't be difficult."

After thinking, Tai took it and shoved it deep into his gums. Took the weapon from Manaru, removed his gloves with upper guards and gave them to him, tossed the dagger in his hand, then began spinning it in his fingers, first slowly, then faster.

"Southern fuck, what did you give me? My legs are going soft," he said, transferring the dagger from right hand to left.

"What, hitting you, huh?" the other bit his lip contentedly. "That's so you'd shit yourself. It's like the southernmost kind, they haul a whole thousand lyen up to Kafna by river. Thousand-lyen," he frowned and even looked aside, puzzled. "What's that fucking river called..."

"Nah, you missed there," Tai spun the dagger so only a blur remained. "Head spins from chew, but hands get nimbler. We always chew before rolling in the Circle."

He tossed the dagger up and caught it:

"You know... seems to me..." he inserted between moves when his hands allowed speech. "Who she'll devour... is our Mistress... she'll devour her. That's who."

"Why'd ya figure that?"

Tai stopped and returned the weapon.

"Gut feeling. Our new one's completely falling apart."

"Falling apart," agreed Manaru. "But I like this V-Mauna."

Tai nodded approvingly:

"So I came out this morning," he tapped his chest plate, "she's shooting a bow. I tell her: 'Va-Mana, this and that.' And she's like: 'It's Mauuuna.' And stares. Well, I think, fuck. When the chief was talking day before yesterday, I heard 'Mana.' Since they boxed my ear, you know..."

"Yeah, yeah, your ear. Then what?"

"Nothing," Tai shrugged. "Shoots well, the bitch. Stands like this, straight," he showed on himself, "sticks her ass out, and draws, draws..."

"Draws," Manaru inserted unnecessarily.

"...pulled all the way to her ear, right here. It's a long bow, not some toy. She threw it to me, I tried—heavy draw. You need forearms for that. Shoulders, yeah... And she's what, eighteen, or however old."

"Not yet twenty."

Tai attempted an exaggerated impression of how patrician lionesses shoot, which came out ridiculous.

"There's bitch strength in her," he summarized.

"As there should be. Without that it's not right."

"Not right," agreed Tai.

Foxy with a Groombrush

What Mauna saw: an almost empty room, a writing desk, and beside it right on the floor sat Amaya, on an enormous fur, with a pile of cushions around, right by a small northern window. She'd placed candelabras right on the fur, or they'd been standing there, couldn't tell. On the fur—a bed table with short legs, on it—a large tray with something amber-green. This amber-green thing Amaya was eating. Yes, and also: she was just in undergarments, in a chemise, having thrown off all vestments with her plasis beside her, her tail lying right across everything. A sirna stuck in the tray, in the amber-green thing.

"Found me. Indeed you did," said Amaya, looking at her and chewing enthusiastically. "You, fox, were sent to sniff around me. I knew it," she raised a finger and took more.

"I don't look like a fox," Mauna sat down on her legs beside her.

"You don't? Take this!" As if she'd been waiting for that exact response, there lay a fox mask on the adjacent cushion—theatrically convenient, impossibly perfect. Amaya shuffled forward on her knees and, without ceremony, fitted the mask onto Mauna, shoving back her shawl and yanking the straps tight while licking her sticky fingers.

"Want some? Sit, munch," she showed at all her stuff, sitting back down.

Mauna looked and slowly pulled the sirna from this stretchy, obviously sweet (by smell and appearance) thing.

"Baklava, very tasty. Kafna thing, these new servants of mine make it. To die for. One of them knows how, was once in Saensie's Family."

Mauna examined the sticky blade of Amaya's sirna. To cut food with a sirna and eat from it without extreme necessity—that's prohibited by the Codex. Obviously, extreme necessity had arrived.

"That's Vaalu-Saensallie?" Mauna took a handkerchief from her belt, which any Andarian carries. You also can't wipe just anything with it without necessity, but such necessity, obviously, had arrived.

"It's her, darling. Well?" Amaya extended a piece right under her nose, and Mauna carefully accepted, holding her palm under her muzzle, keeping the sirna in reverse grip.

"Sweet. Very," she noted.

"Of course. Nuts, honey. Chow down, get to business. We'll be a pair of gluttons. You'll get even fatter—your distance will be phenomenal."

Mauna let the insult slide past without trouble—a well-practiced skill. Her mentors had taught her many things, when you considered it all.

"I came to say something."

"What, you're leaving too?" Amaya exhaled, wiping with the back of her hand. "Right. Fuck, I'd leave too. But where do you go from yourself?"

"I'm not leaving. I just found out what happened two weeks ago." Mauna focused on cleaning the sirna.

"Ah... Just now?" Amaya pricked up her ears.

"Melim told me."

"So, what, Nel told you nothing?"

Mauna shrugged. No.

"Aha, uh-huh," Amaya thought briefly, then continued eating.

Where does all this fit in her, my Vaal, thought Mauna.

"Good, right?" Amaya gestured at the baklava, licking her fingers and claws clean.

"It's delicious. Very sweet. Amaya, I'm so sorry. I had no idea. Please, tell me what happened—from the beginning?"

"Nothing yet. It'll happen soon. For now I'm stuffing myself."

"I mean about your Family."

"Oh, that. Yeah, no Family. Well, they assembled another, thread by thread from the Empire. The sisters are endlessly kind to me, sent everything and everyone here, quickly. Everyone. All excellent, all experienced. I already love them. Eat already. Should I be the only fat one walking around?"

"Amaya, you're thin. You're very slender. You're very... thin," Mauna stated the truth, folding her hands on the sirna she'd settled on her thighs.

The Messenger measured the acolyte with a look, making clear that such monstrous lies were beneath her. Mauna looked at her, motionless, breathing evenly, in the fox mask, the black dots of distance under her eyes now invisible to the world, streams of chaindrops down her neck, streams of shawl down her back.

"Lovely. You should leave. Here comes the ugly part," Amaya pushed the table further away.

"I won't leave," Mauna refused flatly.

"No, go. I'm your mentor now. That's it! I'll tie you in knots. How goes it... Now call me mentor. Right, from this day, Vaalu-Mauna, of the Nakht-Serai House, becomes acolyte to Vaalu-Amaya, of the Argai, this exquisite subject of the Inner Empire. Let us praise this day, Vaal."

Mentor? Alright. Here and now—Amaya had declared it.

"No, I won't go."

The Messenger shrugged, then gestured dismissively.

"Fine, whatever. Bear witness."

Amaya stood and undressed, naked. Well, almost—kept Vaal's amulet.

"Amaya-ment..." Mauna said by habit, and bit her lip with a fang. "Is this, will there be ignimara?" she said more hurriedly, so she wouldn't notice this treacherously criminal, even sycophantic 'mentor.' Only now did Mauna begin to think that 'mentor' was a criminal and sycophantic word; she'd so awaited mentorship, and here's this, all of this. Before, this word held respect, and fear, and all that, and all that...

Amaya's sincere laughter, she really found it funny. She completely didn't notice the crime.

"Yeah, I'll light ignimara. Ignimara from your mentor, check it out," she answered cheerfully.

"But why? It drains your power..." Mauna watched in bewilderment as Amaya retrieved not a ceremonial bowl but a common washbasin from behind the table.

"Look who's talking, our foxy empath."

"Mentor, does empathy steal power worse than ignimara?" Mauna suddenly asked about the practical, deciding to see Amaya as a mentor after all: both from real interest and to direct everything into a better discourse channel.

Instead of answering, Amaya placed the basin before herself and returned to sitting on her knees on the floor, ceremonially and quite gracefully. Mauna thought that she dances well, must be good at all dances required of every Ashai-Keetrah: fromal, suungmtari, maybe even aash. It would suit her.

What followed next, Mauna completely didn't expect, and simply froze. She hadn't particularly expected anything, being curious, but this. What? This: Amaya shoved fingers in her mouth, deep, terribly deep, and began vomiting into the basin. Usually vomiting is loud, Mauna hated and feared vomiting, even feared hearing it; it happened to her when sick or given light soma or made to inhale arra heavily, well that's usual thing for Messenger acolytes, they sometimes (often) need to, it's the Messenger path, and... Amaya did this very quietly, almost implausibly so, and somehow even easily, as if she did this every day, there were no confused movements or unnecessary hesitations, everything precise, expression calm. Most importantly—methodical; rest and breathing—calculated, the exercise's tempo—rhythmic. Didn't stop until everything returned.

Yes, exactly as if she did this daily.

Amaya rinsed with water from the pitcher and spat. Mauna's gaze moved between her and the basin. After spitting again, Amaya fixed Mauna with a harsh look—cruel toward herself? Toward Mauna? The world?

"I told you: you won't learn anything good here," she said quietly, and forcefully pushed the basin away. "Leave while it's not too late."

Wordlessly, Mauna drew her handkerchief from her belt. Each Andarian handkerchief bore unique patterns—each lioness, each province, each corner of that ancient Suung pride had its own. She steadied Amaya's neck and cleaned her chin, the corner of her mouth, her nose, carefully around Vaal's amulet. Then she pressed the cloth gently into Amaya's slack hand. An Andarian gesture of significance—though Amaya, certainly not Andarian, might not grasp its meaning. *What pride is she from, actually?* Mauna wondered, meeting her eyes.

"I won't learn. But at least I'll help someone wipe their muzzle," she said, calmly and seriously.

This response, apparently, shocked Amaya more than her mentor's behavior had shocked Mauna.

"Don't tell me you pull this shit too," Amaya said suddenly, her voice sharp with alarm.

Mauna had rarely heard such concern, and never directed at her. Others didn't worry about her—she was reliable, diligent, always trying to do things properly. That's how it had always been.

"I've never seen anything like this. Never even heard of it. I know about purging for poisoning, but... why this?"

Amaya immediately believed her, and instantly calmed. Of course, she took her pipe and lit up.

"Good," she exhaled.

After considering, Mauna rose and surveyed the room. She spotted the scabbard on the fur, secured Amaya's sirna properly within it, and attached it to her own belt—sirnas shouldn't lie abandoned without an Ashai-Keetrah's care. Amaya watched everything. Mauna signaled 'stay put' to her mentor and approached the door.

"Servant here," she told the bodyguard, cracking the door open, and slammed it shut.

Returned and sat again as she had been.

Amaya, truly obeying, sat and did nothing, didn't even dress, just lounged on cushions, chewing her pipe. The servant came very quickly, it turned out to be Tayra. From her Renaya, Mauna had heard that she was very closed and taciturn; a Yunian, of strength age, and she has many children, part here, part already in Bash, and she's not married and never was; they thought she was mute, like Mauna's servant, Shezi, but no. Useful, useful, this is useful.

Tayra wasn't surprised that Mauna was in a mask and had become a fox, and that Amaya was naked, and wasn't surprised by the basin either. Experience serving Messengers won't let you be overly surprised.

"Remove this." Mauna indicated the basin. "Bring two groombrushes—one coarse, one fine."

Tayra nodded in a half-bow, left.

"What happened, Amaya? The Family's murder—what, how, why, what's next? Walk me through it." Mauna's tone was relentless, demanding answers.

The Messenger closed her eyes, pain distorting her features.

"I don't know..." she answered defeatedly. "I don't even know if it's my fault."

Don't go further, Mauna understood. Not now, nothing about this now.

Implausibly fast, Tayra returned and handed Mauna, specifically her, everything requested. Mauna sat behind Amaya, who didn't react at all, and began grooming her with the coarse brush, leaving the smaller one by her tail.

"When I went through things, my mother would groom me," Mauna noted.

"You're a fox, Munisha. Little foxy. Yeah-yeah, you know everything. I'll grow attached. You won't shake me off... Think about why you'd want that... Better do the smart thing..."

Mauna wanted to address the binging and purging. She didn't fully understand it—had never seen or heard of such behavior—but she grasped (being Ashai-Keetrah) the underlying pattern: anxiety, disorder, despair, grasping for fleeting comfort followed by immediate self-punishment and fear. But she held back from lecturing. After all, her own conduct with the clients today deserved reproach, yet Amaya hadn't criticized. Amaya said nothing now, only purring so quietly she feared being heard (funny—it's felt through palms). Mauna groomed her attentively, watching the brush's path across her back and nape.

"Then this: why did no one tell me about your Family's death?" the acolyte broke the silence.

"And who should have told you?"

"Nel, when sending me. Khirana, when we traveled. Your vilus who fled today. You."

"I thought they sent you to spy on me. But look at this: they sent someone who knows nothing."

"Why spy on you?"

Amaya shrugged.

"Perhaps I'm only pretending not to know," Mauna's irony.

"No... Nah. I thought one thing about you at first. Now I've changed my mind."

"Why?"

"You groomed me, bought me. Little foxy."

"Now I'll always carry brushes with me, and groom everyone."

"That only works with me, others want bricks. Not naming names."

"The ingots went to your treasury," Mauna snorted.

"What a vixen!" Amaya was indignant.

O She rolled her shoulders, and Mauna took her tail, examining it critically.

"Nel and Khirana," Amaya continued vivaciously, "and everyone-everyone-everyone: who knows them, they muddy-muddy, muddle things, decided something, figured something, forgot, probably. You're in exile, don't forget, and here in exiles and prisons who knows what happens, right? Been in prisons? Don't worry about it. Nermai—coward, always was such. Started fearing that they'd kill him too, though we're already in the Empire, and we're going nowhere. For now, at least... I didn't know that you didn't know. And if I had known that you didn't know, then... it's... how is it... ah, don't worry about it. I'm not strong in all this, Munish. I understand nothing except how to Message."

"I don't agree."

"I don't agree!" said the Khustrian, um... fine. I can't even joke. I can't mock, can't see intrigues, can't count money, I don't even know how to order servants to bring me this Kafnian trash with raisins."

"Mentor, what about my Stamp⁵¹ on that Message? I'm at fault."

⁵¹ The Stamp—personal seal of an Ashai-Keetrah, granted at Coming of Age, marking

"Wait, I thought I was the only one who did random things randomly. Why'd you do it?"

Not an easy question to answer. But Ashai must account for their actions and inactions, so Mauna sorted it out:

"Insight impulse. Quick action that didn't pass through the mind."

"Ah. Well then, Vaal commanded it," Amaya agreed easily. "That's it, you're cooked, Munish," she turned her head to her, her muzzle in profile. "A Stamp on paper is an oath. In this case an oath to transmit a Message. And you? You must honor your oaths, no excuses. You must follow your oaths. This is very important."

She suddenly turned to Mauna.

"You don't understand. I mean, I really mean it, understand?" the mentor looked from eye to eye. "This is the most important thing for an Ashai, it holds the will, and will is needed for everything we do here, the Craft..." she frowned, choosing words; the choice came with difficulty. "Never break vows, especially the Sworn-Bond," she lightly tapped her chest. "The Sworn-Bond obligates protecting and caring for Family, and look now: where am I, and where are they. Instead of being where I should, what was I? I was lying drunk in a carriage."

Mauna absorbed this calmly, then guided her to turn her back again.

"You're not guilty. Your former head of security is guilty, may Naheim embrace him," she spoke slowly, examining her grooming work. "He shouldn't have traveled without Chamber Guard. He should have sat there, planted his paws, stuck his sword in the ground and demanded it. Or demanded someone from the Legate."

"I appreciate your attempt to cast away the snakes of guilt from me. But no. I'm already bitten. I'm guilty," and again Amaya turned, sharply.

"Don't talk." The words erupted from Mauna in pure Andarian patrician command—prohibition, termination, absolute negation. The tone cannot be replicated by anyone not born to Andarian nobility. It's annihilating.

Hard to imagine what other mentor she could have told 'don't talk.' Any Messenger at all, or Pre-Messenger, or even just a sister.

"Well then I won't," seems Amaya didn't really know what Andarian 'don't talk' meant, or simply didn't care. "So you'll send the Message, you put your own Stamp after all. Now the sword of broken words hangs over you too. We both know that words are power, especially *there*; words are arrows."

Yes, that humbles you, thought Mauna. All true.

"I'll try, my Vaal, give me strength. Especially since I've now discovered..."

Mauna stopped herself before revealing: "...my empathy, finally accessed it, which is draining me." A weakness, a crack, a leverage point. An

her authority and binding her word. Ashai are known as 'Conductors of Trust' precisely because their stamps carry high credibility. —Z.

omission bordering on deception, since she'd implied her empathy manifested early, in naysi or stalla years, as Gifts should. Half-truths and evasions create vulnerabilities others could exploit. Amaya had just demonstrated she could seize such openings ("So you'll send the Message!..."). Yet perhaps honesty would serve better here—Amaya might understand late manifestation, might know how to prevent empathy from consuming everything, might answer the practical concerns.

"Tsa, what'd you discover?" Amaya waited, quite a while actually.

"Amaya-mentor, I must confess, since you've accepted me as acolyte."

"Oh, spill it, everything." Amaya squirmed excitedly, her tail whipping around to slap Mauna's leg. "Still holding back after yesterday? Out with it."

"I opened empathy only when I arrived here. Opened it on those two dhaari, at the very beginning. Before this I had no Gift of empathy, I didn't experience it, and know almost nothing about it except the most general things."

"You're like, serious?"

Mauna nodded. Yes.

"Whoa, fuck me".

And that's all.

"Mentor, any advice?" Mauna asked after waiting.

Amaya shifted sideways, stretching across the fur, looking thoughtful as she absently scratched her bare neck. She gazed down and away, puzzling over something, candlelight from the floor reflecting in her eyes. Mauna suddenly recognized it—the dreamwalker's gaze, unmistakable now that she truly saw it. Khirana and others had mentioned this look, how they searched for it when selecting naysi for Messenger training. Yet Mauna had never understood what they meant, despite being an Inner Empire acolyte herself (shouldn't she have it?) and spending her life around various Messengers.

"No idea. I'm not exactly... kinda good with empathy thing," Amaya replied simply. "Don't let it loose too much or you'll burn out. Actually, forget it exists for now. Completely. We need dreamwalking: Passage and stuff, Seeking, Bond, Messaging." Each word came reluctantly, as if she resented having to speak them. Passage. Search. Bond. Messaging.

Mauna twirled the brushes, joining them this way and that.

"Yes... And that's everything I don't shine at, except Passage, Nel evaluated it as not bad. And now also empathy..."

Amaya grabbed the chemise and pulled it over her head.

"Soooo, that's enough being serious, we'll figure something out," she responded from inside, not yet fully dressed, voice muffled. "You already stamped it, nowhere to go, we'll stretch the fox on the globe," she emerged into the world, no longer naked.

Mauna even searched the room with her gaze for a globe, maybe there was one? There wasn't, but the fox—certainly; turns out, she'd been sitting in the mask all this time. Even took the mirror to be sure. And true, all true.

"How are your new quarters? Sleep well, Passage is good? Noise, needles? Air, how's the breathing?" Amaya inquired briskly, gathering her decorum back into a disorderly pile: mirror, belt, plasis, stamp, circlet.

"I sleep well. Haven't noticed needles, no noise. Pillows are excellent, bed's a bit soft. Haven't passaged yet, holding three days. Air's good, smells don't stick in the nose."

'Needles'—that's everything that disturbs sleep.

"Actually, okayish residence, well-slept-in, I love it. When I sleep, I'm like dead," Amaya searched for something on the fur, on the floor nearby, then began shaking the plasis. "Damn it, where's my sirna? Forgot it in the baklava or what."

Mauna silently drew it from her belt and offered it, still sitting on her legs.

"Here. Please don't lose it—sirnas don't like being lost."

"Ah, Meownisha, it's just a knife. What matters is my little foxy doesn't get lost." She rapped Mauna's long red fox ears.

Mauna closed her eyes.

"I'll do everything I can," she said quietly, more to herself than to her.

But no, Amaya caught it immediately:

"Munisha, my Vaal," she put on the plasis carelessly, in good spirits, "don't worry about it. I told you: relax, or you'll tear yourself apart on this very globe."

"So I'm still a fox, then."

"Well, have you looked in a mirror? That's not a sheep there, not a cow."

Amaya demonstrated the reflection in her hand mirror. All true.

"You, in short, sleep and chill for three days, no empathies, no aum-lans."

"Aumlan is metanoia gathering, concentration," Mauna tried to defend her meditation. She likes aumlan.

"Yeah, it gives nothing for your business, poultice for a corpse," Amaya straightened her plasis hem, spinning on her paws. Froze, tightening the belt: "Hey, wait. Wait! What three days, you need to send the Message tonight. That judge was actually in a hurry, it's urgent for him, big money paid. Hurry-scurry!" she waved her hands, and the belt wasn't tied, and it fell. "You're something else, Munya."

"It's beyond my abilities, and we both know this."

"We both know that you'll send it and die, or get sick there," Amaya said cheerfully, bending for the belt, "what can you do, you have no way out already. You keep searching, again and again: how to run from this, how to become a Pre-Flop. There's a huuuuge difference between: trying to do something, then croaking that it didn't work; and actually really taking it on and doing what needs to be done."

She came over, securing her Stamp while looking down with an almost playful expression:

"You know what you are—you're a good Messenger. You just need to put the square peg in the square hole, not the round one, got it?" Amaya wrestled with the stubborn mirror on her belt.

She started pacing, distracted, grabbing things, searching for others.

"I'll help you somehow."

"How exactly?" Mauna stood smoothly.

"Don't know, I never had acolytes, I told you. We'll be, like, sawing the cart while moving, or how to say it right... cutting out little wheels and screwing them on... don't know how."

She took the pipe, it slipped from her hand, barely caught it; and with the other desperately fixed something in her ear pendant, and everything got tangled there.

"Thought you'd hide out here and transform into a Pre-Messenger toad? Not happening. We'll show them all, then die trying."

With Amaya it's all one thing: everyone's either eating something or dying, no other way.

"Right, evening's coming. Let's get to it." She planted her hands on her hips.

"Get to what exactly, mentor?"

"We're going to make a mess of things."

Under the Huntress Moon

"Right then. What have you already managed to achieve, and what do you know?"

Amaya told Mauna to strip down to her undergarments and sit on the bed, while she stirred something with a long spoon in a cup; watching her carefully, Mauna concluded she was preparing soma, but not the usual way—somehow in her own manner.

Mauna didn't like this development and drew inward—she disliked soma in all its forms.

"I'll start with what I managed to accomplish. I was once able to accept a dummy from Nel, but I couldn't transmit anything back to her."

Amaya stopped stirring, looked at her disciple as if to say 'go on,' but there wasn't really much more to tell. Mauna returned a meaningful look, and Amaya resumed stirring while pacing around her rather empty bedroom.

"Dreamwalking?"

"Dreamwalking is fine. I passage into it easily enough, can sit there for long. I don't walk through dreamworlds—I was taught there's no point. I saw Vaal early, at twelve years old. I visit him once a moon, no difficulty there either."

Quite puzzled by Mauna's brevity, Amaya poured the soma, or whatever she was making, into a glass vessel and began swirling it, watching it against the candlelight. She chewed on her pipe, though it was unlit; she clearly never smoked in the bedroom, which was good—and really, that is the only proper way.

"Good, and what do you know about the Craft? How about it? Start from the very beginning... as it is."

"I've had three mentors before: Vaalu-Vanaramsya, Vaalu-Myanfar, and then Vaalu-Nel. At the Mastr-Fein mengir Nel emphasizes fetishes and portraits—everyone there does that. Especially portraits. At Tar-Sil, well, I was still small, they were setting me up for sustained dreamwalking, as is proper. I did well at it, so everyone said I was progressing correctly, everyone was pleased," Mauna noted confidently. "Myanfar, by the way, would often seat me with the Welcomers in the mornings; Vanaramsaya never did that, but I was mentored by her only from eight to ten. Myanfar focuses on Discourse^{52,53,54}, so I wasn't initiated into details—too early for that. I was with her until fourteen. Then Nel..."

⁵² *Eh... where do I start... —S.*

⁵³ Sacred ritual communion strengthening the Sister-bond between Sisters. —Z.

⁵⁴ *We're talking about the Messenger orgies. The male participants, if any, aren't complaining, naturally. —S.*

"So everything went sideways when you ended up with Nel?"

"I wouldn't put it that way," Mauna parried defensively.

"Well, that's how it looks," Amaya glanced upward. "Fine, continue."

"Myanfar was pleased with my dreamwalking, and began teaching me Search. I could find her somehow, but I absolutely couldn't locate the mengir, even though she always gave me a piece of it to hold before Passage, tied it to me. She claimed I'd find the mengir if I sat in aumlan near it for about a week. Just when I was supposed to travel to Khas to sit by the Tar mengir, suddenly Myanfar passed me to Nel."

"Why?"

"I don't know. Right after me, Myanfar immediately took on another acolyte. She's three years younger than me. She's already messages dummies, I know that for certain. Mirra."

For some reason Amaya laughed. Mauna fell silent. Amaya found this very amusing. Licking her lips, she asked:

"Mirra—she's Khustrian, right?"

"Yes."

Amaya let out another chuckle.

"Does she throw dummies inside the mengir?"

"I don't know," Mauna shook her head. "By the way, let me ask you: what's your pride?"

"Denenai."

"Smarts of the Empire, cunning of the Empire."

Rubbing her eye and smiling, Amaya gestured—'go on.'

"When I came to Nel..."

"Did you have any conflicts with Myanfar?" the Messenger suddenly interrupted.

What constituted "conflicts," Mauna pondered. What manner of conflicts could exist between mentor and acolyte? The mentor commanded—the acolyte obeyed. Or failed to, but attempted compliance.

"What kind? No. I don't think I caused her any trouble. She rarely punished me..."

"Fine. So. You came to Nel."

"Now everything became backwards: I found the Mastr-Fein mengir well enough, but couldn't locate Nel or the others, including the acolytes—there are three of us. I established Sister-bonds with everyone: with Nel, with Umalla, two acolytes came to visit me for joint aumlan, we exchanged many Gazes, I spent much time with portraits and fetishes. But... How to clothe the thought..."

"Yeaah, you probably needed more portraits, fetishes, and gawking sessions," Amaya sat on the edge of the bed, cradling the vessel of black soma.

"Vaalira and Karana made good progress. They're both two years younger than me, but already very stable in Search and bonding. And... and you don't have a single portrait," Mauna gestured around the room, and indeed. "I can't find anyone even with portrait and fetish, much less without..."

"Mrrow, something didn't work out with Nel."

"That's untrue," Mauna shook her head firmly. "She labored earnestly for me, truly. I failed to show sufficient determination somewhere. And she, I should mention, has already set one acolyte just right, namely..."

"Masmari, right," Amaya grinned.

"Nel devoted considerable care to me, honestly, Amaya. Great affection. She genuinely... *vtai*, Amaya, I disappointed her. I strove so to weave Sister-bond threads, we all invested such effort, Nel included..."

"And did it work for you?"

Here one had to think, weigh everything; Mauna clasped her palms before herself, ran her fingers along the bridge of her nose.

"I'll put it this way..." she said, closing her eyes.

"Right, enough," Amaya dismissed with a gesture.

She tugged the bell cord beside the bed. The servant Taira entered, and orders followed: summon the Medium, bring something or other, and something else. Mauna wasn't listening because she was lost in thought. Yes, she considered herself capable in all things, she had pride, but her competence was only in everything that wasn't most important; meanwhile others advanced, succeeded at everything, knew it all, everything came naturally to them. Mauna watched as the Medium arrived—it was sire Melim himself with sire Meiran (whom Mauna had also managed to meet), and they examined the wall map of the Empire with Mistress Amaya, studying the flags. Melim and Meiran argued about one flag; Meiran held it in his hand, waving it broadly through the air while making his point. Melim disagreed; Amaya stood nearby, never releasing the vessel of soma from her hand and occasionally swirling it. Finally, they moved the flag; no one paid attention to Mauna in just her chemise, sitting on her legs in the middle of the bed. Her undergarment, the chemise, has a belt, and on the left side Mauna has tied her sirna, because she always does so, and sleeps with the sirna under her pillow, as is proper. Amaya had removed her belt some time ago, which was amusing—her plasis hung like a loose robe, not following her figure, making her resemble a well-to-do Andarian hamanu who had come to the female quarters in the evening (males, naturally, didn't enter there), where Andarian lionesses usually went beltless.

"Good, map's ready," Melim confirmed. Then he pulled from the case he'd brought: "Tonight's Messages, Mistress. Quota?"

"Quota?" Amaya frowned, actually grimaced, the corners of her muzzle gathering in folds; she seemed caught off-guard by the question, desperately deciding on the fly. "No, no quota at all, nothing. I'll be doing no Messaging and no Reception, only Mauna will Message her thing. Wait everyone, I need to pee. Here, Mauna, hold this, swirl the soma."

Having spoken thus and passed the vessel to her acolyte, she departed.

Clearly sire Meiran remained unaccustomed to their new Mistress's bluntness—he walked the chamber with arms folded behind him. Sire Melim contemplated more immediate concerns: the Mistress had sud-

denly forfeited her entire evening, necessitating extensive reorganization; after reflection and notation, he positioned Mauna's prepared Message upon the bed before her, meticulously arranging it.

"Vaal-Taria will receive, Dream-walking one," he indicated to whom the Message should be sent. "Is this a *covenant*?"

A Messenger's acolyte can't simply send Messages at will. She is *outside the Graph*. And the Inner Empire can't send Messages to just anyone, or receive from just anyone. Not that there are many others who can establish contact with them, but... All sorts of things can happen, there are those who can. Everything here is complex, with a thousand 'buts.' And there are only two ways for an acolyte: send by covenant—prior agreement from some sister to maintain contact with the acolyte; or send by emergency protocol—in acute necessity, which is always unusual and draws attention, something like a fire.

"No," Mauna answered, meeting his eyes, and swirling the soma.

"Then emergency?" he was clearly surprised by that 'no.'

She swirled the vessel again.

"Yes," she nodded readily.

What else was left?

My Vaal, have mercy, Mauna panicked inside. *How? What am I doing? Amaya will hate me. I can't manage this.* She should have at least started by somehow attempting to exchange a dummy with Amaya, one needs to begin with small things.

"Draw it," Melim handed Meiran paper, and he brushed a thick red line across the top—the emergency mark.

Amaya returned, drawing everyone's attention.

"Howdy? How are things?"

"The Mistress has no Messaging and no Reception," Melim said, simultaneously justifying and accusing, "so only this, by Vaal's will—a Message from the Radiant V-Mauna."

Fully satisfied, Amaya asked:

"Map ready?"

"Yes."

"Off with you then."

"May Vaal show light in the night," the Medium wished, and they departed.

"Wanna step out?" she asked Mauna.

"Why step out?"

"We're about to be bound, and I don't want you immediately asking: I need this, I need that, mentor."

Mauna listened to herself. No, nothing. But the observation was sensible, so Mauna crawled to look under the bed. Everything necessary was there, but required reaching far, and Mauna felt too lazy to climb down from the bed, so she stretched without embarrassment. Suddenly someone smacked her from behind, and she nearly bumped her head on the floor from surprise.

"Amaya, what was that for?" Mauna's muffled, calm voice as she dragged the chamber pot into the light.

"You have an insignia on your ass. Never saw it before, my hand just itched to give it a smack."

"Mentor hasn't seen naked highborn lionesses?" Mauna climbed down from the bed.

Indeed, surprising. Half of all Messengers came from patrician stock.

"Seen some by chance, but those didn't have butt markings."

"Then their lineage isn't very ancient. In our House it's customary to mark lionesses everywhere necessary. My bloodline is old—seven hundred years of genealogy."

Smoothing her chemise properly, Mauna casually tossed the lid onto the fur beside the bed and settled with dignity upon the chamber pot.

"Hey, what are you doing?" Amaya asked suspiciously.

"You requested I withdraw, so here I am."

Disbelieving, Amaya circled the bed and even peered beneath it.

"That's my chamber pot! Ugh, Meownisha. And you call yourself a patrician!"

"No impropriety here," Mauna declared with complete assurance and condescension. "This is entirely acceptable—males cannot enter now. We all conduct ourselves thus."

"Who is this 'we'?"

"In Andaria, and it was the same at Nel's. Lionesses can do everything together in female spaces, and we're in a Messenger's bedroom. Really," the acolyte shrugged.

"Bite my tail, honestly. My Vaal."

The bell rang again, and in that time Mauna rose, pushing the pot back with her leg.

"Bring us, well, cloth to bind hands," Amaya told Taira. "And this—take a wide tail-ribbon, search my room in the chests, any one. And bring ink with a brush, not tentush, just regular ink. Bring me a wide brush too, there's some in the ehsana⁵⁵ somewhere, bring a couple so I can choose the better one. And bring her a chamber pot from her rooms—she uses mine! In Andaria, imagine, they piss in others' pots without asking everyone to leave!"

Mauna lay on her back. Vaal. This is impossible. All this had begun foolishly just a couple days ago, proceeded like a comedy, and would end as farce. It will be complete failure, Amaya will mock her—she'd already laughed ("Mirra's already throwing dummies! Ha-ha!"). And tomorrow morning either gather her will and belongings for Pre-Messenger service, or poison herself. Maybe better to stab herself, Mauna thought. Stabbing is for disgrace, or threat of shameful death, or captivity; otherwise one can take poison without reproach. Being a Pre-Messenger is not dis-

⁵⁵ Ehsana—pharmacy room. First thing any Ashai does when establishing herself somewhere? Set up an ehsana. We're half-priestesses, half-apothecaries when it comes down to it. —S.

graceful... Or is it? But there is always another reproach ready: if she gives her life back to Vaal, she will flee from serving Him, the Empire, and the Suungs.

Sluggish suicidal contemplations were disrupted by animated Amaya: "What does your insignia mean, what's on it?"

"Solar wheel," Mauna answered calmly, gazing at the ceiling.

Amaya looked at her, sighed. Mauna didn't see how she smirked, silently conversed with herself, wiggled her fingers in the air—expressions, ears moving; she agreed with something, nodding. She undressed, dropping everything right on the floor.

"Get up, come on..." she invited Mauna.

She placed her own amulet of Vaal on her, adjusted it this way and that. Cautious and oppressed by the approaching prospects, Mauna didn't think about this, didn't connect the dots.

"Gather pillows as you usually like," she tossed pillows at her, abundantly.

"I just Passage on my back," Mauna dug herself out of them.

"Where is that Taira?"

As if summoned, Taira appeared with a servant whose name Mauna didn't know yet, bearing all requested items including the notorious chamber pot. Through their assistance, they secured their left (Mauna's) and right (Amaya's) hands together; the acolyte understood this practice from previous, though infrequent, early training. Additionally, Amaya commanded tail-ribbon wrapping, followed by meticulous fine-tuning as she constantly directed: excessive tightness here, insufficient there. Upon achieving perfection, Amaya recalled and positioned ink with brush proximately on the bed.

Mauna observed the second servant's curious examination of them, prompting an absurd notion to probe her empathically and definitively destroy everything. She already felt how considerably empathy had depleted her throughout the day.

"Enough, depart, Vaal shall guide," Amaya forestalled such foolish schemes.

"Vaal shall show light in the night, Mistress," they bowed and departed.

Amaya began drawing on the tail-ribbon that wound around the cloth binding their palms with her left hand. Awkward position, and she huffed; looked at how the candles stood, little light, sighed.

"Forgot that, tsa. Should have done the... dra-wing earli-er."

Mauna observed. This was new to her, she didn't know such things.

"But this is even better," Amaya sniffled, tracing the first symbol: it turned out to be Sixtima, the dark side of the moon. It came out so-so. Then she drew the first letter of her name. Then she sketched the solar, imperial symbol.

"Solar will interfere, Amaya," the acolyte noted.

"As always, Muni, I love everything harmful and ruining everything," Amaya bent over, not looking at her, ears half-pressed, carefully and

touchingly drawing with the brush in her left hand. "Solar is harmful if you Message like everyone else. Solar is needed if you Message like me."

She finished drawing.

"As the northerners say: tsanna?"

"The ideal condemns everyone," Mauna answered with a Canon sentence, because she didn't know what to say.

"Yeah-yeah, you know everything, Munish-foxy. Write mine. Write my name."

"In full?"

"No, like me, the letter."

Mauna traced an 'A' of the high script.

"Mhm... Give me," she took the brush from Mauna and drew another symbol: Luana, the bright side of the moon. Ink dripped onto the bedding, but Amaya paid no attention at all.

With some difficulties she managed to place the ink and brush on the bedside table; she lay on her side, as much as possible given their position, and Mauna did the same.

"Before we begin, you must know something. Listen carefully, Mauna."

The disciple pricked up her ears and shifted slightly, flicking her tail.

"Don't look at me yet, look at the map."

This proved rather awkward in her position, but it was what it was—Mauna began studying the Empire map on the wall, bristling with flags.

"This is... Well, how to put it..." Amaya began helplessly, then fell silent. They lay quiet like that, and Mauna couldn't see her rubbing her muzzle with her palm, then giving up and surrendering to it all. "Remember this: emotion drives Messaging. Emotion is your food, your fire, what you'll ride on. In perfect worlds you'd be calm, you'd exist in eternal aumlan, pure and flawless, needing no damn affect, beyond reproach, with dhaars coming to pray to you like a goddess. They'd make you a statue—naked, round, and beautiful. But we're in this shitty world of warm blood, where all this"—she gestured at everything around them—"exists. You won't get anywhere here with pure reason alone—it won't work."

She sighed heavily.

"It won't work."

She exhaled again.

"Fuck," her palm fell onto the bed, ceasing to gesture at everything around them.

"Vaal, have mercy. Amaya, please: stop cursing so much. I've never heard so much profanity in my entire life."

"Remember, you need emotion," she paid no attention, and if Mauna had been looking, she would have seen that Amaya spoke with closed eyes, in genuine anguish. "Love, Sister-bonds don't work—I tried, all unreliable. There's nothing to love them for and nothing to bind them with. You have to force yourself. Fuck it. Huntress hatred works reliably, like the sun. Love is temporary, huntress hatred is eternal. Love is a gift that needs reciprocation, but hatred doesn't care."

The acolyte listened not critically exactly, but cautiously, her mind spreading labyrinths of possibilities, causes and effects.

"They choose their emotion, almost all of them. Sister-bonds... No-no-no, that's not love, that's, you know, such attachment—vulgar, ridiculous. Braiding little tails. They sit around their freaking mengir, gossiping. They make little portraits of each other, artists make them, yes, and then they get off on them. They lick each other, or fuck together with males, well, you understand, Discourse. I can't stand that word. Discourse. It's a gangbang, what kind of discourse is that, call things straight. You have to look at reality, you have to look at reality, this is very important, Mauna, very important. This is a table, this is a map, this is an orgy."

The map was beginning to appeal to Mauna; what did 'appeal' mean?; just appeal, that's all. She knew it well anyway, by heart; she could answer well who each flag belonged to.

"So I won't teach you this bullshit with portraits and loves."

Amaya pointed with a clawed finger at the Empire map.

"But what I'll teach you—how to be a huntress. Huntress hatred, and to find your prey and drive Messages into them, you must ride on hatred, you must be in fury, vengeance and denial. You'll be..." Amaya didn't finish, turned away: "Your ears will hear, your eyes will see the prey—hop!—caught, struck down. Take that, bitch, take-take-take! Yah! Grrr."

Again she pointed insistently at the map.

"This is your Hunting Grounds."

She turned Mauna's head toward herself.

"Don't try to be noble, don't try to be worthy of connection, but what you won't have to try is being pregnant and hungry. You'll give birth to Messages in them, then devour their Messages."

Mauna blinked, with very light movements settled more comfortably on the pillow, looked Amaya eye to eye, who decided something for herself and declared with agitation:

"This is a terrible idea—giving me an acolyte. You're fucked."

So that's how it would be, right away. Clear enough. One way or another, sacrifice was inevitable, things couldn't continue like this; probably nothing would work out—so be it. She took and decided: she would die as a Messenger, and that's that. Just like that, simply. Not as a Pre-Messenger, not as someone else, but exactly so. Let everyone know: she was a serious acolyte, she fell in battle; in the Empire, lionesses who died in childbirth are honored as fallen in combat, so it would be here too—acolytes sometimes die during Acceptance from strong soma (ordinary Ashai, no one risks this with Messengers), and she—as Amaya loves to say—would croak trying to become a Messenger; father, mother, brothers—all would be proud of her.

Mauna fearlessly took Amaya's free palm (took responsibility upon herself), it was slightly awkward because of their bound hands, but this was even better, they could intertwine in embrace there too. Mauna smiled, and also fearlessly, as it seemed to her, but if one could see them

from the side (this is simple, you can see them), one could notice—with fear.

"Just look at this... I thought you couldn't do that," Amaya immediately noticed.

Not fleeing further from responsibility, Mauna joined their muzzles, noses. Amaya had nothing against it, she had only been waiting, so brave and hesitant simultaneously, it's her nature. Amaya lightly, slightly, rubbed her nose against hers.

"Mentor, tell me..." the disciple began, and didn't finish. Something like "...what to do" or "...what next" was intended. But she didn't want to.

Amaya spoke immediately, even with relief.

"You Passage, I Passage," her voice sounded much closer, heard now not only with ears. "I'll come to you, no need to search, we're bound as close as possible, won't lose each other, won't miss," she smelled of smoke, and this proved both unpleasant and pleasant at once, just like that. "We'll go hunting in our Lands, it'll be like one of the dream worlds, and you won't go to the mengir," Mauna sensed her shaking her head, no-no, "you won't call to each of them separately, begging—they'll all be there at once, and they'll all be yours. You'll see all this, this very thing, through your metanoia, well you know, you know all this, but since we're bound, our metanoias will converge, somehow, somehow they'll converge, Munisha, you'll see something like mine," Amaya said, and Mauna understood—this was known to all Messengers: in dreams you see everything through yourself, there's no common reality, but a fluid and very personal one for each soul. "You'll see something like land, lands, it'll remind you of the Empire map, it will be that map, something your noia will show you. Everyone will be there, and we'll catch them all... not all... but who there... who needs to be caught there?"

"Taria."

"Taria. Taria, right. Ours-ours. Over there, south of us. Not far. Western Andaria, forest-hills... Taria, she's big, she's old."

"But... will she open to me?"

"Poor, old Taria, she has no chance not to when you overtake her. You don't beg for connection, you... You'll see everything there, I'll help you, I'll be nearby, I'll be somewhere there, I will be, Mauna. Dreams are chaos, don't try to put everything in its place there... Come on, let's run. You're hungry, and you're full, you're about to burst, give everything, eat everything... Like this, just like this. Now we'll... You drove the Message into yourself?" she asked a naive, unnecessary question.

Mauna didn't even answer. Of course she did it.

"Our prey, come on... Everything worthwhile in life draws blood. Such is life, Munisha, that's it..."

Amaya poured soma into the cup, and doing this herself wasn't easy with one hand bound, so Mauna helped her, holding the cup.

"Drink," Amaya said matter-of-factly. "Leave me a little."

In small sips Mauna drank; she wanted to just down it all, screw everything; but she remembered about her mentor; the soma was bitter,

salty and sweet at once, but not utterly vile like what both Myanfar and Nel had given her. She handed the cup to Amaya, but she didn't take it, instead dipped a large brush and smeared it on Mauna's muzzle, part of her neck. Much was new to her, and Mauna didn't know this either, but one shouldn't draw conclusions—different mengirs had their own recipes, their own methods, nothing unusual.

Amaya knocked back her portion too, licked her lips appreciatively and gave the brush to Mauna, who understood and smeared her with what remained. She tried hard—you should see how seriously Mauna did everything—and overdid it: soma got into Amaya's nose, and she sneezed right onto Mauna, because there is nowhere to hide when you're bound together.

"Bless you," Mauna said. "Sorry."

Amaya lay down, sniffing.

"You too. Well, lie down, foxy."

Which the disciple did.

"What will happen, mentor?" Mauna asked, and asked it about everything.

"Something will," Amaya answered after thinking. "That's it, we'll talk there... Let's go."

After adjusting a few things, pulling a pillowcase over herself, Mauna closed her eyes. She shifted slightly, let her tail fall along her leg, just so. There would be no problems with Passage—there hadn't been for a long time, everything would be quick and masterful. And with soma—all the more so. Forty million Suungs, after all. And Messengers—six dozen and six. And a handful of acolytes, or however many there are... Ah, one more, one less... They don't take just anyone there, only the finest daughters of the Suungs. Right? Yes. Oh yes, soma; soma, soma, little somaaa, as Amayaaa would say, soooooomaaa...

Of course, she passaged. Of course, around her the shining emptiness of the worldless void, in which it always smelled like earth oil to her; dreamwalking, it's an interesting thing, in it you can taste different colors, or acquire the inability to pronounce certain words, or develop fear of any innocent concept (for instance, you might become terrified of any small triangular things, and it will eject you). In this void one could sit for a long time, very long, one could fall into something like aumlan, and some consider this the very best practice of aumlan itself; one could go to the dream worlds, up or down, but this is of little use to Messengers; one could go witness Vaal, but now this too was pointless, because after that it would definitely eject you, always ejects. From here one could begin striving toward any mengir or immediately rush toward any Messenger (hello, portraits, fetishes and Sister-bonds), but Amaya had said not to do such things, and Mauna knew this now not only with her mind—she knew it better, knew it with her will.

One option remained: freeze here, not waste powers, and wait for Amaya. No need to strive toward her, this too Mauna already knew. She looked at her hands to settle better here, and on her left hand a bracelet

glowed blue, on which were Luana, Sixtima, the Sun and their names (here—in full, such beautiful handwriting); excellent, and suddenly something new—silver dust appeared all around, lots of it, and then without any preamble Amaya appeared (this was definitely her, no doubt), and how she appeared was something else entirely.

What Mauna's own metanoia presented to her: this was a lioness, and that was good; she was much taller than Mauna; she was dark; she had long legs, too long; she had a long tail, like the road to Marna; she was, one could admit, not quite naked, because she had some decorum after all—necklaces of different colors and sizes, and that same bracelet on her right hand, and it glowed red; she is a huntress, and why a huntress?—because she had an enormous silver spear with flowing ribbons. The impression was instant and irrevocable, Mauna already knew she would find her even in Naheim, even in Tiamat.

She didn't waste power on anything, stretched out her hand with the red bracelet: 'Come on, come on, let's go!' Mauna didn't hesitate, extended hers, and the transition began immediately. But the transition turned out different from going to a mengir or to dream worlds, no, this was much harsher; Mauna knew this was the hardest part, here she couldn't let go of her mentor's palm, get lost or be ejected, that would be very bad, that would be failure, she'd become that very Pre-Messenger toad; she gripped Amaya's palm, she felt how fervently her strength was melting away, so wastefully spent today on warm-world foolishness with empathy, how her dream forearm would now betray; and how vile that this is her left hand, not right, her right hand is stronger, she is an archer after all, there, somewhere far-far below, where the world of warm blood remained; she even intended to grab with her right too, but no avail—the transition wind wouldn't let her even move it. If she could have, she would have grabbed with her teeth, but that was impossible, not possible.

They burst out somewhere, literally with a crash, and Mauna very vividly, very truly slammed into the dust of this somewhere's earth. She rolled onto her back and saw that this world had a sun, well just an ordinary sun like that, bright, maybe a bit bigger than the one there, at home. She thought: *Now it will burn me.*

It didn't burn, because the sun was blocked by Amaya-huntress with her spear, and it cost her nothing to lift Mauna to her paws; after she rose, Mauna realized that she too had acquired legs, also long, but she hadn't turned out naked like Amaya—she had acquired a completely non-hunting dress, it would be amusing to hunt in such a thing in the warm-blood world, and it was semi-transparent, you could see everything, complete see-through.

Amaya pushed her, everything was clear here—run, go running. Mauna pushed off, but decided to stand, look around. Something like Andarian steppe, even trees here and there. It seemed mountains were turning blue in the north, ah yes, there they were, in the nor...

Amaya pushed her more desperately and weakly at once:

Find her! Map! Taria! Strike her with the Message!

Map, Taria, strike with Message. Mauna ran, running turned out easy and wonderful, very easy and utterly wonderful; her strength hadn't diminished, it had become even greater than before, than all day, maybe all year, maybe all life. There had been a gray cloud over you—and suddenly it was removed. Yes, Andarian steppes all around, which had transformed into a small Empire, mountains in the north, sea in the south. Paths wound just like Imperial roads. Mauna realized she was running north, but needed to go south, because Taria was in the south; but if her path was north, then here, nearby, Nel should be, very close, after all she and Amaya weren't that far from Nel; and as soon as Mauna heeded that she could and should seek other Messengers, there she was. Nel.

Nel slept under a stone, curled in a ball, she very much resembled a female firran; she had covered herself with her tail, and had a very peaceful, even sweet appearance. Beside her a long flag was stuck crookedly in the ground, Mauna looked, and it lit up: 'I guard what guards us.' This was Nel's motto. Mauna stopped.

Probably something could be done with her. Probably she was prey, and prey could probably be pierced. And as soon as this was understood, an enormous bow spread in her left hand in bright streams, from center to edges. Mauna swayed it in her hand, she became so interested, swayed it again—completely weightless. From the bow one could (should) shoot something, and Mauna didn't like taking first arrows from quivers behind her back, she always pulled first those tucked on the right side of her belt, and yes, there they were, and she easily took one of them (good thing this semi-transparent dress had a belt!), but the arrow turned out too ephemeral, you couldn't strike anything with such a thing. Ah, well of course, obviously, this was completely clear to everyone, that the arrow needed to be formed, given foundation and substance, and only one thing could do this—a Message. The delicate, glowing arrow shimmered and waited to be charged with a Message; but Mauna had no Message for Nel; Mauna could invent one right now, something triumphant and caustic at once, but no-no, first came the duty of an Ashai of Messaging of the Su-ung Empire, and Mauna ran south, looking around; she noticed more flags in the distance, but realized that not every prey here would have a flag, and anyway, there was much of interest here, in these Hunting Grounds. One could run fast, even move in glimpses, even could juuump.

There she was, in the distance, all glowing, Vaalu-Irama, chief of the Tar-Sil mengir, and even the mengir pillar was visible; so Taria was nearby, and there she was, right in a pit-den, surrounded by trees; she sat with eyes closed, very much resembling a village healer, whose drawing Mauna had once seen in a book, she was all in feathers on her head and some unimaginable garb. *Let's disturb the peace, break some stuff*, she thought cheerfully. She raised her bow, shook it; now let's charge the arrow, and charge it with a Message, and we have one!

*From: Mauna, acolyte of Amaya. To: Taria. Emergency.
For: Sharrakh, from Val-Narzai, Khas. Sharrakh, come imme-*

diately, with family. Don't accept the proposal from Elassi. Stop by Varras and collect the debt, don't take no for an answer. Kirits. Signature: Raven-Mountain-Grass-one.

Mauna released the arrow, remembering everything needed for good archery, even her breathing. She hit Taria precisely, right in the head with feathers, and Mauna exhaled, lowering her hands: if females experienced such an orgasm of release down there, at home, they would claw lions at every corner, they wouldn't let them walk freely, begging males to fuck them; interesting, is this what lionesses feel when they give birth to cubs? *Vaal, don't spare me, I'll live here!* she moaned, collapsing to the ground on limp, long legs; she went and smoothed her ears, her nape, and discovered with amazement that she somehow had a mane, but not like males have, short and coarse, but long, soft, flowing, very long, going all the way to her tail, it now streamed around her as she sat on this excellent earth.

What about Taria? She woke, but quite stoically endured this excellent outpouring from the young Messenger; without any hurry, she pulled the arrow from her head, looked at it critically, as if at some previously unseen fish, glanced around, and even noticed Mauna; looking at her and scratching herself, after some hesitation, she simply ate the arrow, just like that.

Right, thought Mauna. She took the Message. So it's accepted. So her queue is free. Or I went out of turn. Need a Reply.

She approached Taria. Silence. Even touched her with a paw. Mischievously poked her with the bow, but nothing. She looked but remained silent. Hmm... Maybe bite her or something. Yes, bite! Hmm, how to politely bite a respected Messenger?

Mauna found nothing better than to kneel on her loooong leg and bit her left palm, something like kissing a ring, only instead of tenderness—fangs; her mane interfered all around, streaming abundantly. Her mouth became sweetish.

Received. Signature: Raven-Mountain-Grass-one. I remember, you were under Nel. Amaya's status?" This Mauna understood with difficulty.

Um. Well, they're here together. Should she tell her? No way. Something general, neutral, even naive.

Mauna tried to speak with her mouth, but nothing came out except growling. Not a single word, only growls. Fine, let's charge an arrow, here's a new one: *Everything's fine with Amaya.* To avoid hassle, she took and poked the arrow into her by hand; but no-no, the arrow passed right through, nothing worked without the bow. Quick draw, bang, hit her in the chest point-blank. Now everything was proper: the arrow stuck; the arrow was pulled out, but no one examined it critically anymore; the arrow was quickly consumed.

Oh, that's it, time to bite again. Amusing herself like a lionessy, Mauna went and decided to bite off her ear entirely. The ear turned out very tasty: like mixing the finest blood and the finest honey.

Congratulations, Mauna, haven't heard from you in the Inner Empire yet, everything was understood incredibly clearly, distinctly, better even than in the home world. You Message clearly. Vaal in power. May your flight be endless."

Vaal in power, indeed. Trembling with joy, Mauna hastily charged an arrow, shot point-blank.

And may you reach Vaal, she bid farewell as well.

That's it, Taria with her bitten-off ear went back to sleep.

Why waste such an excellent opportunity? Mauna ran further through her Inner Empire. The feeling was like this: many-many years ago, when she wasn't even a naysi yet, when Vanaramsaya hadn't even taken her as an acolyte, a whole pack of second and third cousins had come to one of her parents' villas for some adult holiday or wedding, some such adult nonsense, they were forgotten and even the servants weren't watching them, they were left to themselves, and arranged wild running through the whole villa with pillow fights, hide-and-seek, her older brother swung her on swings so hard that she could only squeal and want it to never end. Just never.

She adapted quickly and reliably. You could jump, including tail-first (strange) and doing a flip in the air (even stranger), you could instantly move great distances, you could toss up the bow and catch it flawlessly, you could climb rocks and see lakes and small streams that roughly corresponded to how they actually flowed in the Empire, you could see all the local population: here was Vaalu-Dayana (a sleeping female firran), here Vaalu-Nyys (here—literally a mountain goat; in the warm-blood world—a Yunian, they have many curious and strange names, Mauna knew everyone called her Nyushka behind her back); Vaalu-Amalie (simply a lioness, touching); Vaalu-Zirara-Belsarra (for some reason a sad pig); there were even tiny settlement-towns, a couple houses resembling Khustrian or Mstvaash hovels; she even peeked into Marna, and there were many of them there—Vaal-Inliramia, and Freya, and Vesta, and everyone-everyone-everyone. Above some fluttered various flags of personal mottos, above some—for some reason not, though they actually too had mottos, and Mauna couldn't yet understand why it's so. At some she mischievously and joyfully aimed uncharged arrows without shooting, but knowing for certain she'd hit anyway.

For some reason Amaya was nowhere to be seen, probably remained there, at home, where northern Listigia should be; but honestly, Mauna wasn't very interested. She ran around enough, calmed down; she decided to peek into Kafna and look at the sea next time, absolutely knowing that next time—would come. She returned back, to initial point. Yes, Amaya was here, she was sprawled on the ground, she too slept, her spear didn't glow and stood stuck in the earth. She slept somehow not peacefully, unlike the others, and her bracelet continued to shine red. Mauna charged an arrow:

I Messaged! Amaya, imagine: everyone's here!

She shot and remembered she should have introduced herself. Who is 'I'? Amaya will understand, probably, but that's not how you Message, you have to introduce yourself first.

Amaya didn't wake and didn't answer. Mauna suddenly saw that many-many arrows were stuck in her, and she methodically counted them—eight. Ah, Mauna the smart one, the queue. She wanted to help, and an idea came—to stick one of her arrows into herself. There was such a complicated thing as joint Messaging, and mentors always taught that these were waters full of underwater rocks and unexpected (unpleasant) surprises, and damn difficult coordinations. What they have here is, you could say, that very thing. Mauna took and pulled out one arrow and it burned her hand, and stuck it right into her heart. Painful and disgusting, and then—surprise: Zirara fell straight from the sky as a sad unsleeping pig, and appeared in all her glory as half-pig-half-lioness.

From: Zirara. To: Amaya. For: Regulate of Law, Northern Listigia Administration. Case eight-five-five-three-five: evidence of seal forgery found, yes. Case eight-eight-three-five-three: yes. Case eight-seven-six-zero-zero: yes. Case seven-one-two-zero-two: yes. Chamber of Prisons: requesting assistance, two hundred places. Prosecutors of Yonurru cannot keep up, delay inevitable, four moons. List eight-zero NOT approved, corrections by post. Regulate of Law, Yonurru Administration. Signature: Scales-Raven-Rod-one hundred fifty.

So, Mauna became alarmed. This was a real Message, and serious, and large. She wound a couple mnemonic gestures, though it seemed to be remembered & driven in well enough. She shot back:

Received by Mauna, acolyte of Amaya. Seal: Scales-Raven-Rod-one hundred fifty.

Above Zirara an arrow appeared very quickly and hung threateningly, spinning around its axis. Not knowing what to do with it, Mauna beckoned it with a gesture, and this proved sufficient—it hit right between the eyes. Ow, painful again.

Well you two are something, doing a joint. You were with Nel. May you attain Luana-Sixtima.

Mauna's reply, arrow charging and shot already took mere moments:
And may you reach Vaal.

The pig exploded juicily and vanished.

Mauna also understood a critically important thing: she needed to pay attention to others' arrows. She had to look around. Were there any more for her? No. Did Amaya have arrows? Yes, seven.

Becoming worried, she—responsible all her life—decided to exit, to give birth to the not-her-Message at home. This was important! She had to... had to exit, not fall asleep, immediately, so that—Vaal forbid!—the Message wouldn't fade or dim. No, she couldn't peacefully fall asleep (that's if you lay down on the ground), she had to strive upward-upward-

upward, and then... She went upward, but then—a swift, urgent plunge downward.

It seemed that in the last moment she noticed someone running toward her, and very interestedly running toward her! But too late.

Quick, whistling in her ears, the transition wind would tear everything apart now, all so urgent; and falling down was much faster than climbing up. Almost instantly she found herself: in bed, in the night, tied to Amaya, with pounding in her temples, chest, and everywhere else. Mauna rose sharply, and this movement made her feel sick. So, she needed to untie herself, and she managed the ribbon quickly and carefully, and thinking of nothing better, wound it around her thin belt (which she hadn't removed, sleeping just like that, with her sirna), but she had to fiddle with the cloth, and she feared this would throw out, wake Amaya, but nothing happened. She removed her mentor's amulet of Vaal, very carefully placed it on the table on her side.

She placed her paws on the floor and knelt by the bedside table (ah, Medium, well done, here was clean paper and a stylus, everything just like it should be), and under the very dim lamplight began feverishly writing, whispering under her breath:

"From: Zirara. To: Amaya. For: Regulate of Law, Northern Listigia Administration. Case eight-five-five-three-five: evidence of seal forgery found..."

A drop fell from her nose onto the paper, she wiped it nervously.

"Case eight-eight-three-five-three: yes. Case..."

She wound a mnemonic gesture.

"...eight-seven-six-zero-zero: yes. Case seven-one-two-zero-two: yes. Chamber of Prisons: need help, two hundred places. Prosecutors of Yonurru don't... don't keep up, delay in... inevitable, four moons. List eight-zero not approved," she underlined 'not', "corrections by Imperial post," she crossed out 'Imperial'. "Regulate of Law, Yonurru Administration. Signature: Scales-Raven-Rod-one hundred fifty."

Only now did she notice that on her left palm was dried blood, which had slightly stained the paper.

After considerations, she added tonight's date: '5-6 day 3rd Moon of Waters 808 y. E. E.' She signed: 'Vaal-Mauna.' Thinking more, for some reason she added 'midnight' (why? and was it midnight?). She took more paper, hurriedly added 'Signature: Raven-Mountain-Grass-one: transmitted.' Even added at the bottom: 'Judge.' As if countless Messages had gone from her, and one could get confused. But she signed again: 'Vaal-Mauna.' And only when she dropped the stylus did it become... so relieving. So good. She sat right on the floor, leaning against the bed, her tail uncomfortably bent, and something unthinkable for her began—she started crying, which never happened to her, never and nowhere.

"I did it, I did it," she looked at her left palm with blood, and it became clear it wasn't her own. "I did it."

Blood

After crying to her heart's content, Mauna climbed back into bed and somehow fell into the sweetest sleep.

Early in the morning she woke, and not just one but two servants were waiting for them, sitting very quietly beside the bed. On her side—her Renaya, on the left, where Amaya was—Khizaya, though Amaya didn't care about anything, as was known, and didn't need Welcomers. But the special disposition of last night had made the Family take extra precautions.

"Where's the Medium?" was the first thing she asked, and her voice turned out loud in the bedroom's quiet.

"Vaal in the morning, Mistress," Renaya whispered. "Behind the doors."

"Go, give them this," speaking more quietly now, she gave the servant two papers. "Wait, wait... And this—put it away for our chambers," she gave her the ribbon that had bound her to the mentor. "Hide it in that emerald casket. Don't lose it."

Saying nothing to all this, Renaya departed with a special gait so her claws wouldn't click. Mauna thought she should have kept the ribbon on her belt and put everything in the casket herself: a foolish thought, but she worried about the ribbon—what if it disappeared?

Mauna stood, examined herself in the mirror—chemise, blood on her palm; she had completely forgotten to remove her chaindrops for the night and had Messaged in them (Messaged!), the tentush on her muzzle worn away completely by tears, making her resemble either a very young widow in mourning or a captive, something like that; she walked about, looked a little at sleeping Amaya, felt ashamed to look at her right palm—even from here it was visible there was blood. Khizaya was embroidering; mentor Myanfar, for instance, strictly forbade Welcomers from doing anything while awaiting a Messenger's awakening, they had to sit like idols; but mentor Nel said this was great foolishness, and it was much better for a Welcomer to occupy herself with some quiet task: sewing, knitting, reading; at Nel's, almost all the servants could read well.

After consideration, Mauna simply went and left, abandoning everything in Amaya's bedroom, just like that, in her chemise—so as not to make noise in the bedroom. This is completely unforgivable for any maassi or hamanu, to walk around the house like this, in undergarments; for Ashai-Keetrah it is forgivable, all sorts of things happen to them; and a Messenger can even run around naked if duty requires it. The Medium waited beyond the door, curious muzzles and pressing questions, and Mauna led them to her chambers and there ceremoniously, all proper, as befitting, gave birth to everything, without even having time to dress: one

Message she had transmitted, her own; and one Message she had received, for Amaya, which rather surprised sire Melim, for in his many years of service he had only heard of such things but never seen it personally. Everything's on the papers, couldn't wait until morning, wrote it down herself. That's it, the Messenger had returned, by Vaal's will, the Medium left, only Renaya remained.

"Did Mistress Message and receive Messages? That's good, isn't it, Mistress?" she began immediately with cautious optimism.

Cautious optimism is inappropriate. Only triumph.

"Renaya! I did it!"

"It turns out well that we came to study with the Radiant Vaalu-Am..." and Renaya continued cautiously, but was already becoming infected with joy from her Mistress.

"Renaya!" Mauna shook her servant by the shoulders. "Sheh-sheh. But this is the best day of my life."

"Sheh-sheh," Renaya covered her mouth for a moment. "Yes, Mistress. Yes. Mentor Nel will be so glad, will be so glad!"

Mauna froze. Mentor Nel. Will be. So glad. Mentor. Nel.

"Yes. Of course," she answered slowly; she stifled the urge to say furiously: 'Don't talk!' No point in spoiling a perfect day.

And so began the perfect, the very best day. Mauna both put herself in order and had breakfast, inviting the entire Medium and even sire Nermai, and went to see what was happening with the horses in this residence; she also ordered Mshani to watch for when the black cord would be removed from Amaya's door ('Messenger is Messaging'), and this happened only after lunch. Dropping everything, she went to her, in full vestments, ceremonial, painted in full distance for some holiday, a grand one, like the Emperor's Birthday or Heroes' Day.

Mauna suspected she'd never enter Amaya's bedroom without encountering some surprise. Amaya lay in bed with a bandaged palm, reading a book with the help of servant Merine—she held the book before her, leaning against the bedside table; Amaya took from a large plate right on the bed handfuls of an strange mixture of dried fruits, nuts and dried meat. These handfuls she chewed not so much herself as she stuffed them into Merine; servant, probably not daring to contradict the new Mistress, obediently and persistently ate them. But Amaya fed not only her, but also—what a thing—a lion cub, still maneless, who sat beside her right on the bed. He and Amaya looked together at the book, which she read in snatches aloud, sometimes running a claw along the page. Amaya waved at Mauna with her bandaged hand—sit beside us, which Mauna did.

"Well there... Where is it... Ah, here it is. 'And the wise lioness Asgarda approached Aratta, and spoke: 'It shall come to pass that you will shorten your path of devotion,'" Amaya reached for a nut and began loudly crunching it. "Here, take, eat," she tapped the plate, looking at Mauna.

"Did she tell Aratta to eat?" the cub wondered timidly, picking at a claw on his paw. "What to eat?"

The cub glanced sideways at Mauna; she had clearly embarrassed him, with all her decorum, in distance, and in intimidating paint.

There was little choice: Mauna took a nut.

"Nah, no-no-no, this is for Ma... Vaalu-Mauna, brilliant acolyte, the best now in the Empire. Are you acquainted with Vaalu-Mauna?" Amaya looked at the cub, lifting her head on the pillow.

"I've seen her, but from far away," he noted, glancing sideways at Mauna again.

"Well, so, here she is, right here."

"Arsai, what should you say?" the servant demanded of her son.

"Thank you," he flicked his ears and, shrinking, looked at his mother.

"No, Arsai, you must say: 'Very pleased to meet you, Excellent Vaalu-Mauna, this is a great honor for me,'" Merine fretted.

"Very pleased, Excellent Vaalu-Mauna, this is honor. Great for me," he repeated hurriedly, not looking at Mauna but at that same claw on his paw.

"'Thank you' works too," Amaya noted. "No big deal."

"No, Mistress, that's not proper..." Merine quickly protested.

"Servants tell a Messenger what's proper and what's not. Vaal, where is this whole Suung Empire headed!" Amaya threw up her hands, sprawling on the bed, nearly overturning both book and plate. The servant caught the book, and Arsai saved the plate.

"Forgive me, Mistress..." and the servant was frightened again; she wanted to gesture something, but didn't dare let go of the book.

"I'm very pleased to meet you too, Arsai," Mauna replied, placing her palm to her chest. He looked at her from under his brow, then at Amaya.

Amaya struck the table with her bandaged hand:

"Right, right, no getting distracted here everyone. Sooo... This thing. 'It shall come to pass that you will shorten your path of devotion.—Shorten the path?—Aratta pricked up her ears.—You will shorten it. Look again,'" Amaya sighed and gathered dried apricots and such into her fist. "'In the last moment she understood everything, but it was too late: the wise lioness Asgarda evilly and powerfully'—Amaya emphasized 'evilily' and 'powerfully' very much—'threw her from the cliff.'"

She dropped one apricot on the bed and ate the rest.

"Thish shing... Arshai, whaf's wriffen here?"

"A-rat-ta," he read monotonously.

"And whaf, whaf's the leshon from fhis? Khishay, give drink."

"Well... I don't know... Aratta died?"

Amaya drank and wiped herself.

"Well, what do you think?"

After thinking, Arsai answered quite confidently:

"If you throw someone off a cliff, they'll die. Though I heard that draags in the East^{56,57} can jump from trees, and nothing happens to them," his nose was running, and he wiped it with his forearm.

"Take a handkerchief, I told you," Merine noted anxiously and in a strained voice. "Behave yourself."

"Where is it..." he began searching around the bed, turning around.

"Here," Amaya reached into her chemise, and it didn't escape Mauna that he stared at her chest, having spotted something there. "Hold on," but she didn't give it to him, instead wiped his muzzle herself, and it didn't escape Mauna that this was her handkerchief, which she had given there, earlier, yesterday, at the ritual with the basin. The cub grabbed the handkerchief and held it, becoming curious, and examined it.

"Mistress, I know something else," he said, crumpling Mauna's handkerchief. "We tried throwing a cat off a bridge. Me, Matenrai and Mazaru. Mazaru heard somewhere that nothing would happen to cats if they fall."

"And what came of it?" Amaya addressed him, looking ahead at the book that the servant still faithfully held.

"We made a bet. We threw the cat once, and it seemed fine. Threw it a second time, and its nose started bleeding. Matenrai said later that it died."

"And what did you bet on?"

"Well, nothing really..." he became embarrassed. And, apparently knowing that the Family is forbidden to lie to the Mistress, confessed: "Well, actually, on kicks."

"How's that?" Amaya pricked up her ears.

"Kicks under the tail. We kicked Mazaru."

Amaya looked at him.

"Is he at least alive?"

"The cat? No, it died."

"No, I mean Mazaru."

"Oh, Mazaru? He's alive, alive."

"There you go. The cat died, and you got sick, and you also kicked Mazaru, and that's why you pierced your paw," Amaya concluded.

"I hit him with my right, but stepped on the nail with my left."

"There's no perfect justice," she summarized.

"And also," the cub suddenly added, "if someone invites you to a precipice, you should look whether they want to throw you off."

"Now that's excellent. Couldn't say it better. That's it, we'll read more later."

"Thank you, Mistress. Arsai, give the Excellent one her handkerchief back. Where are you going?!" Merine hissed, falling into horror: her son, instead of climbing down from the other side of the bed, simply crawled over the Mistress and the Messenger.

⁵⁶ East is war. War is East. —Z.

⁵⁷ *He means we always have trouble there. Praise Vaal Mauna is in the West.* —S.

"Mom, I forgot. I'm sorry, Mistress."

Mauna saw that Merine wanted to grab him by the ear, her hand twitched.

"Put up no-Entry," Amaya stretched and yawned sweetly.

"Yes, Mistress," the servant bowed, holding the book under her arm while gripping her son's hand tightly with the other.

"Vaal in a beautiful day, Mistress," Arsai said farewell pitifully, knowing punishment awaited.

"A strong day, Suung."

Here they were, alone. Amaya continued to keep the handkerchief tucked in her chemise, and now peacefully looked at Mauna. The plan had been slightly disrupted by book reading, cubs and servants, but remained unshaken, and it was this: Mauna would look at her; her calm, stern, patrician and ceremonial appearance, the look of lineage; she would not say 'thank you'—Mauna had always considered those words unreliable and slippery, preferring instead either a brutal action in its obviousness, or the unexpressed, inexpressible. There was place for action in this regard, but a bit later, and now was the time for the inexpressible: she simply looked at Amaya, one didn't even need to be Ashai-Keetrah to read everything on her, on the disciple, on Mauna—already a Messenger, without foolish 'yes, but...' and sympathetic sighs. And all it took—one night.

Amaya, she thought, was the one who delivered what she didn't even promise. Let's be fair: Mauna's mentors had taught her much, Pre-Messengers, teachers; sometimes even too much, let's be real. But to bind Mauna with the Craft they proved to be... Vaal, such helplessness, someone's oversight, or something. Ah, what difference did it make. Amaya didn't promise, she simply delivered. You wanted the Craft? Here it is, take it, take-take-take.

"It hurts?" Mauna smoothed her arm.

Amaya looked at her palm, waved it off, then peacefully gleamed with her eyes. Mauna took and with touching caution unwound everything from her (this took long), her keen gaze and assessment: the strips of her claws across Amaya's palm, across her fingers; yes, she had indeed tried with all her might not to lose her mentor's hand amid the transition winds. Without asking anything, surrendering to the disciple's iron will, Amaya reached with her left, free hand into her plate for her nuts-apricots-meat.

"How are you?"

"Me?" Amaya looked around, slight surprise. "What about me. I'm—here," she showed her scratched palm, wiggled her wounded fingers. "How about you?"

Mauna didn't answer—report and pride would come later. Now came the time for gestures. Carefully leaving the wounded parts at rest on the bed, Mauna without haste drew her sirna from its sheath, ceremoniously took aim (unsurprisingly, her training had included how to properly slash one's hand and draw blood) and cut her right palm diagonally, the very

one she'd used to cling to Amaya to get there. Amaya lay just the same, as if stunned or under opium, passive; things seemed to simply happen to her, life conducted its full carnival around her, while she couldn't keep up with everything, leaving her only to stare with wide eyes at acolytes who cut their own hands and didn't even think to explain themselves.

The debt is fulfilled. Having restored bloody justice, Mauna took her palm again, and again Amaya's fingers were stained with blood, only now not her own but another's (or was it kindred after all?).

"Amaya, I transmitted my Message. And I received one Message for you. Everything's already with the Medium," Mauna said all this as if reading a death sentence to a very old, sworn enemy, her patrician ears hungrily half-flattened, and the movements of her lips—even haughty.

Amaya pondered.

"It's never boring with you, Munya. For me?" Amaya protested comically, but quickly gave up fooling around, and grew curious, pricking up her ears: "From whom?"

"From Zirara. Scales-Raven-Rod-one hundred fifty," Mauna finished off her enemy.

Amaya thought again. And then melted into a sly smile, even bit her lip with her fangs.

"What, Munish, we made a mess of things?" she wriggled in bed, and again smacked her with her tail, like before, now on the knee.

"My Vaal, dear Alamut⁵⁸, I want to go there again," the acolyte's tragically serious appearance was in such contrast with her moaning joy.

"What, foxy, got a taste for blood?" Amaya raised an eyebrow, oh my, still biting herself with fangs. "That's right, I told you so, and you were being coy," she struck her on the forearm, but not hard.

"Hmm..." Mauna didn't reveal herself about the blood-tasting, but did what cats usually do: squinted her eyes, shooting glances. "Amaya-mentor, I must observe that the Family shouldn't be so indulged in crossing boundaries and distance; and males in a Messenger's bed, even cubs, this is... an incorrect thing under these circumstances, though I see the nobility of motives; especially since he's sick with a runny nose, and it could pass to you. And you—I can see this—are greatly weakened, having given all of yourself to me, leading me into the Hunting Grounds of the Inner Empire, which I had never been to and never knew about," she gestured at the map, an important clarification about 'never knew,' Mauna had pressing questions, "this could be bad for you, our service to Vaal-Suungs," she emphasized 'our,' "it would thereby fall under threats of illness, weakness. Amaya, we serve by properly caring for the Family, but we care for ourselves too, and you should care better," she smoothed her hand, "better remember about yourself, please..."

Mauna moved into this caring and sincere attack, but with each word her confidence dissolved; and not because she felt she was wrong (she

⁵⁸ Sacred wind of Andaria. —Z.

was saying completely correct, reasonable, truly obvious things). Everything came from the fact that with each of her words Amaya charged up even more, like an arrow with a Message, charged with the hidden satisfaction of anyone who has caught someone in a crime, and listens to all the facts, circumstances, evidence and arguments from an (as yet) unsuspecting interlocutor.

Without any interruptions, Amaya let Mauna finish; understanding it was over, she exhaled:

"Ah yes, I'm a complete criminal, that's known. But now we'll talk about your far blacker deeds. I completely forgot to tell you, completely-completely," Amaya said, radiantly satisfied, "that last night you Messaged in a way that's forbidden to all In-Empire sisters, and this good mentors never teach good acolytes," and she stuck a claw in her mouth, scratching her teeth. "Forgot to warn you. You're not offended, aaaare you?"

Mauna contemplated, looked upward without changing her head position, nothing. With one hand she still connected with Amaya, with the other she scratched at her light-gray plasis at the chest. Then her gaze returned to her mentor.

"I..." she began.

"Oh-oh, you didn't know about such things?" Amaya had only been waiting for any sound. "Ah, yes, where would you know from. You were a good acolyte with good mentors, it wouldn't have occurred to them to teach such stuff. Not that they know much about it," Amaya pleurably moved her shoulders, again that restless tail, "some of them just suspect something, our dear suspects. And that's good, they don't need it. But we won't tell anyone, right? Or we'll catch it," and she winked hard, as always, acting.

Good. Mauna contemplated again, looked upward again.

"You taught me something other sisters don't know?"

"Well. Whoopsie," Amaya played with her fingers in the air, weighing things. "Four others know. I won't name them: you'll recognize them yourself, there, don't worry. You're the sixth. Sixty-foxy," Amaya rubbed the amulet that Mauna had worn that night. Infinite pleasure in her eyes. She was waiting for something, probably.

"And this should be sheh-sheh between us?" Mauna placed a claw on their still-clasped palms.

"Not just sheh-sheh. This should be sheh-sheh the size of Taria herself. Vaal forgive. Or no, not like that, not like that," Amaya waved her hand chaotically. "Sheh-sheh, that's for all the sisters, and even Families, and tail knows who else. Secret—that's for us, for two," she showed two fingers. And easily, quietly added: "You'll only pass this to that disciple you'll completely trust, and who won't be a fool like me. Like you are. If you will have one. Though you probably won't. Not everyone's as lucky as me, Muni. I'm lucky, that's how I live."

Mauna listened very attentively, fully alert, even leaning forward slightly.

"And being a huntress there—is this a way to do without Books, fetishes, portraits... and even mengirs?" Mauna looked at the door, back, and around.

Very good, Amaya liked Mauna's clarity.

"Yeah-yeah, you know everything, Munisha," Amaya exhaled, relaxing, and reaching for food again.

Reflections on shattered preconceptions were probably expected—strange new knowledge about which nothing from former mentors anywhere, almost panicked attempts to find out 'but how...' or 'but why didn't anyone...' and so forth.

Mauna straightened, sat up, and now looked above Amaya, at the completely bare wall.

"Magnificent."

She kissed the palm on which quite a lot of Mauna's blood had flowed, which no one had bothered with until now, and left it in peace. A touch to everything: all this time Mauna hadn't realized she hadn't sheathed her sirna, and had done everything with it—gestured, stroked Amaya's palm. She put it back. Then she examined her own palm, with which everything became inconvenient, because you'd smear everything with blood. Now it was Amaya's turn, and she examined what was what there.

"Hey, what about caring for yourself?" the mentor noted with amusement, discarding her old bandage, and it fell somewhere on the floor.

"We should rebandage ourselves. Nothing here. Need new cloth," Mauna looked around.

Amaya crunched another nut, and Mauna began to suspect there was a risk for her of repeating foolishness with basins again.

"There you see. Nothing here."

Letter, Secret and The Sacrifice

My Excellent mentor Vaalu-Nel,

I hasten to report that my efforts, commanded by Vaal and destined to serve the Empire and Suungs, have led to a breakthrough. After arriving at Huntress Moon I wholly devoted myself to the intention of entering Sister-bonds and Messaging, fully recognizing my previous inadequacy. Applying all my strength, I was able to find our mengir as well as Tar-Sil, and also establish several successful Sister-bonds.

Radiant Vaalu-Amaya, despite her great preoccupation and other personal circumstances, nonetheless gave me some attention, and arranged with the sisters of our mengir for exchange of empty Messages with acolytes thereof (Vaal-Vaali-ra, Vaalu-Karana), and also bound me by covenant with flawless Vaalu-Taria for transmission of episodic Messages. I beg forgiveness for not turning directly to my Excellent mentor for arrangement of these current matters, but instead imposing upon Radiant Vaalu-Amaya's attention—this was done for convenience; moreover, the Radiant one graciously agreed to do this for me, thereby repaying 'debt of praxis' and 'debt of sisterly assistance,' according to her words.

Due to some mysterious shortage at Huntress Moon of aids, such as sister-fetishes and sister-portraits, I lack strength for Messaging in full volume, but they suffice for empty Messages and several Messages per week by covenant. And I am confident that having everything necessary in proper quantity, I will manage far better.

I regret that my abilities did not manifest earlier than usual for acolytes, due to which my mentor—I admit—might have felt understandable worry and disappointment. But Vaal brings us when we are ready.

I continue independent praxis according to my Excellent mentor's instructions. I request permission to enter Sister-bond with my mentor on any night convenient for the Excellent one. I eagerly await our future meeting in person, where I can fully share achievements and hear all observations.

*Eternally faithful disciple of the Excellent one,
Ashai of Messaging,*

Before sending, Mauna rewrote this letter several times; all drafts were burned. Each time there were more false trails, Amaya's role was increasingly diminished (from 'Radiant Vaalu-Amaya gave me invaluable instruction in joint Messaging...' to '...nonetheless gave me some attention...'). In the first draft Amaya was wrongly named as mentor, later such a monstrous error was not repeated. Each time the shield that covered Amaya grew larger. She herself, Mauna, became more ordinary and obsequious with each version. Narrative landmarks: I was bad, then became good, tail tucked, Amaya does something or other there, never mind her.

The letter that Mauna didn't want to write (but your wants on the path of Ashai of Messaging have no meaning), this preemptive move, was absolutely necessary. Her secret with Amaya had to hide in the fog of mundanity and ordinariness; her unexpected success had to transform into something good, nice and simple; no thread should lead to Amaya, nothing should threaten her, cast shadows, and so on and so forth.

Mauna didn't show it to Amaya, and didn't mention it; what if it would hurt her feelings? No need—she was sensitive.

The secret, Mauna understood, needed to be buried deep, and one had to dig tirelessly, not be lazy and not give way. The secret proved incredible in its power and crystalline in its clarity. She and Amaya no longer discussed the need to hide everything, didn't spawn plans for how best to stay silent, they didn't even touch this topic; complete understanding was established between them on this question.

The secret allowed Mauna what she had never dreamed of before: finding all Messengers without discrimination or regard for those same fetishes, Discourses and Gazes and such else; shooting Messages at them if needed, or simply aiming, for excitement; biting them however she wished (best of all to bite off the head) and tearing out Messages if necessary (didn't even need mnemonics much—the Message went straight as imprint into metanoia)^{59,60,61}; effortlessly entering connection with acolytes of her mengir and with sadistic pleasure shooting them with dummy Messages, while they were frightened by Mauna's clear Messages, with whom they had recently quietly chuckled when meeting at Vaalu-Nel's residence for Gaze sessions; Mauna understood why Amaya had then, the first time, colorfully expressed that her sister Shiala, how best to put it... well in general, sometimes acolytes failed to Message anything back to Mauna, especially in Replies to Messages: she tears a piece from a sister-acolyte, and there—chaos, so disgusting to taste, ugh. Case in point: Mauna once bit, and there—a piece of internal dialogue: 'She'll beat me again, no, arrr!' And do what you want with that, cry or collapse.

⁵⁹ *That's impressive.* —S.

⁶⁰ *That's transgressive.* —Z.

⁶¹ *Spoilsport.* —S.

"Amaya, what do you have to pay for all this?" Mauna reasonably inquired. Holidays are expensive, her father likes to say.

"The fuck I know. With your hide, if you're a fool," Amaya answered easily, drinking wine-juice at lunch. "Females, you know, don't like it when other females are very different. Everyone should be level and know their place, like these... what are they..." Amaya was at a loss. But found it: "Stumps."

"Stumps?" Mauna frowned.

"Well, you've seen, when they cut forest, stumps remain. They're all the same."

"Then why doesn't everyone Message like this?" an even more reasonable question from Mauna.

Amaya set down her cup.

"The fuck I know," another simple answer from Amaya. But the question truly puzzled her. She wiped herself, looked at Mauna. "Well. Few huntresses, much prey. If the opposite, then what would happen... some tail-mess would happen. And not everyone can do it like this."

Okay.

"Who passed this tradition to you?" Mauna asked the most important question, sensing a good moment (in her opinion).

But not so fast. Amaya always answered her as she could; and she could only do so in her own way: with hesitations, profanations, incredible digressions, ramifications and amusing metaphors. But here she laughed.

"Yeah-yeah, you want to know everything, Munya."

The perceptive, intelligent acolyte-Messenger didn't insist. Everything has its time, even if it never comes.

As became fire-clear to Mauna, the secret couldn't be detected in Messaging—the sisters' metanoia simply showed that acolyte Vaalu-Mauna was simply entering reliable connection with them, Messaging clearly, and not engaging in empty chatter—and what more was needed, what else to expect from a acolyte of such an excellent Messenger as Vaalu-Nel?

Mauna's thought: Vaal, thank you for metanoia; good that everyone there has their own. Here, in the warm-blood world, this wouldn't work, here everyone is almost the same, like that same stump.

After that fateful night Amaya didn't Message for three days and lay in bed a lot, something like illness. It seems she caught a runny nose from that same cub.

"I told you so," Mauna reasoned.

"Look at that, can't even get sick," Amaya didn't care.

Amaya's dignity, thanks to Mauna's visible and invisible presence, became much better. She was no longer caught in gluttony and subsequent ritual, and she swore it was all over; she seemed to smoke less, at her disciple's insistence and under her vigilance, though she didn't stop. She didn't suggest sharing this habit, though for some reason Mauna thought there would be attempts.

She stopped indulging in empathy. Now there were more important matters. Constant feeling of superiority over everyone, in general. Is this how Messengers feel? Oooh yes.

Morning archery with dhaari Toya also became routine. Bow and arrows acquired new meanings. Dhaari Toya was silent, answering only when asked, dutifully carrying arrows. My Vaal, perfect. Once she was a little late, and Mauna just stood there with her bow but without arrows—one of the couriers going to the Medium had accosted Toya, and she didn't immediately think to get rid of him with the phrase 'I carry arrows for the Messenger to shoot, and if I don't deliver them, she'll be here and very angry'; Mauna, being in excellent mood, didn't bother, didn't investigate, didn't punish.

The Family liked Mauna, very much; someone constantly dropped an accidental 'Mistress,' followed by apologies and justifications; in the residence's emptiness she quickly became the center of order, hierarchy and everything definite. Her own servants, whether Renaya, Mshani or even mute Shezi, silently witnessed and confirmed this shift in power. Mauna loved to visit the Medium, look at the current Graph, stay informed about affairs—something Amaya had never done; they didn't keep secrets and were quite willing to engage in all discussions, even unnecessary ones. They told her that one of the Legate's legions had indeed entered Helsia, and probably more would enter. They looked at the map and reasoned about this.

"Poor fire-priests," Sire Melim laughed. "And they executed a bunch of Helsian rebels right in Nasar, or Halsidics, or whoever."

"Vaal doesn't forgive," Mauna approved.

Mauna and Amaya didn't discuss the Craft too much—there turned out to be little to discuss, and Mauna practiced everything entirely on her own, at home. Amaya sporadically dispensed amusing and not very necessary insights, but once, accidentally, gave simply wonderful advice: wrap ears with cotton at night, as during aumlan; Mauna said it was uncomfortable to lie like that, but Amaya showed her that only a little cotton was needed, no need to arrange huge things on your head, no need to wrap anything like servants do for Mauna. But the cotton had to be the most expensive. Not believing, Mauna tried it, and Passage became even better. Another good piece of advice from her:

"On moondays Vaal himself commanded to Message, everything's better."

And so it proved.

But mostly they preferred to chat and run around together there, in the Hunting Grounds.

Mauna also learned something about herself:

"You look there, well just wow, just amazing."

Unable to resist, Mauna grew curious, knowing perfectly well that another's metanoia was, hmm, another's for a reason, only Amaya saw all this; and also that descriptions of another's visions could influence your own, causing all sorts of interferences and mishaps. But still:

"How exactly?"

Amaya closed her eyes:

"You have a mane, very long, it streams behind you, sparks fall from it, like from a fire, if you know... stir it with a stick. And you shoot everyone with a bow that's bigger than you, Vaal forgive. And you're more slender, not like here. In short, you look excellent, better than here."

Look at that, how our metanoias coincide, thought Mauna. She was serious, then—rare occasion—smiled, waved dismissively, looking aside:

"Amaya, embodiment of directness. I love you."

"And I love you more," she immediately replied.

Once, after pre-dinner, Amaya questioned Mauna about her past, about the ancestral home (Mauna clarified that there were actually three, counting the main residences), for some reason became very interested in her brothers (yes, one was a drengir in the Legate, always at service at the East, and Mauna missed him to death; another one was a boring and married Imperial bureaucrat who completely renounced his inheritance; and the third was unclear—either a rake or a sculptor, sometimes he'd shut himself away with books, and father kept asking mother to take him back to the womb). And suddenly, out of nowhere:

"Did you talk about the Sacrifice with your mentors?"

"Naturally," Mauna nodded.

"Yeah, you should take care of that matter right after Acceptance. The sooner the better. The Craft will go simply like clockwork. Khirana handles this. She's a scoundrel, but she knows her business."

"Khirana?" Mauna was surprised. She didn't know this, though she'd spent much time with Khirana (both that she was a scoundrel and that she handled Sacrifices).

"Yes, she's a master at it. She'll arrange everything for you."

"I had no idea. Did she arrange it for you?"

"She? For me? No... no. Not her," Amaya said thoughtfully, and Mauna already knew when she didn't want to develop a thought. Then the mentor asked warily: "Has a male taken you?"

"No," Mauna answered calmly. "I haven't even been embraced. Haven't even had my neck licked."

"Damn. The fate of Messenger acolytes. Terrible."

"Not really," the acolyte thought calmly. Males seemed to interest her somewhat, but not very much, and everyone around was so... meh. Neither fish nor fowl, nor even baklava. Impossible to imagine anything with them.

"But for Craft, this situation is perfect," Amaya sighed. "Then just hold out until the Sacrifice. The Sacrifice will be just explosive then, enough for a lifetime."

"Do you think they'll accept me, I'll become a Messenger?"

The mentor laughed, pleasurably twirling her pipe.

"Oh, they'll accept. Now they will, be certain of that."

"Amaya, what's it like?"

"What, Acceptance in Marna? Nothing speci..."

"No," Mauna interrupted. "The Sacrifice."

"Like..." she closed her eyes again. "It's like... It's as if... Like golden, warm water penetrates your blood. The meaning of life, tsa. I don't know how to describe it. Complete high. Then bad, then high again. Well, you'll have nightmares. Sometimes you'll remember memories that aren't yours, but you know, probably, usual nonsense. They're very uninteresting, as a rule. But some can be quite amusing. And you'll grow balls."

"Balls?" Mauna pricked up her ears, listening. What balls.

"Vaal, if you could see your muzzle in a mirror. Take it, remove it from your belt, admire yourself," Amaya was amused.

Oh yes. The mysterious mane with whom Mauna had gotten entangled turned out to be this (according to the Medium's report): a criminal authority, known in Bash and throughout Listigia as 'Stump,' and his Circle was called just that—Stump's Circle, and everyone under him were stumps; specialization: brothels, inns, taverns, gambling; unmarried; in his youth killed someone right in the middle of Bash, was condemned but immediately pardoned for mysterious reasons (?!); at odds with some other Circle, they have a whole war there; enjoys extraordinary understanding with Bash's Imperial authorities, and is welcomed in the surrounding areas too.

A couple times a week they came from him to the Medium, and invariably sent Messages to neighboring western Andaria, which Mauna immediately, that very night, Messaged to Taria, because no other real Messages went through Mauna; this was why Amaya had made a covenant for Mauna. Taria always accepted them without queuing—the arrow didn't stick in her but was immediately consumed.

The Chapter in Which Mauna Fell into Rage

It suddenly turned out that Amaya had a lover whom she'd been hiding. And successfully—not a word, not a hint! A Messenger completely devoted to grief for her Family and the Craft, and also to her unexpected disciple, the very best now in the Empire. Not so fast. Everything worked while he wasn't nearby. But hiding him when he arrived at the residence on a very beautiful firran in broad daylight proved rather difficult.

"Amaya, some sire has arrived on a firran."

Mauna is in tall knemids above the knee, legs encased in leather, holding a short whip in her hands. Shorts, shirt, belt, sirna, mirror in its guard. The Stamp can be left off in such cases. The belt is brutal altogether, even for Ashai-Keetrah, who are accustomed to wide belts.

"Really? Well now!" Amaya was surprised so amusingly and so falsely. "Um... and you, Munish, what, going for a ride?"

The acolyte nodded, slapping the whip against her leather-clad leg.

"Have a good ride! And, well, take bodyguards with you, take four," Amaya fussed, "no, five-six heads! Take sire Uruz, take him too. You never know what happens... What a day!... Listen, Munish, I haven't told you about him yet, have I?"

No, Mauna shook her head. The question was unnecessary—Amaya remembered perfectly well that she hadn't.

"Listen," Amaya began touching her shirt buttons, her sleeves. "Listen, Mauna, this... He... he's Secret Service. You should know that he's Service guy. You shouldn't really... maybe don't talk to him much... just so, if you happen to cross paths. He can be curious."

Mauna looked very attentively at her mentor.

"We'll cross paths if he's here."

"He'll come and go," Amaya squeezed her eyes shut, rubbing her temple. "Just don't pay attention to him."

"I'll try."

"Good. Wait," Amaya kissed her on the cheek. "That's it. Go riding..."

Getting proper mounts at Amaya's residence was rather difficult. First, she turned out to have unusually few riding horses, the rest were assigned to carts and coaches. Second, the groom was an idiot—Mauna disliked him but restrained herself, being cold-blooded and high-born. Saddles for lionesses? Never heard of it: why would they need saddles when they ride in wheeled vehicles, not mounted, right? In general, here in Listigia, Mauna had never seen a lioness riding, even sidesaddle. Third, by temperament and breed all the horses were 'wrong.' From five, Mauna chose a phlegmatic mare, slow to respond to commands: boring, but there'd be no foolishness. There was also a gelding, but Mauna didn't like the color, and he was already quickly bonding with sire Uruz, so Mauna decided not

to spoil him (the gelding, not sire Uruz—he was probably beyond spoiling).

Yes, sire Uruz, head of the bodyguard, despite Amaya's hurried advice, was not taken. Why should he? Let him guard the Mistress from this... one on the firran. Those taken were: Tavu, Khagal, Tainaz, Tai. The first three rode poorly—painful for Mauna to watch. Tai turned out an excellent rider, rode in military-practical style, swaying like a pendulum and not caring about presentation at all: nothing fazed him, the cutthroat (honestly, this was—in her few years—the first male who made her feel a flutter below); Mauna, naturally, rode with perfect form.

Service guy. Curious. Your martyred expression, Amaya. Kiss. Go riding, Mauna reflected. Where was the good mood of love, where the passion, where the joy and excitement that a lover had arrived? Wait. Listen. Go riding.

They rode near Bash, once startling some hamanu by approaching from behind, and one of them fell on her tail in the mud. Mauna stopped but didn't apologize—there was no fault of theirs. Everything ended with calm conversation; the lionesses were intimidated by Mauna, understanding she was a *very important* Ashai-Keetrah. Some teen, an absolute rogue and scoundrel, dared shoot at them with a slingshot, apparently believing he was in complete safety, being on high ground and surrounded by friends. Not so fast. Tai on horseback easily overtook him with a flanking maneuver, his friends scattered in all directions, and the rogue made a tactical error in retreat and cornered himself—that is, climbed a tree.

For some reason he thought they'd spit and not bother climbing after him. Not so fast. Khagal, the smallest and lightest, a lean and wiry Khus-trian, methodically began removing his maneguard, long sword, small crossbow, plate armor, short gambeson (which—as Mauna already knew—the bodyguards called 'sprat' among themselves, for mysterious reasons). He seemed to do this deliberately slowly. All the rest gathered around the tree on horseback; Mauna planted her fist on her hip and looked up. The criminal sat on a branch, about ten or twelve years old—his mane hadn't started growing yet.

"Come down yourself. You'll get off easier," Tai even suggested in a friendly manner, shielding his eyes from the sun with his palm.

"Fuck off, pig!" the teen snarled, his growl breaking into a squeal due to his age; he'd probably mistaken the Messenger's bodyguard for city watch.

Wow. Khagal climbed up, the rogue struck him in the muzzle with his paw, for which he got punched in the gut. Grabbing him somehow by his clothes, Khagal dragged him down, lost his grip at the end and the criminal fell to the ground, bloodying his nose, where he was taken.

So Khagal and Tavu took him under the arms, and then it was for Mauna to decide.

"Who are your parents?" she asked.

Everything according to the Codex, actually. Even this was provided for both in the Codex and in those very 'Regulations on Crimes Against

the Ashai-Keetrah...' Parents were responsible for minors, and the consequences here could be quite severe.

He didn't answer, and they twisted his ear:

"Answer when a Messenger asks you," Tavu demanded.

"Huh? What?"

"Do you know what Messengers are?"

"Nah."

"Do you know what Ashai-Keetrah are, moron?"

"Yeah. Stop twisting my ear."

"This is an Ashai-Keetrah," Tavu pointed at Mauna. "Only... very important. You'd almost never see one like this anywhere, understand?"

"Don't take me for stupid, you stupid," the teenager turned out very tough.

"So who are your parents?" Mauna asked again.

"Dunno. How should I know," he looked around desperately, right then left, at those holding him. No need to waste empathy—he really didn't know.

Hmm. In such a situation—everything at your discretion. Mauna dismounted.

"Are you Suung?" she asked.

"Yes!" he answered furiously.

"But you don't know your lineage," Mauna noted, approaching.

"Still Suung! What, do I look like a dhaar?" his courage had diminished considerably—he'd already realized this was all quite serious.

"Let's see," Mauna drew her sirna. "Choose: I'll shave your mane and shorten your tail-tip. Or I'll cut off a finger."

He was silent.

"Mane it is then," Mauna decided, though honestly there wasn't much to shave there.

"No! Don't touch the mane!"

"You'd rather the finger?"

"Yes."

"Which one should I cut off?"

After thinking, he showed the little finger on his left hand.

Midday, cicadas hissed and that nasty northern wind blew.

"Don't want to dirty my sirna. Wait. Where's my knife..." Mauna, hiding her sirna, began looking along her belt—she had a small, convenient knife. But it had vanished—she'd forgotten it at Huntress Moon.

"Excellent one, here," Tai extended a dagger.

"Is it valuable to you?" Mauna looked at the dagger, turning it in her hands. Well no, Norramark steel. Then she looked at Tai. He showed remarkable foresight and grinned.

"Yes, it's from the Legate days. Tavu, gimme your shiv. The one from the residence, with stains. You have it, right?"

He silently gave it to Tai, and Tai gave it to Mauna.

"Put your hand down," Mauna ordered the teen, pointing at the gambeson spread on the grass, which he did with the help of the bodyguards' iron grip. "Give me the finger."

Mauna crouched down, gripped his palm, positioned the dagger to cut. She looked at him, he at her. He said nothing. Glanced down at the sharp thing, then back at her.

"What's wrong with your muzzle?" he suddenly showed curiosity, squinting.

"You're addressing me incorrectly. How do you address lionesses older than you?"

"Hamanu. I guess."

"Right. Go on, try again."

"What's wrong with hamanu's muzzle?"

"Wrong. How do you address Ashai?"

"What's wrong with hamanu Ashai's muzzle?"

"Wrong. It should be: 'What's wrong with the Excellent one's muzzle?'"

"What's wrong with the Excellent one's muzzle?"

"This is tentush, patterns. Sometimes Ashai do this, especially we Messengers."

"This is... and this is that thing... mail through dreams, right?"

"Yes, exactly that. But you said you didn't know."

"Mixed things up. And what, is it real—letters going anywhere you want in dreams?"

"Anywhere you want."

"And immediately?"

"Immediately."

"And many?"

"Vows don't permit an answer."

"Many then," the criminal squinted, guessing everything. "And this... how is it, how does it work... through dreams... imagine that. I thought it was like a fairy tale."

"No, not a fairy tale, everything's true. Vaal grants us such things. You've seen ignimara, haven't you? There, not a fairy tale. Ashai never deal with fairy tales, and on the day they start doing so, the sisterhood will come to an end. And you shoot at a priestess of Vaal with a slingshot."

"I didn't know, thought it was guards. Sorry. I mean, the Excellent one forgives. Well, let's cut it then."

Mauna gave him the dagger.

"Take this. You're grown up now, running around with slingshots doesn't suit you. Give him a sheath."

They did.

"Let him go. Push it," she held the sheaths.

He drove the dagger into the sheath, hard.

"Let's go," Mauna announced, waving to everyone.

Before jumping on his horse, Tai advised, taking the teen by the neck:

"Hide it, or they'll think you stole it," and gave him a cuff on the head. "You're a decent kid, don't mess around with bullshit."

Otherwise the ride passed without incident, and after a couple of hours they had returned to the residence. Mauna approached from the garden side, together with Tai; she dismounted, removed the glove from her right hand, put her hand under the saddle, examined the mare, looked at her teeth—she had a habit of chewing the bit severely. She checked the hooves.

"Didn't sweat much. But tell him to cover her," she gave the reins to Tai.

"Yes, Mistress. Oh, Excellent one."

"Tai. You're making that mistake for about the tenth time."

"I know," he suddenly answered boldly, smiling and leading the horse away.

Mauna thought about this, tapping the whip against her leg, then walked toward the residence; servant Mshani was coming toward her. But then Mauna noticed that someone was sitting alone on the veranda, apparently dozing with legs spread out.

"I'm going there. Go on, Mshani."

"Yes, Mistress. Should I serve?"

"Serve."

The servant left, and Mauna headed toward the dozing figure, just like that, in all her riding gear. She sat on the little sofa; the dozing one (Service guy; curious; don't talk to him much) stirred, squinting from the sun. A northerner, he was content. He had already been inside Amaya. For some time he looked, silently getting acquainted with the stranger.

"Vaal-Mauna, acolyte of Ashai of Messaging," she introduced herself, removing her single glove from her left hand and setting aside her whip.

"Karris, of the Tairams," he half-rose to kiss her ring. "Amaya told me about the young-Flawless one."

As always, they confuse stalla and acolyte after Coming of Age. Suddenly Mauna thought this was good. This is even excellent. A sign. Be young-Flawless. Be naive, be open, look at the world with big eyes, you could even flutter them, be shy as befits Andarian females. An excellent creature for any curious one from Secret Service. Be, be, go on!

"Vaal granted me passage through Coming of Age," she smiled, but without showing teeth, needlessly repositioning the whip on the sofa. She crossed one leg over the other, tucked her palms under her thighs, sat on them like that. "After it I couldn't get used to no longer being 'young-...' Everything so fast, my Vaal."

"Oh, a thousand apologies. I will be frank—I have not yet had the honor of meeting an acolyte of Messengers."

Mauna nodded, and fortunately a servant came, giving time to stay silent, to examine him—stately, handsome, from the northern Suungs, probably Suungkomnaasa, gray-white fur, silver mane without any bindings, nothing; she had sheathed her empathy since she began Messaging (arrows, Inner Empire, you wanted the Craft, take-take-take...), but now

was the perfect time to sacrifice this, possibly even drowning a couple nights in weakness.

She needed to bite off a piece of this male.

They poured lemon water for Mauna, brought a blanket, Renaya offered to wash her hands here, which she modestly and touchingly declined.

"How was the ride?"

Mauna launched into description. Bash is a 'charming little town.' Mauna was surprised it had no theater, at least so she'd heard. Stroking the insignia on her neck, she described in nauseating detail how they'd startled some hamanu, and one of them plopped into the mud. The hamanu who fell had a 'poor' but 'pretty' dress. A duckling was added to the story, which one of the lionesses was carrying, and Mauna felt sorriest for the duckling—it got dirty too. The duckling almost ran off. Mauna bravely ordered it caught, and everything was crowned with success. It had such a cute, yellow little beak, Mauna adores ducklings and never eats duck. Then they returned, and the ride turned out wonderful, and here she was.

"So Vaalu-Amaya is the Fire-bright one's mentor?" the Service agent stoically endured all this.

"Hmm, sire Karris, actually... May I ask something first, I'm embarrassed to ask, but..."

"Of course, absolutely. Any question."

"You and Vaalu-Amaya... I don't know how properly to pour out my curiosity... She told me nothing about the sire."

"Yes. I love her. We are lovers. Let's be open."

"Oh..." a gasp, surprise that such things actually happen, that lovers exist in the world. "Thank you," an awkward 'thank you.' "My curiosity isn't idle, sire Karris," overly significant, youthful thoughtfulness. "I simply must know I can trust the lion, because Vaalu-Amaya..."

"Yes?"

She needs to wrap herself cutely in the blanket. She needs to shine her eyes sweetly. Ah yes, the distance—smear it and be surprised by your helplessness.

Mauna wiped her palm under her eye.

"Oh, I forgot, dear Alamut," a little laugh. "What is wrong with me."

Karris attentively handed her a white napkin from the table, she wiped her palm, and deliberately smeared her tentush across her muzzle.

"Thank you," she settled back, looking pretty awful. "Vaaluh-Amaya is not my mentor. My mentor is Fire-blessed Vaalu-Nel, yes... I didn't come for mentorship, but for independent praxis. There's no point going into details, vows forbid it, the lion will understand..."

"Of course," Karris immediately agreed.

"I was also ordered to observe the Radiant one, Vaalu-Amaya. Oh, sire Karris, the sisterhood worries about her. These terrible recent events, my Vaal, it's so horrible, it's incredible, I don't know what to think about it, sire Karris," she hid in her palms.

"Indeed... Something irreparable happened to her Family," he poured himself something strong and green in a small glass, apparently worm-wood tincture. "May Naheim embrace them," he poured the tincture.

"I can imagine what she went through. And the sire, surely, was also worried about Amaya when he learned. They'll catch them, they'll be prosecuted? Sire Karris, can someone investigate all this, punish them? It's impossible... some wretched Helsians! Does the sire know what happened there?"

He nodded his head to the side, indefinitely, setting the glass back down.

"Noble one, I invite you."

"Oh no, that's a drink for males, it would be too strong for me. Alcohol is harmful to Messengers."

"Come on, it's good, just right after a ride. Truly, Noble one."

"Amaya isn't watching?" Mauna looked around, even behind her. "Or I'll catch it. Sire Karris, honestly..."

"Allow me to..."

"No-no, I'll do it myself. Andaria," Mauna apologized, since Andarian lionesses always pour drinks—both for themselves and for males; or servants do it for them. She actually poured tincture into the goblet from which she'd been drinking water, and even added some for him, and smiled again, with tight lips. "If it's from a goblet, no one will guess. I'll have just a little..." she flicked her ears.

"A little deception," Sire Karris smiled too.

"Yes," Mauna confirmed, holding the goblet. "And how did it happen, why did this occur?"

"It was simple, as far as I know: Helsian rebels—most likely Halsids—attacked Amaya's convoy, in which she—fortunately—was not present. Due to poor communication and wrong decisions, there was no Chamber Guard with the convoy. This happened in the pawhills, not far from Shadowrock. Very close to the Imperial border, actually. And catching individual rebels, Radiant one, makes no sense—they must all be destroyed, all together. Which is what the Empire will now undertake."

"Perhaps the sire could ask anyone: guards, the Chamber, Secret Service, prosecutors, so they could also somehow... catch them all? Not just the Legate. Though I'm sure," she waved her palm, "that the sire has already done this. Does the lion worry about Amaya?" Mauna asked sympathetically, drank from the goblet, and made huge eyes, pressing her palm to her mouth.

She had planned to spit the tincture onto the ground or back into the goblet, but Mauna abandoned this plan—he was watching. But this was even better. She swallowed, closed her eyes, pressed back her ears. Amusing falseness: she could swallow far worse, a Messenger's acolyte—this wasn't soma. He still watched her attentively, good—perfect time for her weapon. Breathing through her mouth, she looked at him, diving into the monument of another's being, more, more, like with the dhaari, come on, go all out. Dissolution, now a male lived in her, and for some reason a

bit of Amaya, and two other lionesses besides, damn them. Dive down, springing off the bottom (where someone knocked), surfacing, ears ringing. You fool, there's risk of blurting something out, empathy charges you with sincerity...

"Really that strong?" Sire Karris smiled.

My Vaal. Wretched falseness. My Vaal, Amaya. You-gone-mad...

"Sire Karris... Sire Karris. Sire Karris," Mauna repeated like an engram, so her mouth wouldn't say anything stupid. "I burned everything inside myself. Oh, dear Alamut... May I have water?"

"Please," the Andarian heritage was violated, and he still poured her water.

"Yes. Thank you. Phew."

"You can have some cheese, it will be great now."

"Yes," which Mauna did when he caringly offered her the tray. "Grateful. Everything became clearer... that is, better," she smiled with teeth, again smoothing her insignia.

He nodded with satisfaction.

"And how did you meet? Oh, sire Karris, lionesses can't resist love stories. My romantic reading will devour me."

"Quite forgivable for such a beautiful lioness," he offered a routine compliment. "It's a long story. Long ago now, it was... five years ago. Nothing special, I came as a client, following my service..."

Press him, what does he do? Press, don't press, press, don't press, Mauna wavered internally.

"...and... and, well, that's all. When we meet our beloved ones, it's most often just the simple prose of life."

"She's lucky," and now, with her smile, Mauna slightly showed her fangs, burrowing even deeper into the blanket. Then, serious: "Can I help Amaya somehow, sire Karris? I don't know what to do..."

"How can one help here. Let the Noble one continue observing her, as the mentors said. Care and support. Moreover, we can combine our efforts—she won't confess to me in anything substantial. Sometimes we cannot be sincere with our beloved ones, paradoxically... But I must know."

"True. I'll share, the sire should know this, because Amaya is dear to both of us. Does the sire know that Amaya smokes very much?"

"Of course I do. Her old habit. I enjoy this vice myself, guilty."

"But Amaya has also developed character disorders. Sire Karris, this is serious, it frightens me. Once I come, and I see... It's horrible! I see—she's expelling food from herself. I thought she was poisoned or something. No, it's something nervous."

"Is that so," he rubbed his chin.

"Yes. Also she," Mauna looked around, then leaned forward, and—surprisingly—he did the same. "She once threatened to kill herself, cut her wrists in the bath. Sire Karris, I thought she was joking. Maybe the sire could stay a couple days with us? She would be calmer."

He shook his head.

"I regret, duty calls. Alas. I cannot, that's certain."

"I understand," Mauna nodded. And with youthful carelessness added: "But, in any case, everything will work out. I think the sisters will send Amaya on a long rest. This is against usual practice... But circumstances are special. I'll replace her here, so they promised me... rather, so they told me it might be. It might be. So that Amaya could depart peacefully. Could the sire go with her?"

"Um... I'll see what can be done, Brilliant one. Thank you for sharing, I didn't know," he became interested, seriously.

"Only—I beg you—this is just between us."

"Sure, absolutely. So Brilliant Vaalu-Mauna will remain here, at the residence?" he studied her.

"Yes, quite possibly, while Amaya rests. It's a good solution. After my Acceptance, or even before it."

"And when will that be?" and he continued studying her.

"Oh, it's exciting... I don't know exactly yet. I think soon. Let the sire..." Mauna wanted to say, in the conversation's flow, '...embrace Amaya,' but couldn't. Come on. Say it. Fine, say '...talk with Amaya.' Or... Or...

She fell silent. Sire Karris didn't much observe Mauna's struggle. He stopped looking at her, rubbed his chin and thought.

"And here's our Amaya," he brightened slightly. "Sit down, my beloved," he gave her his hand without rising, she obediently walked around the little sofa and sat beside. They licked each other after barely noticeable awkwardness.

There's an expression in Andaria, Yaamri, and other old prides: 'too angry to die.' Mauna fell into rage. It was okay and doable, until her fury was driven by precisely this 'beloved.' She now hated that word for life. To hide herself and occupy her mind, keep her blood cold, she silently poured herself more tincture and drank it—no difference now, empathy had already consumed her strength for several nights.

The noise of hatred overwhelmed her; how could he do this to Amaya, to her, so touching? If you have a thirst to possess a lioness, then surely there should be a feeling of protection, a desire to shield her from all sorts of absurd circumstances and evil things, like various acolytes who supposedly 'came to observe,' shouldn't there be? Why didn't he strike Mauna right there across her naively insolent muzzle, regardless of consequences and possible deaths, as a male should? Lions are so much stronger than lionesses that they can twist them into a pitiful ball and do whatever they please—Mauna knew: once, when she came to her parents' summer residence, her eldest brother was there (that same one in the Legate), and fooling around, he did this with her, and precisely then Mauna understood that if a male wants—truly wants—to do something to you, he will do it, and nothing will help you.

Vaal, what foolish questions she had, and even more foolish premises.

"Oh, well now, I see you're conversing. I was thinking... Oh, no-no," said Amaya, seeing that Karris was trying to pour for her too. She lit up,

setting the tobacco pouch on the table, her gaze darting between lover and disciple, back and forth. "Um, this, Mauna, how was your ride? You've," she pointed at her own muzzle, "smeared all your tentush."

"Oh."

And then, diligently wiping herself with the long-suffering napkin that had turned completely black, Mauna poured out to Amaya the story of the transcendent duckling, looking into her eyes. Yes, imagine, hamanu in the mud. It had such a little beak. Mauna smiled, much, and Amaya didn't interrupt at all, only drew on her pipe, pressing back her ears—she had never seen Mauna smile so much. Karris glanced sideways at Amaya, or away, but not at Mauna. Having poured out all this, Mauna left under the clear pretext that she needed to change her clothes.

What Are Males Good For?

The Secret Service lion, essentially, fished out of her a heap of falsehoods mixed with naked truth, told Mauna nothing himself, but she didn't need it. She had already learned enough, and this enough turned out even more joyless than suspected.

Mauna was reading in her chambers, having ordered her servants to watch for when Amaya would return to her quarters, or go to pre-dinner (in case she went alone, without her), or settle somewhere, having rid herself of the Service sire. Romantic reading, of course, had no chance of devouring her—she never read anything like that. Instead, in her current reading cycle: the Codex of Ashai-Keetrah (strange as it was, since Mauna knew huge chunks by heart); 'Lioness of Vaal, Daughter of Suungs, Messenger of the Empire,' by Vaalu-Anlille (a treacherously frank book about the Craft, circulated only among and for Messengers; Vaalu-Anlille the Elder, not to be confused with the Younger, her daughter, which was itself unique, since for a Messenger to have a daughter (!) who also became Ashai-Keetrah (!)—this, you know, deserves separate discussion; the Younger tragically perished in that same, now-hated Helsia, though Helsians themselves don't inspire Mauna's contempt, mostly decent folk, enterprising and even cultured, clearly wanting to 'be like Suungs' and secretly wishing to actually join the Empire, but numerous undercurrents and politics keep throwing sticks in all the wheels); and perennial literature, everything old or inspired by the old (new authors reek of stupidity and pretension, except for two of them).

First, why the Codex? Because of its bone-crushing clarity. Mauna despised anyone who said the Codex was incomprehensible and obscure, and was in constant disarray. *You're the ones in disarray*, Mauna thought.

Second, why Anlille? She had been a Legate Messenger, and spent her whole life traveling with the Legate, never lingering in residences. This wasn't going to patrician dinners in Marna and wandering expensive shops. The entire book consisted of practical advice and descriptions of many difficulties. For example: what to do if almost the entire Family falls ill with campaign diseases? what to do if the legate is an idiot with enormous self-importance? what to do if the Graph is hopelessly damaged, having burned in a tent along with the tent itself? what to do if you can't gather many portraits, the Book of Souls got wet from a poorly closed chest lid, and fetishes for some reason stopped working properly (Mauna thought about how these problems were no longer relevant for her)?

Third, currently it was 'Revolt Against the Future World,' by Yulai of Ivol. Pity he died a hundred years ago. Mauna wasn't attracted to males of letters, but she loved this one from afar. He was cold, merciless, but extremely precise and lofty in expression, and simply predicted the future:

now everything's not great, it will be bad, and later still it will be even worse. A dubious claim, but actually she saw that the changes in the Empire he predicted had taken place. But he wasn't interested in the next hundred years—he was interested in the next thousand; and in general, for him direct time didn't exist, only cyclical. Mauna might not have paid him special attention if not for Vaalu-Irmirana, a Messenger currently in Kholts. A quiet one who—no less—saw the future, literally. Just before Coming of Age, Mauna visited her together with Nel, and she suddenly gifted her this very 'Revolt...', shyly noting that Yulai was right, and everything would be exactly so: not great, bad, even worse. Nel had come then to exchange fetishes, to strengthen their Sister-bond. Mauna now understood the deep irony, because Vaalu-Irmirana—it turned out—was also a huntress. And she didn't care about fetishes.

Yes, of course, it's worth listing which other huntresses Mauna met in the Hunting Grounds of the Inner Empire. Amaya hadn't lied—there really turned out to be six: Vaalu-Naamzira, the Emperor's personal Messenger (incredible, almost cosmic irony, visible to the naked eye: her parents either deliberately (unlikely, no one possesses such foresight except Irmirana, but she's a quiet one and won't spread talk about world fates carelessly), or accidentally named her after the legendary Vaalu-Naamzira who killed Emperor Tastas; the matter was of course quite long ago, four hundred years past, but still); Vaalu-Tsvimaya-Evsuga, Ainansgard; Vaalu-Saensallie, Kafna; Vaalu-Irmirana, Kholts; Vaalu-Amaya, there she was nearby, quite close; and herself—Vaal-Mauna.

All met her differently, but well. Tsvimaya, for instance, didn't bother with newcomer at all, and never once conversed with her. From Naamzira, once right after entry, Mauna received an arrow: 'First: never discuss this with anyone. Second: don't discuss this at home with any of us, especially not with me when you come to Marna. Here you can.' From Vaalu-Saensallie she received a fire arrow, because she threw fire at prey, which turned into arrows at flight's end: 'Greetings, come visit Kafna sometime! All lionesses are like lionesses, but you here are a fox!' From Irmirana came a brief Message: 'Congratulations.' She, incidentally, didn't run around the Inner Empire at all, but simply sat in aumlan in her corner, and arrows from her just appeared in you as if from nowhere.

'Revolt...' shone with new colors in light of this new knowledge. Irmirana-huntress-seer, Yulai, the gifted book, 'everything will be exactly so.' Therefore Mauna gladly reread it.

... We, continuing reflections on the hegemonikon, must also consider the question of service and duty, accepting the initial axiom: 'To rule means to serve.' Regardless of one's position in the hierarchies of the Imperium, which include not only all Imperial power, but also the power of patricians, landowners and heads of Suung families, as well as all other hierarchies—evasion, inconsistency, frivolous irresponsibility and everyday injustice, manifested in quotidian affairs—all this destroys the

*will necessary for observing duty and carrying out one's will, and calls into question any service and, therefore, power; and consequently, the possibility of bearing one's position with dignity. All this is closely connected with the fact that any power is counterfeit, any law is unjust, any institution void, if they do not originate from above, from the Imperium, which is illuminated by Vaal's fire, and...*⁶²

Further Mauna knew that the Imperium would come to an end, because everything would hopelessly spoil under the influence of regressions and degenerations, how could it be otherwise, and everyone would consider themselves equal to each other (what absurdity, Mauna thought, it surely couldn't come to such a thing), and then suddenly servant Renaya entered, causing Mauna to startle.

"Mistress, Radiant Va-Amaya is coming to us."

"Good. Leave."

Mauna closed the book, but no one entered. She tapped it with her claws, turned over the hourglass. No, no one.

Renaya again:

"Mistress, the Radiant one was coming, stood in the corridor, then went to her chambers."

"What was she doing?"

"Looking out the window," Renaya was confused.

Mauna tapped the table, stood up, looked at herself in the large full-length mirror, and went out herself. She walked down the corridor—it wasn't far; mute Shezi came toward her and gave way.

Amaya sat at her table, and by all appearances was driving today's Messages into herself; she looked businesslike and cheerless, frowning deeply—Mauna had observed this about her: when Amaya was busy, she'd frown like this, her nose bridge would wrinkle. She wore no chain-drops, circlet, or band, not since Mauna had seen her after the ride. She was also smoking, of course. And she was reading the Message text under her breath.

"Permission, Amaya."

"Oh, come on, come in," her mentor beckoned, and began running her claw along the Message.

Mauna approached, and the Message was thrust upon her, while Amaya stood, going to the window:

"I hate Messaging such things. My head will explode."

From: s. s. A. M. Vaalu-Amaya, Medium

Date: 28th d. 3rd Moon of Waters 808

Urgency: ordinary

Who: Imperial Secret Service, Listigia administration.

⁶² Ἡγεμονικόν! —Z.

*To: Imperial Secret Service, main Imperial administration,
Marna*

Reception: s. s. A. M. Vaalu-Freya

Backup: s. s. A. M. Vaalu-Inliramia, s. s. A. M. Vaalu-Vesta

Copy: 0

From Amaya for Freya/Inliramia/Vesta. From: Secret Service, Listigia. To: Secret Service, Marna. Operation Blue Wave—successful. Operation Red Wave—successful. Operation Sages of the Cave—successful. Establish new Wheel. Oak-five accepted stick. Chest North-one—seven hundred thousand five hundred. Chest North-two—zero. Chest North-three—one million three hundred thousand five hundred, urgent replenishment. Seal: Raven-Diamond (F)|Star (I)|Flag (V)-Shadow-thirty-five.

"Pleasant Message, actually. I like it," Mauna said quite honestly.

"I keep telling you: you'll pass Acceptance. You even like such things," Amaya tapped her claw on her pipe, looking out the window. There was wind there, and the weather was getting worse. "Listen, tsa, interesting: what did you two talk about?"

Mauna approached from behind, and also began looking out the northern window. The glass was uneven.

"What did he tell you when I left?"

"My Karri? To me? Oh..." Amaya moved her shoulder. "Nothing really. We sat a bit more, then he left."

"What did he say about me?"

Amaya smiled without looking at Mauna.

"Said you were fun to talk to. Nothing special... You were amusing there, Muni. All smeared in tentush, telling about some ducklings. Giggled a lot, more in one day than in these three weeks. Female wisdom—don't leave a lion with another lioness, or it'll start!" she laughed again.

"Did he warn you that I came to watch you?"

Amaya looked at her with a frozen smile.

"Watch?..." she echoed.

"Did he tell you they sent me to replace you, and you need to be sent on a long rest?"

Amaya was easy to confuse. Amaya was always getting confused. How had she even lived to thirty, being a Messenger?

"Oh..."

"Didn't he ask why you vomit in basins, and why you once decided to open your veins in the bath?"

"You told him about my food bullshit?" Amaya truly panicked. "Oh, fuck..."

"And not only that. The main thing: didn't he ask you anything at all? About me, about you, about the Family matter?"

"No," she shrugged, and Mauna noticed that the pipe betrayed her slight tremor.

"He doesn't love you. At all. He just... he just..." Mauna searched for the word, didn't find it. "Amaya, he's dangerous! I devoured him there, then spat him out, because such a thing can't even be chewed!"

Amaya inhaled deeply to say something, or even burst into anger, then exhaled—she understood something.

"You shouldn't have told him about the food," she continued looking out the window, quiet voice. "And you shouldn't have made up about the bath. And you shouldn't have saved the ducklings. I know, Munish. I know he doesn't love me. He uses me, completely, however he wants."

"But why?" Mauna was amazed.

Amaya shrugged.

"Do you tell him things?" Mauna circled behind her tail, now right, now left. "Does he pry with questions, pry into Messages, pry into sisterhood matters, where does he pry?"

"Who? Him? Yes. Yes, he pries into everything. I tell him a little. Sometimes."

Just like that she confessed. Just... right like that.

"Why?" Mauna put her hand on her shoulder, she flinched.

"Well, it's like, well Mauna... he's so persistent. He'll press, I'll crack. He'll press again, I'll break. I like being squeezed."

"Vaal, Amaya, I... This..." Mauna grabbed her head, the chaindrops bit painfully. "The sisters could find out about this!"

"Them? I think they already have," Amaya waved dismissively, yes-yes, they already have.

Mauna turned her mentor around.

"Why do you need him, Amai, what's wrong with you?"

"Hey, what are males good for? He fucks well. Nobody wants to fuck Messengers," Amaya pulled away, but uncertainly, pulled up a chair with her paw and completely melted into it, while Mauna immediately sat at her paws. "Or is it just me? It's like, if I don't tell him things, he'll stop loving me, nobody will love me. What's the point of all this... Nobody loves me."

"Don't you dare say that!" Mauna struck her shoulder, and it seemed painful. "Don't say it!"

"And you thought up the rest thing well. I would leave. But I can't, vows won't let me. Let's drop this conversation, Munish..."

Mauna, at Amaya's legs like a predator looking up at prey larger than herself, from below upward. She gripped Amaya's plasis with her claws.

"Amaya, what vows you're talking about, if you tell a Service agent about Messages?"

"That's exactly why I said: never break oaths," Amaya spread her hands. "Break once—and everything rolls downhill. One wrong decision pulls another, and again, and again. Don't... Let's not. I don't want to know this... Better expose me, Message the sisters."

"No, let's talk. No, I won't expose you," Mauna climbed up and hugged her; an awkward position, but Mauna endured it.

"No? Hey, you know, you should though. What about vows?" as always, Amaya tried to say something like that. Like she wants to bite, but licks instead.

"Grrr, Amaya," Mauna pulled back and growled at her. "So maybe we'll act so that neither you nor I have to break vows? Because I'll break them for you."

"But why?"

"What do you mean 'why'? How is it 'why'? Because you're... You. Here you are," and Mauna kept hitting her with her palm, but then calmed down and sat back on her paws, on the floor.

Amaya dropped her pipe and climbed down, also sitting on her paws.

"We'll both dislike this," she warned vaguely about something, and Mauna couldn't determine what she intended.

She embraced Mauna around the neck, timidly so, peculiarly. Amaya looked at her with regret, as if watching an acolyte, friend departing far and long (or forever), her brilliant, restless eyes. Then Amaya gripped her neck, even stronger than required, as if Mauna risked to escape; and then happened something that proved difficult for Mauna to immediately realize and understand, because she had never kissed anyone before, and this wasn't a mentor's kiss for a disciple—one could allow that a mentor might lick your mouth in a surge of feeling or joy, no, this wasn't that—Mauna was violated and penetrated; this was both good and bad. Mauna remembered her loud exhale through the nose, and that Amaya reeked strongly of tobacco, both in taste and smell, and also that she herself closed her eyes and pressed back her ears, though no one had taught her this and she had nowhere to learn it. But Mauna did nothing else with herself—Amaya did everything.

This didn't continue long, it was quick. Recoiling, Amaya leaned against the chair, extending her legs. Strange: she seemed to be trying something new to taste, licking her lips, looking upward. On her muzzle transformations proceeded with incredible speed: first concentrated, busy recognition of taste; then—surprise; then—frozen stupor of amazement.

"My Vaal, you..." her palms went from forehead to nape, back, strongly pressing her ears and disturbing her features, she closed her eyes. Amaya with complete, utter tranquility, spread into a smile.

She exhaled once more and slowly blinked:

"You say I need to be done with him?" she asked her acolyte pretty confidently.

"Immediately," Mauna answered at once, and also licked her lips.

"Good. Hmm... well, how?" Amaya turned back into her former, usual self, only more peaceful, joyful.

Mauna pondered, continuing to lick her lips.

"No need to invent anything," she showed with her palm: one, two, three. "You are a Messenger, occupied with duties, burdened with obligations—no time remains for such entanglements. He will withdraw of his

own accord, more swiftly than you anticipate. One must hope the sisters have not learned overmuch concerning you and him."

"Hmm... What else to do?"

Unclear whether Amaya was ironic or serious.

"What not to do: don't indulge with basins, don't climb into baths, and walk with me during the day, and look for lovers without brains, but capable of... squeezing you," Mauna answered.

"Somehow you know a lot about lovers, Mauna. And you made up the bath thing yourself, that's disgusting, swimming in your own blood. And I can't ride," sarcasm from Amaya.

"You'll walk on your paws," Mauna showed two fingers.

"I won't run that fast, unless you tie me to a horse like a captive, that would be spectacular."

"I'll ride slowly, at a walk. Or also go on paws altogether."

"Oh... All serious. Also on paws altogether. Fine, tie me up, and at a walk. Good."

"Good?" Mauna asked suspiciously.

"Yes."

Mentors and Mentor

Actually, Amaya wasn't deceiving; actually, she never once deceived Mauna, though the acolyte had been very suspicious at first, very suspicious. Her 'yes,' despite all its chaos, was still 'yes.' Another two weeks passed, Karris came once but received a very calm dismissal at the gate: we regret, the Mistress is busy, service, orders, let the sire not wait. Sire Karris didn't insist. Mauna ensured the Family knew how to turn him away: calmly, without scandal, very friendly.

No adventures, things went smoothly, the Season of Waters came. Amaya already knew that in a month she'd have to leave for Helsia, to a formation consisting of the Third and Fifth Legions, or to the Thirteenth—her usual service. Mauna had accepted this, knowing she'd have to return to Nel, and then they'd see how things will go. They really did walk together, Mauna tried to get her on a horse, but unsuccessfully. Amaya loved holding hands like a lionessy, or walking arm-in-arm with Mauna.

About the kiss: Mauna reflected, but not much; a mysterious event, but there are plenty such in the world. Amaya never returned to it. Nothing happened.

Yes, from Nel she first received only one Message, brief: '*Mauna, excellent that you found your voice and began Messaging! I'm proud.*' This was reassuring, a good sign, things looking up, all well. But here was the second, fresh one, that came to her tonight on the 7-8th of the 4th Moon of Waters 808 E. E.:

PERSONAL MESSAGE. Your successes bring joy to the Mastr-Fein mengir and all sisters. Umi and I will come to you on the thirteenth of the fourth Moon of Waters. Prepare Huntress Moon for our arrival.

Having consumed this personal Message-arrow, not intended for the Medium ('PM,' in Messenger language), Mauna dutifully recorded it in the morning and began looking at it, dissecting the Message into layers of meaning.

First, a PM. Well look at that.

Second, successes bring joy to the mengir and all sisters. Everything clear here.

Third, 'Umi and I.' This was really something. Not 'I and the Most high Vaalu-Umalla,' and Umalla is an important one. You don't talk to acolytes like this, you talk like this to sisters after Acceptance. Right, and here Amaya also hadn't deceived: yes indeed, they'll accept her like a dear one. Mauna couldn't restrain herself and cracked her knuckles with satisfac-

tion. Suicide—cancelled; parents' pride—infinite; her acolyte vow—completely fulfilled.

Fourth, 'prepare the residence.' Most expected and most correct: 'Inform Amaya about our arrival.' Also a good phrasing: 'Prepare for our visit.' It was known that Nel didn't like Amaya—didn't need great intelligence here. Few loved Amaya—in this Amaya was right; but among these 'few' there were still lionesses near her. One definitely existed.

Sitting longer over this fourth point, Mauna saw roughly this: Amaya leaves for Helsia and gets stuck there, for a long time. Mauna remains here, at the residence, for a long time. It felt that soon—Marna, Emperor, Acceptance. This is very good: Amaya would remove herself to Helsia, to Message for the Legate, it would be harder for her there but safer than here, they wouldn't bother her in Helsia, far and inconvenient, she'd do needed service and everyone would be satisfied; the mentors and all others, everyone around would calm down, since reliable Mauna would be nearby, not incomprehensible Amaya.

Certainly, with all this she came to her mentor, and they sat on the veranda on a rainy morning, and Mauna was pleased that their paths of thought immediately coincided:

"Cold restraint," Amaya began first, and her usual morning drowsiness fell away, "that's how we'll do everything. I'll sit properly on my rear. And you, on yours, too. They'll arrive. There'll be lunch or pre-dinner. Neli, she's simpler, if you think about it, if not for all this nonsense, we might even get along," Amaya gestured around at all the nonsense, probably meaning everything in general. "Umalla—she's ceremonious, can't stand bright personalities, you know this, but I'll warn you anyway. Keep your distance, and be as proper as... as you can be, don't mess this up."

"I will be totally alright."

"Now-now, overconfidence chewed foxes better than you. Further, this thing..." she smoked with pleasure. "Damn, this fine-cut tobacco, it's so damn good. Need to buy a bucket of it. You start thinking like five cheats at a table. Further. Nel will take you aside, or both of them, that's almost certain. They'll congratulate you, say you'll soon go to Marna. You learned nothing from me. We tried joint Messaging once, and it was terrible: I got sick, you were spitting. You asked me for advice, I grunted and postponed everything. You lacked fetishes and portraits."

Exactly what I wrote in the letter, Mauna rejoiced. *Ah, Amaya. You can, if you want.*

"The Family. The Family might give us away. We spent a lot of time together."

"I rode your ears with all sorts of stupid stories. Which I did, if you think about it," Amaya spread her hands. "You bore it steadfastly. You didn't like me, I liked you even less. You read a lot, sat in aumlan a lot, and just took and really strained yourself, and really intended, and really remembered Vaal, and really started Messaging. 'I believe in myself!' said the Khustrian... well, you know the rest."

"Yes."

"I'm not sure they'll leave you here. I think Nel will take you back with her first. I don't think they'll make you a Legate Messenger, you're far too sophisticated. You need to weave schemes and intrigues, amuse yourself with politics."

"Also I won't call you mentor," Mauna determined coldly and clearly. "I'll address you with a pre-address. 'Reverend' will do just fine."

"Exactly. Ugh, I don't like you either, Meownisha. You're an arrogant nasty thing, a bitch."

Mauna couldn't think of anything in response. She liked that Amaya understood everything. That she didn't take offense, none of such foolishness. Mauna liked that she could freely and clearly hide and protect Amaya, while Amaya was fully on board, fully agreeing.

"All business with lovers, or any such topics—you know nothing. Leave it all to me, I'll play the fool, that's easy as spitting for me."

"Very well."

"Yes, and say that I smoke disgustingly much," Amaya exhaled smoke, "it just sits in your nose, and I stink to you. Also I like to puke, you caught me and nearly fainted. Say that not in front of me, of course, but when they take you away."

"They don't need that."

"As you like to say: don't talk! I told you, say everything if it comes up."

"Good," Mauna agreed, taking everything into her toolset, just in case.

"I think they'll take you right away. Or tell you to leave soon, which you'll do. Honestly, they don't give a damn about me anymore, they've lost interest, now you're the tasty cake. So take care of yourself, I really mean this," Amaya insisted.

Some servants came, and Amaya was very interested in what would be for pre-dinner or dinner today, and the question caused difficulty, resulting in running back and forth, during which Mauna only tried to find some breach in their intentions, but the breaches—even if there were any—turned out small. Everything would work out well, if only no one did anything stupid.

"They'll only be consoled," Amaya continued, though they'd even managed to almost finish with the food, "that there's someone to Message for the manes in Helsia, and that you've blossomed here in the Craft. You'll now be a very fashionable touch to the portrait."

"Nel's?" Mauna turned the spoon in her hand, and mesmerine tea dripped onto her plasis. Annoying.

"Uh-huh. Not even a touch. But like... a very cool Marna plasis."

"Amaya. Will you tell what was in that letter?"

"What letter?" Amaya loved playing the fool, but always overacted. "The one you arrived with at first? Nothing important. They wanted to make you a Pre-Flop. Screw them."

They were quiet. Amaya sat, then suddenly livened up:

"Right, now sit up straight. This..." she took a water jug and placed it on the table opposite Mauna. "This will be Umalla. This," she took a

chicken leg and placed it left of the jug, "will be Nel. I'll be in the center, mistress of the residence, and all that. You..."

Something wasn't adding up for her, and Amaya frowned.

"No, fuck that," she waved her pipe, ash scattering. "Sit near Nel, on the left. Umalla, Nel, you. I'm opposite. We don't seat anyone in the center."

"Seat Umalla there," Mauna advised.

"Is that allowed? Residence mistresses sit in the center."

"Not only. Also—very important guests," Mauna said confidently. As a patrician, she certainly knew about seating arrangements. At home in Andaria, her mother dealt with this scrupulously, to the point of mental derangement.

"Excellent."

They changed seats; the chicken leg and jug took their places of honor.

"Meownya," Amaya squeaked, waving the chicken leg as lionesses usually do when embodying other lionesses during gossip. "I'm so glad Vaal awakened the powers of the Craft in you!"

The chicken leg stared at Mauna.

"Mentor, my only merit is that I followed the instructions of the Amazing one, and Brilliant Vaalu-Myanfar and Vaalu-Vanaramsaya. Nothing else could have led me there." Mauna clearly pronounced 'nothing' and 'else.'

Now the leg turned to the pitcher:

"I knew it would be so. Vaal shall guide, Vaal won't fail. It couldn't be otherwise." Amaya grimaced.

"Sisters, how did you spend your time together?" the pitcher rumbled. Amaya coughed and even had to spit.

Leaning back in her chair, Amaya spoke in her normal voice:

"Pretty well. Mauna is diligence itself," detached tone. "And such enthusiasm for *regulation*—I don't envy the negligent in her Family."

"The Family's neck must be held with all fingers," the pitcher rumbled again.

"Mauna, just don't tell me you crossed *ordination* boundaries at Huntress Moon," the chicken leg squealed joyfully. "I read such things, I know you."

"I tried to help Reverend Vaalu-Amaya where necessary," Mauna pressed back her ears, looking at the leg. "Let's consider, mentor, that the Family is new and requires proper attention." Now she emphasized 'proper.'

"Yes, that's right, she tried very hard," Amaya crossed her arms, setting aside the chicken leg. Very hard. She tried.

"What other inconveniences did Mauna cause you, sister?" the leg was in ecstasy, pointing at Amaya. "I must know everything."

"Really, Neli, we shouldn't embarrass the acolyte, especially after such successes," the pitcher knocked on the table.

Mauna stared at Amaya. She clenched her palms into her fists.

"No-no-no, we shouldn't indulge our acolytes on the threshold of Acceptance," the leg delighted.

Oh no, not this. You're wearing tentush, distance. Fingers dug claws into her own palms.

"I find it unusual," Amaya spoke capriciously, "how much attention Mauna pays to riding. Bash isn't very safe, there's all sorts of scoundrels here. And she's also zealous in aumlan—I don't even have anyone to pre-dine with, what is this," fake laughter, but well-polished fake laughter. "And yes, finally, she should concern herself with her own sister-portraits, not complain about their absence in other residences. Since such successes have emerged," Amaya drew out 'suuuch succeesses,' resentment could be felt. "And the threshold of Acceptance."

"That's a valid, valid observation," the leg noted tragically.

"Will you come with us or leave slightly later?" the pitcher demanded. "We should leave part of your bodyguard, Neli, and go with mine."

She needed to step on her own paw—that should help. It didn't. She had to use the oldest trick in the book: something flew into her eye, despite no wind and the rain.

Amaya glanced at Mauna.

"Mauna, tsa, dozed off or what? So when are you going?"

This was probably how it all had to be, how one had to live, because there was no alternative: teeth clenched, driving her will toward something... toward something... And while Mauna was deciding where to drive it, her paws raised her up and carried her forward, her hands enfolded Amaya, drawing her ear and cheek against her chest, palm tender against chin and neck. She kissed her nose, then her left brow, her right, and elsewhere too.

"Mentor Amaya. Mentor. Amaya."

"You ruined everything, Munish," Amaya melted. "The huntresses have lost."

The Chapter in Which One Lioness Nearly Cried

The mentors arrived on the thirteenth evening, remarkably traveling light, despite Nel's known habit of hauling literally all her stuff wherever she went. They came irritated, grumbling about road delays; but they gave Mauna warm embraces, chatted pleasantly with her, then retired. Amaya naturally greeted them too, though Mauna observed no conversation between Umalla or Nel and her—at least none she noticed; yet failing to notice didn't mean nothing occurred. Both retired without Messaging, taking rest; they hadn't 'deployed,' as Messengers term it, made no arrangements to suit their preferences—indicating swift departure, possibly tomorrow.

There'll be breakfast-midday-lunch, then everything after it, then straight away, Mauna determined. Everything simple—they came to tell Mauna that Acceptance was soon, or even announce immediately when it would happen. And by everything it was clear they'd hardly take her with them. Everything precise, clear and straightforward.

Overall, this elevated Mauna's spirits.

Breakfast seating unfolded nearly as Mauna predicted, without surprises: herself beside Nel, Umalla center, Amaya isolated opposite. Nearly, because Mauna discovered herself flanked: Nel right, Umalla left; achieved through Nel's gentle "shall we rearrange?" accompanied by light shoulder-guiding.

Mauna relaxed and found herself enjoying it all. At last, certainty: she had embarked upon the Inner Empire's vessel, departing toward a thrilling future.

"These Listigian roads. You'll go mad before you arrive," Umalla complained phlegmatically.

"Oh well," said Nel, eating heartily, "it can be worse."

"I have a client, Road Administration. Says Listigia has very odd earth. Clay soil, you need to drive some kind of piles. And for some reason convicts die a lot here—marsh fever."

"I hate when clients launch into all their stuff. Once they buzzed my ears off about how complicated everything is in the Treasury."

"What was so complex there, mentor?" Mauna inquired.

"Whatever, I didn't understand. The more garbage in your head, the worse for mnemonics."

"I agree," Mauna concurred. She would agree with everything.

"You're still young, you still have little. Later there'll be more, just keep clearing it out. You, Umi, how do you clear garbage?"

"A Messenger can command herself anything," Umalla answered coldly, vaguely, tapping fingers on the table. She'd lift them, relax. Tap. And tap again.

Until now she'd gazed solely at Mauna and Nel, or downward. But that 'solely' ended:

"What do you think, Amaya? How do you manage all the excess?"

"I don't know. Should I? Nothing troubles me, no one troubles me."

"Radiant Vaalu-Amaya inhales much tobacco. She shared that this helps. It's her secret for coping," Mauna reported with a certain humor.

"No, no. These are... provisional solutions," Umalla dismissed such methods, though mildly, casually.

"I hope you haven't picked up bad habits," Nel wagged her finger and looked at Amaya, then patted Mauna's palm. Scrutinizing an egg on her fork, she added: "Well, Umi, everything in this life is temporary."

She is interesting, Vaalu-Nel. She too comes from patrician stock like Mauna, Marna nobility. Something northern: wide-set, lynx-like eyes. Her manners are impeccable, but only when she wants them to be; usually she relaxes quickly in appropriate company, and her simplicity won over many.

"Not everything. Were all things transient, we wouldn't occupy these seats," Umalla scratched her cheek while gazing through the window. "Mauna, your view: what endures?" she inquired, eyes still directed outward.

Umalla speaks slowly. Somehow once someone had let slip about birth defects, and how a Mistress of Life had nearly strangled her at her father's demand. The Mistress refused at the last moment and convinced the father that his daughter would grow up if not properly, then at least somehow. She isn't highborn. In her youth she had been breathtakingly beautiful, death to all males; delicate chin, broad muzzle; remarkably dark fur.

"Hegemonikon. Vaal. Imperium. Tiamat," Mauna replied with perfect composure, utterly certain.

"That's why I love when a Messenger is from patricians, from old blood," Umalla scratched her delicate, legendary chin. "There's always something... right about it," she looked at everyone, once more tapping with finger-claws. Tap.

"All sisters are patricians, one way or another. The Codex," the conversation didn't prevent Nel from eating heartily. Mauna calculated she'd consumed six eggs already. Nel loves them dearly.

"Exactly. One way or another," Umalla sighed. "Well then... Sisters," a look at Mauna (direct), at Amaya (head tilted), "how did you spend your time? How long was it... Two months?"

"One and a half. Six weeks," Nel answered instantly, taking the bell; reconsidering, she set it aside.

They were alone—everyone else had no-Entry.

"Therefore, Mauna. You begin. Vaalu-Amaya shall rectify any imprecision," Umalla commenced directing.

When the previous Messenger, before Umalla, went to Elevation^{63,64}, no one even questioned who would be the chief sister of Mastr-Fein mengir.

"Indeed, I'm most eager to listen," Nel grinned while observing Mauna; Nel habitually sat extremely close to others, particularly acolytes, Mauna felt her body against her thigh. "Your conduct, your praxis progress?" another palm pat, which Mauna wisely kept accessible, recognizing Nel's tactile nature—she'd touch you constantly, crowd close, intensely physical.

Mauna held a pause, looked at Nel, smiled at her very carefully (being Mauna), then looked at Umalla; this was fine, fine, it suited an acolyte to be a bit intimidated, serious, afraid of status gradients.

Don't, don't, don't, Mauna commanded herself. Futile effort. She glanced toward Amaya.

Several breaths in and out. Fortunate none could observe her tail. One could see that her pupils had dilated, but that was nothing, who knows why and for what reason they dilate. Unlike Mauna, who was already showing cracks (youth...), Amaya had an excellent facade—indifference, light fatigue, something like boredom. No obvious hostility, only underground. She was watching her, as if to say, go on, blurt out your thing, something roundly neutral, swim between the pebbles, Meown-isha, spare my wretched head.

Mauna remained unaware her pupils had expanded further.

Abruptly Amaya hissed—expertly, persuasively venomous. Then laughed with stark solitude, striking the table forcefully. Mauna startled; Nel naturally sensed this. Umalla scratched her nose, glanced at Nel, who traced her thumb claw across her remaining four.

Amaya pointed at Mauna:

"And we didn't sit idle. We even had some praxis. A shared joke even emerged between us. I'll tell it: I come to her once, she's reading, I ask how things are going, how the Craft is progressing, or not, she timidly says: 'Reverend, I'm experiencing difficulties, I worry before clients.' Or something like that..." Amaya waved her hand, squinting. "So I say: 'What's with you, just go ahead and accept them.' And she goes and confesses, says: 'Sometimes I fear I won't be able to do everything perfectly,' something like that, perfectly, and that's it. And I went shhhh, and hissed. I say: 'Well, clients won't hiss at you, what's to fear?' We laughed so much."

Umalla remained unmoved, Nel attended carefully with expansive grin: superb humor, wonderful sisterly support; then regarded Mauna with identical smile, such fascinating tales Vaalu-Amaya shares, simply listen, nodding while patting her hand again.

⁶³ *At sixty-six, an Ashai gets elevated right out of relevance. It's retirement dressed up as spiritual promotion. Naturally, this has made age forgery something of an Ashai art form. —S.*

⁶⁴ The Elevated, I must note, continue to serve the sisterhood in their most vital capacity: as mentors and keepers of wisdom. —Z.

"I kept doing that afterward, and look, things got moving," Amaya added and sipped wine-juice, swirling her goblet. She hiccupped, covering her mouth: "Oh, tsa."

"You accepted clients?" Nel inquired of Mauna carefully, recognizing that Amaya's delightful story has ended.

Mauna not only summoned her patrician coldness and invisible aristocratic disdain, she recalled how Amaya had trampled her tail (approaching from behind while Mauna sat floor-bound)—such trauma once occurred. Apparently accidental, though who truly knew Amaya's nature. The hissing incident absolutely transpired, undoubtedly authentic—no doubts here.

"Indeed, I accepted clients under the reverend's supervision, naturally. Vaalu-Amaya remains extremely occupied, seldom receiving them personally," brief hesitation, "therefore I deemed this suitable opportunity to assist. That hissing guidance, which I recall distinctly, enabled me to receive them without undue anxiety."

"And how did everything go?" Nel looked only at Mauna, as did Umalla.

"I think well. I did this three times," Mauna looked into the eyes of close Nel. "The first time—I'm obliged to tell my mentor about this occasion—I got entangled with a local business lion. Messages from him regularly go to Dream-walking Vaalu-Taria."

"Why?" Umalla asked.

"Insight," Mauna told the truth.

This found understanding from both Nel and—it seemed—Umalla too.

"What's his name?" the chief sister of the mengir asked.

"Sire Satarin, with the local nickname 'Stump.' His business is questionable, but..." Mauna became embarrassed.

"Hmm... Isn't that..." Umalla squinted, trying to remember something.

"Very good, Mauna," Nel immediately commented. "Insight is insight. We must catch insights. So, what else?"

"Aumlan, mentor, everything as we used to do. I confess, I became even more addicted to riding..."

"Yes," Amaya interrupted, rudely. "I find it unusual how much attention Mauna pays to riding. Bash isn't very safe, there's all sorts of scoundrels here. And she's also zealous in aumlan—I don't even have anyone to pre-dine with, what is this," Amaya's laughter. "And, finally, she should concern herself with her own sister-portraits, not complain about their absence in other residences," she pointed at Mauna. "Since such successes have begun."

"Forgive me, Reverend. I felt that I should..." Mauna closed her eyes, tension distorted her features. "Here at Huntress Moon, the residence itself is good, intention went well, very well. As mentor Nel taught, so I entered, and somehow immediately... it just happened. It was like that. When I took the entanglement with sire Satarin, this insight, everything started from there. Vaal guided. His urgent Message... rather, the judge's

Message he came with... this Message didn't properly fit into Reverend Vaalu-Amaya's Graph, he would have waited long, and I took... and stamped it myself..." Mauna looked guiltily at Nel, at Umalla, but didn't look at Amaya.

"Yes, that was wrong," Amaya nodded.

"Indeed, Mauna, you shouldn't do that," Nel looked radiantly at her, only at her.

"And that same night I was able to establish Sister-bond with excellent Vaalu-Taria. And after that the dam," Mauna performed the gesture of respect, *anlil-gastau*, pressed ears, "was destroyed. Our mengir, Tar-Sil mengir were found, and... Vaal's Gifts are incomprehensible, let those honored by them have no doubts."

"Splendid, Mauna," Nel enfolded her. "Very good."

"What else?" Umalla asked quite amicably.

And what else, Mauna thought. Ah, here's what else.

"And I also discovered the Gift of empathy."

"How so?" Nel was genuinely surprised.

"I don't know. Vaal gave it very late. But... we're granted gifts when we're ready, isn't that right, mentor?"

Nel customarily grasped her muzzle for examination, her typical manner.

"Don't worry so much. You're all agitated... There, there. All closed up, easy now."

"How can I not worry, mentor," serious Mauna as always.

"Umi, come look, you examine better, and you have empathy too."

"Not my strongest side, never was. Alright, come here, give me..."

Umalla's turn came to look into Mauna's eyes, tilting her head this way and that.

"Is there a candle? Come on, give it."

One was found—Nel gave it. Umalla also took her mirror, and thus, with its help and the candle, looked into Mauna's eyes. Amaya with a capricious look took up her favorite, baklava, and observed everything, setting aside her hand with this same baklava, placing her palm under her elbow.

"Wow. Well Nel, she had empathy before," Umalla doubted the whole story.

"Impossible!" Nel displayed annoyance. "For sure not."

"You say so?... Well, now she does. Quite substantial."

Umalla left Mauna alone.

"Such news!" Nel rejoiced once more. A day of pleasant surprises. She smoothed Mauna along the neck, shoulders, touched her nose. "My disciple."

Everyone calmed down, Mauna rubbed her palms.

"What else should I bring in response... Nothing more to say, honestly. I hope I wasn't a burden, Radiant Vaalu-Amaya?"

While chewing, she regarded Mauna. Took another baklava bite.

"No," she shrugged, looked away.

Ta-tap—that was Umalla tapping. She indicated the bell to Nel, since it stood beside her.

"Ring it, I need to wash my hands."

That's it, servants came, bustle, Amaya announced she needed to leave, which she did. And right after that Umalla suggested going outside, because why sit indoors.

"Show us around Huntress Moon," Nel requested-demanded, running her hand along Mauna's back.

Mauna conducted the tour. Demonstrated: my shooting location, small garden here. Bodyguards attempted following; Umalla gestured dismissal. She remained silent while Nel inquired about minor details, discussing bushes—her passion for gardens, plants, flowers. They circled the residence, returning to Mauna's shooting area beside her two targets, which she ordered made. Nel also examined these, circling them, then positioned herself behind one, hands placed upon it. Umalla leaned against a tree, stretching her shoulder, yawning, vigorously scratching her nape. Without preamble:

"Mauna, your Acceptance will be in a month."

"Infinitely grateful for this news from the sisterhood," Mauna bowed slightly, pressing her ears. "Didn't dare dream it would be so soon. My capacity for messaging and reception isn't quite sufficient yet..."

"Everything's learnable, will go quickly. You love to be modest. Tell us how it was for you here," Nel rested her chin on her hands.

"Tell us about her," Umalla clarified all that was needed.

"Much has already been heard. Reverend Vaalu-Amaya abuses tobacco..."

"Amaya, Amaya. Just say it like that, you'll soon be a Messenger," Nel immediately corrected.

"Amaya, in my opinion, doesn't pay proper attention to Family regulation. She certainly tried to give me several pieces of advice, and some proved even good," Mauna said, and Nel smirked while Umalla chuckled silently. "I followed praxis myself, as mentor Vaalu-Nel taught me, and..."

"You taught me, Nel," another correction followed.

"Forgive me... As you taught, mentor Nel. May I keep 'mentor'?"

"Of course, Mauni," she squinted, and then looked at Umalla.

Nel kept touching the arrow driven into the target, curious as a lioness. She tried to pull it out, but the point was quite stuck.

"Once we tried joint Messaging, at the very beginning. It was her idea. The idea proved poor. Amaya fell ill for three days, and I... I'll express this colorfully... was spitting."

Nel laughed aloud, Umalla silently.

"Otherwise: I wasn't hindered, I hindered no one, and—I admit—I interfered with regulation and frequented the Medium."

"You love that, running around in the Medium," Nel observed.

"Did anyone visit her?" Umalla asked.

"Clients? Yes, but all three times I received clients, not her. This is strange, actually."

"No, someone else."

So, Mauna thought. Amaya said she would handle this herself. But I have no choice... They'll corner me.

"And someone else. Her lover—I discovered he's a Service."

"Correct," Umalla confirmed threateningly.

"But he visited only once. I had a small conversation with him, by chance."

"And what?" Nel inquired, still resting her muzzle atop the target, leaving the arrow alone.

"An individual unworthy of a Messenger, I didn't like him. But I suppose this isn't her only problem," Mauna tried to steer away from this topic.

"Oh no, Mauni. Not the only one," Nel readily agreed.

"Her inconsistency and stupidity, poor rapport with sisters, anomie in sisterhood affairs, and toward the sisters themselves," Umalla enumerated. "Deadly negligence with her former Family. And consistent self-destruction. Her conduct is extraordinarily inappropriate in the Inner Empire."

They fell silent. Mauna didn't like the conversation's turn. Their secret was buried and hidden, that was clear, evidence burned. But here... here something was all going somewhere... transferring somewhere directly to her, to Amaya; and how to bury her, where to hide her?

"By the way, Nel, why didn't you tell me about the Family's murder?" another fork from Mauna, quite logical. She was already, practically, a sister? Then give answers like to a sister.

"You should have arrived clean, looked at everything with clean eyes. I didn't want to spoil this trial for you even more. I thought long about whether this was the right move... I think now it was wrong," experienced Nel disarmed Mauna.

"She's a big problem, Mauna. All might prove acceptable, but with this Service agent of hers—she long ago and completely crossed all boundaries," Umalla crossed her arms.

"And what about him?" Mauna exhaled, also crossing her arms.

"She leaks like a sieve. The quiet extracts everything he wants from her. She blabs many things to him, contrary to her vow, sisterhood, and even common sense. This has already caused us many troubles, Mauna. And one really serious problem."

Well, let's put up a huge target, the obvious solution.

"Then we need to resolve his question. Let's rid her of him," Mauna said harshly, maliciously.

"He's not the disease. He's its symptom. It's not about him," Nel noted melancholically.

"Exactly. The question needs to be resolved with Amaya herself," Umalla, much more direct, went straight through.

"In that case..." Mauna thought, walked two steps. "We'll remove her from Huntress Moon, send her on long rest. This is contrary to our practices, her Craft will suffer, but..."

"That will provide nothing," a gesture of negation from Umalla.

"There are no former Messengers, Mauna. One can become a former Ashai. Messenger—never, and you know this," Nel said.

"But you started correctly. She must be removed."

Mauna looked at Umalla, then at Nel. She stroked her insignia.

"Is this what I think?"

"Yes," Umalla said immediately.

Amaya! lightning in Mauna's metanoia.

"Only a sister of the Inner Empire can deal with another sister. Only thus, Mauna," Nel spoke, and pointed at her.

They didn't continue, they observed Mauna. This was strange: she had worried much more there, at the table, but managed to overcome herself, everything played well; now she wasn't even worried, because there was no point in worrying here, there was no sense here, here one needed to decide. Two paths: take this on; refuse. Nothing else was given. Refuse: Amaya will be killed anyway, they'll surely try, even themselves and right today, and she, Mauna, will have no control over this. Agree: one can wriggle out, buy time, think of something, there is control.

"Come to me," finally, Umalla beckoned her with a gesture.

She approached, and Umalla with a practiced movement pressed a small vial into her hand, from her belt pouch. Right into her palm. Mauna hid everything behind her plasis, without looking.

Having done the deed, Umalla stepped away, turning her back to everyone, and looked south and upward.

"I must ask... I must clarify several things for myself."

"Your doubt, your fear—they're natural. Don't think we do this easily," Nel sighed, looking at the residence.

"Do we have... sanction... from the sisterhood for this?"

"The High Mother⁶⁵ knows. Vaalu-Vesta. I suppose that's sufficient for you. But this is only between us," Nel's muzzle was again on the target, head tilted, her lynx eyes. One could draw a good portrait from her now.

"Only," Umalla confirmed without turning around.

"What has she done?"

"Much, thanks to her quiet. Nel will tell you later what happened to Ketira because of this," now Umalla began circling Mauna, examining her.

"Above all, proceed carefully, await the proper moment, act alone. Exclusively. Alone," Nel counseled.

"Don't get caught. Did you hide it well?" the chief sister examined her.

Mauna tapped her plasis, but Umalla didn't trust and looked behind her collar.

"Nel, look," she became interested, "pockets inside the plasis. Not bad, huh? Convenient. Must tell my tailors."

"You don't have pockets inside your plasii?" Nel asked with a chuckle.

⁶⁵ *High Mother—supreme Ashai-Keetrah. The ultimate authority. One position, one li-oness. In theory. Reality proves complex. Evil tongues say the position of High Mother was invented by the Empire. Just sayin'!* —S.

"No."

Something must be done. Something glacial, revolting, Mauna attempted self-preservation. She mustn't worry, weep, collapse, weaken, fret, attempt thorough analysis and arrange all reasons into comforting piles—utterly pointless. A brilliant notion struck: consume the poison immediately herself, without excess discussion. Absolutely elegant gesture, perfect. She reached behind her plasis but terror seized her. Profound terror. One matter: contemplating it, imagining possibilities—anything conceivable; another: extending her hand, actually locating the vial. She abandoned this, retrieving her mirror: let's be a bitch if unable to remain Ashai of noble Andarian lineage, Vaal-Suung of ancient blood, and observe within.

"This won't raise questions from the Chamber, Empire?" Mauna asked, looking at whisker traces in the mirror.

"All questions, if they even arise in someone, will very quickly disappear. But they won't arise," Nel looked at her approvingly, with relief, with pride.

"This shatters my heart," lifting her head, Mauna meticulously examined her under-eye distance markings.

Nel looked at her hazily and infinitely touchingly, just as a mother looks at a daughter getting married. It seemed she would cry now.

"Mauna, you'll die broken-hearted, I promise it. Like all of us," Umalla concluded definitively.

Lunar World

Mauna slept wretchedly that night. The Craft proved impossible.

She deferred everything until morning. The mentors postponed nothing, departing instantly after concluding their affairs. Exhausted, foul-tempered, Mauna rode out with her customary quartet: Tavu, Hagal, Tainaz, Tai. She carried the vial, constantly verifying its presence. Tap her shirt—present. Moments later—again.

With each lyen of distance it didn't become easier and clearer, only worse. She felt nauseous, her head ached, unclear pains appeared in her right side, unknown before. *Should have poisoned myself there, in front of them*, she thought. She was angry at them. She was angry at Amaya: after all, no one gets up in the morning and decides: 'I think I'll poison my sister today'; it's terrible, but Nel and Umalla had valid reasons; Mauna knew that Messengers don't delegate punishment and retribution over their own, it's contrary to unwritten laws. The High Mother herself knows everything, my Vaal...

Eventually Mauna grew utterly weary of everything, including herself, succumbing to typical lioness affliction—hysteria. Not ordinary hysteria—Ashai-Keetrah cannot indulge common female hysterics, particularly her kind.

"Halt," she commanded in the field.

This interrupted Tainaz's semi-mystical story about how he once got lost in the forest, which no one took seriously, and he was getting irritated.

"Down," she dropped.

They dismounted.

"Tai, come here."

No problem, he approached.

"Draw your sword."

He didn't ask 'why?' but drew it. Vaal, how simple everything is with males.

The female, lunar, wet, stuffy world suffocated her; the feminine principle wasn't balanced by a male. Mauna desperately needed the presence of a male, any; he should go and invade into her life, and perform a beastly devastation there, and also light the sun in her lunar Inner Empire. No, lies! Not any. This kind: who'd rip apart everything, her included, shred the whole mess with all her nonsense.

"Now I command: cut off my head."

"What?" he grinned, looked at the others. Tavu scratched his mane, Hagal spread his hands. Tainaz did nothing: held two horses. "Excellent one, how's that?"

"What happened, Excellent one?" Tavu asked a good question.

"Cut and that's it! Do it."

Tai looked down, tossed the sword in his hand, and came closer.

"Head might prove useful to Mistress yet," he squinted, with that irony, as if he'd figured everything out again, the bastard. "Cut it off, Mistress reconsiders—can't bolt it back on."

"Stop calling me Mistress! Amaya is your Mistress! And I'm deadly danger to her, I must kill her. Clear? Clear. Defend her. Invoke your Sworn-Bond."

Mauna felt instantly light, sweet, her head stopped hurting at once. You take—and shift everything onto the male. He thinks, he decides, while you get pure bliss of floating downstream. Kills? Guilty bastard. Doesn't? Guilty bastard.

They were silent.

"Amaya isn't our Mistress. She didn't take Sworn-Bond from us," Tavu said.

Hagal nodded. Tai squinted and spun his sword.

"It's been two months already. Why?" Mauna was very puzzled.

"Good question. All of us here," Tai indicated the other males with his sword, "serve Amaya only under Sworn-Bonds from our former Mistresses."

Sworn-Bond is given to one Messenger, but its power extends to all Messengers. But first of all—the Mistress; whoever swore the bond is the Mistress. Transferred to another Messenger for long? New Sworn-Bond, as quickly as possible; but apparently, here with Amaya everything's wrong too.

"The rest?"

"Entire Family likewise. All—under old Sworn-Bonds."

"My Vaal," was all Mauna said. And then she sat right on the road, just like that, letting her tail fall between her legs, firmly gripping the whip.

"Right, Mistress, let's go sit by the roadside," Tai moved her to the grass, almost limp. They threw a large coil of thick rope under her tail; Mauna didn't resist.

The bodyguard gathered around her in a crouch, except Tainaz—someone had to watch the horses after all.

"Yesterday they ordered her removal?" Tai asked quietly.

"Yes," Mauna agreed heavily.

"Well, that's it," he said very simply, making an interesting fist movement, as if striking an invisible lioness. "Messengers know what they're doing. She screwed over her old Family, and she'll screw this one if nothing changes. She won't be there, and..." Tai didn't finish, but pointed at Mauna. "And her place will be taken by one who understands what's what. Transfer of position."

"How do you know all this?"

"It's all clear as two claws here."

They gave Mauna a drink from the flask.

"I won't do this. Tai, better kill me," she whined, complained.

"Mind, Mistress, bad business is simple business," Tai clicked his tongue, "but we must think about the Family too. Fine, order is order, I chop off the head, place it right here, right on the road. Then we arrive at Huntress Moon, they ask us: 'Where is Excellent Vaalu-Mauna?'. And we answer: 'Oh we took off her head, what's the big deal, happens to everyone, Mistress had a bad day!'"

Mauna laughed at the absurdity of it all.

"Makes no difference to me, but Tavu's wife—belly this size again. Fatherless cubs, trouble and sorrow."

"Congratulations." Mauna emerged from her hand-shelter, looked at the world.

"Thank you. Hope she gives birth soon. She's become so spiteful, can't stand it anymore."

"The cubs will be calm then. Let's go. Wait. Sheh-sheh. All sheh-sheh. None of this happened. You saw nothing, heard nothing. Forget it," she pointed at them with her whip.

"Of course, Mistress," they all answered.

She stopped correcting them—pointless.

Ah, wonderful. Now to everything was also added great shame, the disgrace of terrible weakness and short-sightedness, and absolutely murderous knowledge among four heads of Amaya's Family (her Family? whose Family? Oh, Vaal...). At least her head stopped hurting, frightened that it might really be cut off.

"Speak of this to no one." Another pointless warning.

"About what?" Tai asked innocently.

They returned, and here—miracle!—Mauna noticed that Amaya was walking alone in the garden, around the residence. She rode up to her.

"Vaal in the morning, Amaya. What are you doing here?"

"Um, well what, we walk at this time. You left, and I decided myself, won't betray tradition. Traditions must be observed, all this stuff."

"That's good... That's good..." Mauna incanted to herself.

She didn't see how the males had clustered together in a huddle.

"I, manes, am blown away by her," Tai, evil and cheerful muzzle. "What a schemer. Softened us up, warmed us for events, so our fur wouldn't stand on end. Felt out how things were," he showed how one feels things out. "You have to know how to do that. Pure bitch craft, well-trained."

"The Mistress will be what's needed, twist everyone into a horn," Tavu fussed around the horse.

"Tavka, I was thinking: she should have ordered to cut off your nuts, would have been more fun," Hagal stood beside him, a head shorter.

"Not yours though, what's there to cut," Tavu waved him off.

"Motherfucker," Hagal hit him on the shoulder.

A groom appeared, they told him: "Go, take the mare from the Excellent one."

Which he silently went to do.

The horse nibbled withered grass, Mauna silently examined her, Amaya also silently walked nearby collecting those same withered grass blades, because there were no flowers anymore—wrong season.

"I know how to make wreaths. Want me to make you one? Dolls. All sorts of things."

"Amaya..." Mauna said tiredly, noticed the groom. "Come here, faster. Take her away. Cover her. Don't let her drink too much at once. Go."

"Why didn't the Radiant one stop there, I would have taken her right away."

Composure shattered again. Not hysteria this time—rage-blood.

"What did you say?"

"I..."

Mauna broadly slapped him across the muzzle with her riding crop. Amaya yelped and dropped the grass. Everything proved insufficient:

"Guard! Guard!" Mauna screamed like she was being stabbed.

Dropping everything, that same foursome ran to her. Two more quickly jumped out of the residence.

"Oh, Maun, what happened?" Amaya was frightened.

"Seize him! Kneel him!"

Groom didn't immediately understand, and they knocked his legs from behind: Hagal on one side, Mauna on the other, but she did it clumsily and unskillfully, hitting herself more.

"He needs to be whipped!"

A small moment, decision from Hagal: "Tainaz, go get the whip."

"Stop! Strip him, the riding crop will do!"

"Maun, Maun, enough, enough... That's enough, enough, enough..." Amaya caressed, shielded her. "What's wrong with you..."

Mauna drew her sirna and threatened the silent groom.

"Next time this will be in your throat! Off with him!" Amaya's uncertain hand held her wrist.

Well, they removed groom and mare alike—Mauna and Amaya remained.

"With me, you'll keep bad manners in the stable!" Mauna grumbled, forcing her sirna into its sheath—the blade resisted.

"Of course, you want to hit someone. But he's not the one you want to hit."

"Bastard. Doesn't keep Sworn-Bond and distance," Mauna grabbed her ears, pacing back and forth. She cooled down quickly.

"I haven't taken Sworn-Bond from them yet."

Mauna, after a pause, pretended to be surprised: "What? Why?"

"I don't know," Amaya, as always, Amaya. "I was thinking..."

"Let's go to the residence, we really need to talk."

"Let's go..." the mentor even said with relief.

They left. Not Amaya's chambers, but Mauna's. Fireplace, they sat near it on the floor, on furs, pillows gathered around. Mauna was given mesmerine tea, Amaya first refused but then took the cup from Mauna and stole her tea like that, chewing an empty pipe, legs stretched out;

Mauna, having removed her riding clothes and thrown them nearby and forbade servants to touch them, sat simply in her chemise, sitting straight, arms around her knees. The conversation was delayed, didn't begin: Mauna couldn't yet, Amaya didn't insist.

"Nel and Umalla told me to kill you," Mauna said clearly, distinctly, looking at the fire. Then at her. Then she shook her riding shirt, the vial fell out carelessly. She threw it to Amaya, who didn't catch it and clumsily began searching for it in the furs and pillows. "I'm supposed to poison you, then—Acceptance, in a month. I'll take your place. Vesta and the High Mother know about this."

Amaya's big eyes, confused look. She clutched the vial in her hands.

"This is bad, oh fuck, I should get smashed..."

"Stop," Mauna slapped her tail, though she wasn't going anywhere. "Here's how it will be. We won't gorge on baklava. We won't sniff arra, drink wine, soma, ramzana and smoke until we faint. We will think," she took the vial from her weak palms.

Then Mauna poured from the vial into the fireplace, burning herself; it hissed. Then threw the vial there too.

"I've already thought. This is terrible, Mauna!"

"This is terrible," the acolyte confirmed. "Agreed. Let's think further."

"What will happen to you?" Amaya completely sprawled out, rubbing her muzzle.

"What about me? They want to kill you, Amaya."

"Bitches, they dragged you into this! What will happen to you, how to save you?"

"Amaya, you need to be saved!" Mauna shook her.

"Me?" Amaya was very surprised. "Oh... Well what's to save about me. You didn't poison me."

"Grrr, Amaya!" Mauna got angry, showing her fangs.

Not frightened, Amaya sighed and looked at the fire.

"Listen, Amaya—honestly: why? For what?"

"I don't know anymore... There's reason enough. For everything. It's hard being a fool, Munish. In the end you'll always be sitting tear-stained and vomiting into a broken trough."

Suddenly Amaya half-rose, like listening to suspicious and frightening sounds, looked around. Mauna also pricked up her ears, moved them about, but nothing anywhere.

"I have thoughts, I know what to do, I'm already scared of myself," she looked around the room, but confidently, extraordinarily confident for her. "Listen, don't interrupt. Tomorrow you'll take Sworn-Bond from my Family. Right after that I'll leave for Helsia as quickly as possible, taking some heads from your Family, you'll stay here. In Helsia I have many old connections, good friends there. I'll disappear in Helsia without explaining, and part of the Family will return from there to you. Because what else will remain for them."

Mauna listened. Overall, this didn't sound bad. Something like this she had seen, vaguely, in her reasoning—what else could Amaya do but

disappear; this would probably calm everyone down; she understood that a difficult-to-resolve difficulty would hang over them: one cannot leave being a Messenger. But Amaya somehow fell out of all this. No one could, she—Mauna—couldn't (especially), she wouldn't even think of such a thing. But Amaya... Amaya could. She is nice...

Some essential details required polishing:

"Sworn-Bond? Alright, Amaya, look: I, still an acolyte, will take it from your Family? In your presence? They'll have questions, and—possibly—not only them."

"Everything will be fine."

"It's quite possible they won't want to, or will doubt."

"Nope," Amaya cheerfully denied. "No."

"Tomorrow?"

"Tomorrow."

"Alright. I suppose..." Mauna thought. "So..."

"Everything will be fine. Trust me. Remember how you trusted me then, and everything worked out? Let me take your hand again and show you everything. You can even scratch it again. Lie down, relax."

"What will happen to you there, in Helsia?"

"Everything will be fine with me. I'll be a Helsian, I'll wear tail-free dresses," she winked at Mauna.

Mauna felt calm, she really sprawled out. Amaya seemed relaxed. It would be easier for her, all this burdens her, she wants to shed it. She was already at ease, it was visible. Amaya stroked her forearm, shoulder. Mauna knew one thing she really liked, she did it when no one was around and no one was watching—scratching her neck with claws; she was doing this to Amaya now; the continuation also suggested scratching lower, on the chest, but Mauna didn't dare.

"You'll say the Family rebelled against me, wanted to go to you..." Amaya squinted, purring. "You'll say you didn't manage to poison me, and I fled. And disappeared in Helsia, what a joke, a Messenger turned into a Helsian or a blacksmith's wife there, disgrace, everyone will simply refuse to deal with this further. Though what kind of wife am I. I won't give birth to anything and won't be able to cook soup there, or whatever wives do. Listen, do I look like a Helsian?"

"But Amaya, my Vaal, all this is lies, it's simply disgusting..."

"Now-now, now-now, don't be angry. Lies, truth, come on, really. Everything will be fine. The world is a terrible place, tails-what crowds behind the door, but if you spend time together, it helps keep the door closed."

"But..."

"You want to save me, or what?" Amaya kissed her nose. "If you don't hope for the best, then you have problems. Right or not? Right or not?" she rubbed her little nose.

"Yes. Mentor Amaya, I... I'm like this..."

"Now-now, enough, foxy. Claw-grip my palm—I'll show everything."

They intertwined their palms, and both got scared, their tails twitched—the vial in the fireplace cracked loudly.

The Chapter in Which Mauna Makes a Mistake

Well there you have it: in the morning the Family was announced that today there would be Sworn-Bond, and that was that.

Better late than never, and for this everyone gathered in the residence hall. For Sworn-Bond nothing special is required at all: you need a Messenger, you need the one who wants to enter into it. That's it. So: new steward, replacing sire Nermai—sire Taar; as it turned out—a very special type, a male of strong will, practical mind, without a single emotion (sire Nermai, despite promises, couldn't find anyone, viliuses are rare, but Mauna herself, instead of Amaya, approached the chief sister of Tar-Sil mengir for help, and she instantly sent this Taar); there is a Medium (one lioness Mizuri—most pleasant person, three males, Graph master Melim); an accountant, amusing and indecently shy young lion, whom the already-vanished sire Nermai had managed to find somewhere at the last moment; five of Amaya's servants, one of them can do everything with clothing, absolutely everything, she came to her from Vaalu-Taria; three more of Mauna's servants, they came simply to watch, because they were already sworn to Mauna; a pharmacy mistress, also a healer, who studied under some lioness of wisdom in Norramark, and she herself is Norramarsi—grim with an eye patch and knocked-out teeth (in youth she ended up in a camp that northerners attacked), and Mauna knew she made the best soma, though simple lionesses are not approved to make it, according to the Codex; a gardener; a groom and his assistant; four dhaar females, for all sorts of dirty work: washing floors, feeding pigs, slaughtering chickens.

Everyone's here, all gathered. Mauna in ceremonial plasis, all in proper distance, everything on her. One thing missing—Amaya herself isn't here. She said "I'll come right away" and vanished.

All stood waiting. Mauna sat waiting, surveying each person. Many met her gaze briefly before looking away. She traced her mirror's reverse. Uncomfortable silence prevailed.

How will she phrase this? came the thought. *Pledge to Mauna, not me? Her explanation?*

No point sitting idle.

"Regarding hesitation and forward motion. Often before a river we stop and think—to swim or not to swim, rushing about the bank," Mauna studied her mirror, "dampening paws, disrupting stone tranquility; wild beasts tremble before striking prey."

"Please continue, Fire-blessed one," steward Taar recognized the passage, pacing continuously.

"Tension grows, the serpent of thought bites its tail ever stronger, the water of will creates patterns of cracks in the dam of inaction," Mauna's

insignia was hidden by the high, dense collar of her shirt under the plasis, she strokes the fabric, looks out the window, "and at some moment we can no longer refuse our plans. Therefore bad thoughts and unworthy intentions must be strangled at their very birth, while worthy and good ones simply need not be hindered from growing. But the burden of life," she spun the mirror around its axis, this isn't very approved of, but what can you do, "of an ordinary soul, which isn't led by the faith of Vaal-Suungs and principles, is that it's difficult to distinguish bad from good. Therefore: know simple, true-faithful maxims—and things become sunny-clear and crystal-simple."

"You all know: Messengers possess the art of memory. This is an excerpt from the Canon, namely: 'On All That Is Above Us,'" Sire Taar commented, continuing to pace.

"Magnificent, Radiant one!" lone lioness Atrissa gushed. Young, sycophantic, yet acceptable by Mauna's measure—future Welcomer material. Sharp shushing followed—Khizaya's rebuke, leader of female servants.

Mauna stood, took a goblet, Shezi ran up and poured diluted wine-juice.

"While Excellent Vaalu-Amaya prepares for the leap of Sworn-Bond, and you languish behind the dam, I'll do something practical: let's check if everyone's here."

Dhaar Toya asked dhaar aunt Selestina—also Sele—in Mramri:

"Aunt Sele, what's about leaps?"

"Toya, what-what did I tell you? Be quiet, listen and do like everyone else, this is high-speech of Suungs."

So, let's count.

"Sire Taar," Mauna indicated him with her mirror: he—prudent, cautious, calculating. She moved on, through the Medium: "Sire Melim, Graph Master," Mauna already valued: simply the best, "Sire Markh. Sire Meiran. Sire Akhas. Hamanu Mizuri."

Next came the servants: "Hamanu Khizaya, hamanu Taira, maassi Atrissa, hamanu Merine,"—a lioness able to bring everything into supra-leonine order incredibly quickly, which for a servant is obviously good, and also, they say, has very strange habits, for example, spinning three times counter-sunwise before going to sleep—"Hamanu Kara,"—this Khustrian is constantly cold in Helsia—"Hamanu An-Weiss, pharmacy,"—this is An-Weissa, or simply Anweisa in common use, and Mauna learned that correctly it's An-Weiss, since in Norramark everything's different from everyone else. "Sire Meyros,"—this is the gardener, cozy and harmless. "Sire Sarron and Young-sire Tirras,"—this is the groom who yesterday received from Mauna across the muzzle and leg, and his assistant, who—we can see it on him—has already heard about the incident. "Sire Stan,"—this is the young accountant with tiny eyes and a whole heap of fears, obsessions, fetishes and odd inclinations. The servants spoke about him, that he was inclined to perversion, and clumsily approached them with completely moronic hints.

Next came the bodyguard: "Sire Uruz, sire Vannaren,"—Mauna knew that behind his tail sire Vannaren was called Vanka, but only behind his tail, this is a very proper male of good origin, exemplary to the point of nausea, this deputy of sire Uruz. "Sire Tavu, sire Hagal, sire Manaru, sire Tainaz, sire Tai,"—he smiled brilliantly, and Mauna simply couldn't restrain herself and smirked back—"Sire Kharg, sire Terion, sire Ar-Darraz, sire Sinai,"—he's missing a piece of tail, Mauna knows, which one must never bring up, which Mauna also knows—"Sire Marran-Rrizai, sire Akhmai, sire Arad, sire Talmar,"—this big male is almost as large as Tavu, and Mauna had heard that in the Legate he masterfully handled firrans—"Sire Narzimmmai,"—this one's rather old for bodyguard, in his fifth decade, all graying, but he managed all weapons and could even forge a sword if needed—"Sire Astar, sire Listig,"—a Listigian, and his parents just named him after the pride, not bothering much, apparently there was a lot to do—"Sire Tamalu,"—namesake of Nel's Graph Master—"Sire Almarr, sire Teir-Marnis,"—the strangest lion, from a ruined and disgraced patrician house, some terrible tragedy—"Sire... um...," Mauna spun her mnemonic gesture-engram, forbidding with her mirror to help—"Sire Sagvar,"—she didn't make a mistake—"Sire Detr, sire Siigr,"—from Suungkomnaasa, a very interesting northerner.

Remaining Mramri dhaars stood aside: "Selestina, Bastiana, Adalheida"—Mauna knew she'd butchered the pronunciation, proper Mramri words are beyond Suung capabilities anyway. Indicating Toya, aware of her full name, but... curse it... mnemonic gesture repeated futilely.

"Toya," Selestina helped Mauna, not wanting to burden Mauna with the full name. Eh, well, Toya will do.

"Toya," Mauna surrendered. "By the way, how old are you?"

"Six and ten. Ten-six."

"Sixteen," Selestina prompted again, carefully watching the young dhaar.

"Sixteen," Toya squinted.

"Did you take Sworn-Bond with the previous Mistress?" Mauna asked curiously, just like that, delaying time.

Where is Amaya, what's wrong with her?

"No-no," Toya got frightened.

"Oh, the only one for whom Sworn-Bond is the first time, then..." Mauna said.

"The whole Family is flattered by such precise attention," steward Taar wrapped up. "I very much hope that the Noble one will find it appropriate to share knowledge about herself?"

The request caught Mauna off guard; but, overall, it wasn't difficult.

"Vaalum—Mauna, of House Nakht-Serai, Andarian old blood," she paced in circles, arms crossed, resting her mirror on her forearm, "acolyte of Brilliant Vaalum—Vanaramsaya, Vaalum—Myanfar and Vaalum—Nel. My Acceptance will happen in a month..."

"Marvelous news," Taar's instant commentary, surveying all for greater enthusiasm—proper reactions required, no shyness; amusing result as everyone animated, scattered applause quickly suppressed.

Mauna thought: what else to tell them? Well, you can't tell them that she here, at Amaya's, became addicted to collecting small, sharp little things, any kind, which she especially fears after Passage, in the between-world; they're not really there, but she fears they'll appear. She also fears that such things will one day burst into the Hunting Grounds of her Inner Empire, traps for the huntress, and it will be bad; these little things she stored in her chambers, by the bed, and servants don't touch them (they know: don't know what kind of thing the Messenger has there—don't touch). You can't tell them that in the Hunting Grounds, if you look into the sea or other waters, you can see yourself, and on her you can see her insignia on her neck and near her tail, and they glow and for some reason spin. You can't say you hate squeaking sounds, like iron on glass. You can't say that in any room she first looks for exits. Also you can't say that she loves to wipe, clean, polish her sirna, and this is always a special ritual she invented herself, not prescribed by anything.

"Here, at Huntress Moon..." Mauna continued, but stopped, because Amaya entered.

Oops. The undesirable surplus effect: the entrance of one who's unpleasant to everyone; conversations and general relaxation, naturalness—vanished. In one hand she held a goblet, in the other—a covered cup with arra.

"What am I... ta-ta-ta..." she hummed to herself. "Pa-pa-pa... swam across..." she plopped into a chair. "Shall we begin, or what."

And indeed she began: sipped from the goblet, set it right on the floor, then opened the arra cup and inhaled from it. Mauna barely restrained herself from rubbing her nose, closing her eyes. This was such excess. If she sipped from a goblet of wine or something like that, and then—arra, there would be only one thing—Amaya would fall asleep right here. Well yes, the plan was for Mauna to take Sworn-Bond, but this wasn't expected at all. The thought was: Amaya would enter, calmly explain to everyone that Mauna needed to take Sworn-Bond, and she would leave for Helsia tomorrow, and there she'd have a new Family, some such lie.

"What were you doing while I struggled with foolishness?"

"We were checking if everyone's here, Radiant one," Mauna answered.

"Sit down, or something... And how, is everyone here?" Amaya had completely oily eyes, she looked at Mauna with her head tilted to the side. Mauna didn't follow the advice, continued standing.

"Yes."

"Mrrryam. If only it were always like this," Amaya nodded and inhaled more arra smoke, then threw back her head, closing her eyes. "...I crossed the river..." she continued her song.

Mauna thought that Nel and Umalla were right about something: Amaya had so much self-destruction, you could distribute it to everyone with a shovel. She even watched the fall with interest, and the whole Family—too. Arra enters quickly, now it will completely carry her away. She might ramble, might fall asleep immediately. Then Mauna looked at the Family, and all, immediately, as if conspiring—at her.

"Hmm," Taar didn't lose his composure. "What to do, Excellent Vaalu-Mauna?"

"Everyone stand by the wall," Mauna indicated with her mirror.

A clear, understandable order from authority above, and everyone did so.

"We can sit and wait until it gets better," she indicated Amaya with her mirror. And she moved her shoulders, as if trying to throw off an invisible cloak. "But it won't get better. Or you can bring Sworn-Bond to me," Mauna thought to say something more about reasons and circumstances, but decided not to.

Just take and bring it, if you understand what you want.

Such silence that Mauna heard blood in her ears, neck, temples. This silence would surely explode now, but Mauna didn't let it:

"Whoever wishes—move to the sunlight of the windows."

The first movement was made by Tai: he slapped his chest, spread his arms like dancing at weddings, and thus crossed to the other side, satisfied as the lowest crook. After him the dam disappeared, and everyone, some quickly, some slowly, found themselves by the windows. Only the dhaars remained, uncertain.

"Flawless one, may we-may we?"

"You may," Mauna invited. "I acknowledge dhaari, no prohibition."

Toya was grabbed by the hand just in case, and the dhaars hurriedly crossed over.

Now the matter of ritual, it's not complex. A couple of subtle signs from Taar to Melim. Melim stood beside Mauna; she drew her sirna; wasn't nervous. The bodyguard gathered aside; everything with them—a bit later, it's a separate thing; they rejoiced, rubbed palms, chuckled.

Taar went first, and Melim gave him a thin, very sharp little knife.

"I shall serve you, Mistress. Hear me," Taar knelt.

"We listen, Vaal sees, Suungs witness," Mauna, preparing her sirna at her palm.

"I, Taar of Khodnian-Sir, true Suung of Andaria pride, swear to be faithful in all things to Brilliant Vaalu-Mauna, best of the best daughters of Suungs, who serves as Ashai-Keetrah with the Gift of Messenger, and to all her sisters by Gift. I shall keep secrets. I shall preserve your life and carry out your will. I have entered this Sworn-Bond, and shall not leave until my blood cools."

"Your Sworn-Bond is heard by Vaal and me, Taar. I shall preserve your life and maintain true intentions. For the glory of Suungs, by Vaal's Will."

Mauna slashed her palm, Taar pricked his finger. He touched her cheek with blood, she touched his.

Things got going. Amaya slept, no one paid attention to her.

All the males passed through, except the bodyguard. All the Suung lionesses passed, kneeling and taking a slightly different Sworn-Bond—they didn't swear to preserve life, they swore to preserve peace. Melim monotonously helped, so no one would forget what and how to swear, and many forgot. Some couldn't manage to prick themselves properly right away, but it was fine. It came to the dhaar females. They put Toya forward first. She, surprisingly, remembered the entire Sworn-Bond by heart:

"I, Toamlia, dhaar of Mramri breed, swear to be faithful in all things to Brilliant Vaalu-Mauna, best of the best daughters of Suungs, who serves as Ashai-Keetrah with the Gift of Messenger, and to all her sisters by Gift. I shall keep secrets. I shall preserve your peace and carry out your will. I have entered this Sworn-Bond, and shall not leave until my blood cools."

Here Mauna made a mistake. She was required to say only this: 'Your Sworn-Bond is heard by Vaal and me, Toamlia.' That's all. But Mauna forgot.

"Your Sworn-Bond is heard by Vaal and me, Toamlia. I shall preserve your life and maintain true intentions. For the glory of Suungs, by Vaal's Will."

Melim shook his head minutely, 'no-no,' and didn't immediately give Toya the knife. No one swears to dhaars to preserve life and everything else; it's enough for them to be heard. But while he was shaking his head, Mauna had already touched her cheek with her blood, which also shouldn't have been done.

"Ahem, Mistress..."

Mauna realized her mistake, but it was too late:

"Vows cannot be reversed. If things were done that way, we wouldn't be here. Give her the knife."

"No way out: she'll marry, become a Suung," Uruz found a solution, the manes laughed.

"Tai, you're always looking for a wife, there you go," it began immediately, knowing Tai's conviction: having lionesses as wives is a stupid idea.

"I love you too, brother," he elbowed the advisor.

Toya reached up from her knees, ran along Mauna's cheek, attentively and thoroughly.

Three remaining dhaars, and that's all. Now the bodyguard's turn, and this is a bit different—others need to leave. Mauna pointed at the drunk-arra-sleeping Amaya:

"Family, help the Excellent one and put her to bed, she needs to rest from life's upheavals."

Things didn't go. Amaya weakly fought off attempts to lead her away, put her hand on the armrest, her elbow slipped, she fell through—she was completely out of it.

"Tavu, take the Excellent one on your arms, carry her away. Then come here," Mauna ordered.

Now things went, and Amaya was taken away like an element not used in the ritual. And they brought a new one—a goblet of wine. Mauna took it and sipped a little from it, holding the wine in her mouth, and she also looked in her mirror; she acquired a busy appearance.

Meanwhile sire Uruz once again reminded the cheerful males:

"So, no excesses. Tai, Arad, Siigr—this especially applies to you."

"Best job in the world," Tai stretched, cracking his fingers.

Everything begins decorously: a lion approaches, kneels, having slashed his hand with his dagger and drawn his sword: "I, so-and-so of such-and-such, true (accepted) Suung of such-and-such pride, swear to be faithful in all things to Brilliant Vaalu-Mauna, best of the best daughters of Suungs, who serves as Ashai-Keetrah with the Gift of Messenger, and to all her sisters by Gift. I shall keep secrets. My sword shall preserve your life and carry out your will. I have entered this Sworn-Bond, and shall not leave until my blood cools."

"Your Sworn-Bond is heard by Vaal and me, so-and-so. I shall preserve your life, command you against the enemy and maintain true intentions. For the glory of Suungs, by Vaal's Will."

One-two, they exchanged blood; Mauna can't wash this blood off, both her cheeks and cheekbones are crimson. And no one can—everyone will walk around like this until it dries and wears off. By the way, in the south this is very inconvenient, flies like this better than honey. And seems that would be all, but no—next comes the part more exciting for males.

Now the Messenger must be embraced and kissed. No, not just a friendly kiss or something weak like that, you must kiss like a lover or your first Game partner^{66,67,68,69}. In such cases elders always warn that nothing excessive should happen, everything should be reasonable, but anyone clever can open the Codex and joyfully understand that much can be done, and possible punishments for this are directly prohibited. You just can't disrobe her, beat or rape her. You can squeeze the Mistress, you can torment her, you can take her in your arms, you can throw her arms around your shoulders, you can try to get somewhere in there, though because of the plasis nothing will work out, you won't get through, good luck. Put hands on her tail, lick her neck, press her to yourself.

Everything was in the glory of Suungs: her jaw began to hurt after about the tenth male; both sides of her neck were licked, they like to sniff something there; some added touching kisses near the eyes, under them, some were very careful; some showed a pull toward ears, one of them bit, Mauna decided to forget who; her nose itched, and much else itched; she remembered how masterfully sire Siigr kissed her, it was even good; the insignia near her tail was, of course, properly kneaded; and one squeezed

⁶⁶ The Game—coming-of-age sexual education practice for adolescent Suungs. —Z.

⁶⁷ *For all that's sacred don't spoil that one. Have you even had a Game, Z.? —S.*

⁶⁸ Yes. With stalla of Seedna. —Z.

⁶⁹ *Whoa. What? —S.*

her waist so hard that Mauna thought she wouldn't endure and would snarl; one still managed with a very cunning maneuver to get into the space between her legs, though Mauna stood perfectly straight, thighs pressed together—took a finger, down along the hem of the plasis, then up, and there he was somewhere under her tail, and even through fabric everything could be felt. She again decided to forget who this was (no, it was still Tai, the bastard, scoundrel, villain). Poor Andarian lioness.

Having sworn themselves, the bodyguard carelessly left, leaving her to herself, as happens in such cases.

She looked in her mirror. She shouldn't have done that.

"Ooooh Vaa-al..." Mauna groaned. She had never looked so terrible, that was certain—in the reflection she was met by a lioness-catastrophe.

She hid the mirror, went to the window. Amaya. What is this? Instead of coming and solemnly telling the Family... Ah, what's there to say! Instead—she got high, got drunk, witnessed nothing, was carried away like a sack, my Vaal, what self-humiliation, no distance, Ashai honor—why and who needs this. How did she even become Ashai-Keetrah, who felt *hlamai*^{70,71} toward her, Vaal, how did she become a Messenger?

She doesn't care anymore, Mauna chuckled. She'll go to Helsia, disappear there. At least say goodbye to me properly, show sisterly feeling, since you'll soon be washing windows there, or floors, cooking soups, or whatever simple lionesses do...

"Ugh," she exhaled, looking in the mirror again.

⁷⁰ *It's like spiritual love-at-first-sight for potential acolytes. You see a lionessy and know she's meant to be Ashai. But it's risky—if you're wrong and she fails the Vaal's fire test (ignimara), she gets burned and you're in trouble. Sometimes you feel hlamai but can't act on it, and that eats at you forever. Yeah... Right. It eats me even now. —S.*

⁷¹ *Hlamai—a complex spiritual-emotional resonance that Ashai experience toward certain young females, typically between ages four and twelve. —Z.*

House and Sea

Without "beautiful morning" (and this was the next morning) and other pleasantries (how about that), Melim—precisely him—simply entered Mauna's chambers and sat on the first convenient spot, on a little stool that was actually for paws when sitting on a regular chair, or armchair, or sofa, or whatever you prefer to sit on. Mauna was found there too: she was bathing in the tub with Shezi's help, the bath often placed by the window so one could watch what was happening outside; Mauna loved bathing with Shezi because it was always very quiet: Mauna was accustomed to communicating with her through gestures, though she wasn't deaf, only mute. She had washed yesterday evening too, and again today, constantly complaining to herself that she 'felt dirty.' Sworn-Bond blood shouldn't really be washed off, but she had to—Mauna couldn't bear it.

There was no Craft last night. And not particularly necessary—no real Messages yesterday or today (soon there will be!), shooting hapless acolytes of Mastr-Fein and Tar-Sil mengirs to death with dummies was, frankly, getting tiresome. Lionessy-beating.

"The Mistress must look at this," he sat as one sits after hard work or battle.

"At what?" Mauna asked calmly, listening to him while rubbing her shoulder with white cloth in soapy foam; actually, she sorely missed the sponges that existed in Nel's residence, but Amaya didn't have any.

Instead of answering, he pulled out some envelope, turned it in his hands, and for some reason hid it again.

"Vaalü-Amaya is dead."

Mauna looked at Shezi: did you hear this, have my ears betrayed me? Shezi kneaded another white cloth in her hands and looked down, as if she were to blame for all of thi...

She stood up, naked, scattering spray.

"But why?!"

"Very much looks like she poisoned herself. Let the Mistress see personally," Melim slowly rubbed his mane.

"Shezi, go, there, Mshani, Renaya, give me. Give me everything."

The servant literally ran away. Mauna climbed out of the bath and stood just like that, all in foam, while water generously poured from her onto the floor, she flicked her tail and spray flew onto the dresser, while a cloud of foam very beautifully and slowly descended to the floor.

"I'll wait behind the door," he stood up.

"Wait, where are you going?" said Mauna, he sat down. "I... I need to ask you."

"Ask what, Mistress?"

She thought a little.

"I don't know," naked Mauna spread her hands.

Nodding to something of his own, he pulled out the envelope again and extended it to Mauna.

"She said to give this to the Mistress when she left. She spoke of going to Helsia soon. Today. Or tomorrow. But today wouldn't work out... We would need to pack..."

"I know! Exactly! Helsia! That's how it should be!" she reached for the envelope, but caught herself and began frantically wiping her palms on the half-dry cloth that Shezi had left in the bucket.

In female panic all three of her servants came running, having grabbed all the clothing and decorum their hands could reach; Renaya decided she needed to shield the Mistress from Melim, which she did. Mauna let herself be dried and dressed in a chemise, but then waved them away and approached the window. Where's the sirna here... There, on the floor—Mauna always keeps it nearby, this too is Nel's school, and it became her own habit. It looked like an ordinary Medium packet, sealing wax around the edges, at the center, with her stamp.

BURN WHEN YOU READ DON'T LEAVE TRACES BURN

Munisha,

we drew the sea, but only I will drown in it. You must live in the house. And also.

Don't break oaths. Don't break oaths. Dont break oaths.

dont br [REDACTED] oaths. Don't [REDACTED]

eternally yours amaya

"When did Amaya give this to you?" Mauna demanded of Melim, to occupy her metanoia with words, actions, commotion.

"Yesterday evening."

She immediately hid the letter in the envelope. Put on her plasis, concealed it inside.

"Let's go," she said, buckling her belt and gripping her sirna bare in her hand.

Incredibly confident, she went out; incredibly confident, she walked down the corridor; but not for long—the confidence began melting with each step, and ended at the door to Amaya's chambers; half the bodyguards had gathered there, as if there remained some sense in guarding something here and the reality of death could be reasonably resolved.

"Why did you bring her all this?" Uruz demanded of Manaru.

"She ordered it, commander. She says, bring it. I went, brought it. I was surprised. But I brought it."

"But why?" Uruz kept repeating the same stupid question.

Mauna arrived, and everyone fell silent: now there was someone who could determine what and how, because the Mistress—she can. Mauna grasped the door handle, closed her eyes, unable to open it.

"What will I see there?" she asked, with closed eyes.

Male Uruz, head of the bodyguards, military mind, took this his own way—needed to report the situation:

"Excellent Vaalu-Amaya lies on the bed, she is dead. In her hand—a bottle of poison. She somehow tied the bottle to her hand. She lies on the bed to the right, if looking from the entrance. Also..."

Mauna silenced him with a gesture, drew breath, and went in.

Everything turned out exactly so. Taira sat beside the bed close to Amaya's still form, every line of her body expressing the desire to reach out and touch, yet not daring. Sire Taar stood at respectful distance, studying the scene with thoughtful eyes. And Mauna noticed... a spear? Yes, a spear beside Amaya. A bow lay on the bed's far side. Anweisa stood nearby too, holding the poison bottle up to the light for critical examination with her single eye.

Uruz entered after Mauna and reported:

"She ordered the guard to bring bow and spear. Purpose unknown. We found no blood, no wounds."

Mauna came closer and sat on the bed. Anweisa indicated the bottle bound to Amaya's palm—not some little vial but an actual bottle, substantial in size.

"She dran' nough poison to kill an entire residence. This is bad, one should take 'nough, not everything. In the ehsana the're travel vials, why didn't she take one of thos'?" Anweisa pointed to herself, to her neck. "Then everythin' would be eas': sleep, then death. That's good poison," she shook the bottle. "But if you drin' it all at once, then—like this..." and Anweisa showed how, and it was clear here too, it was visible: the horror of death by poisoning—all over the bed, on the floor.

"The bodyguard heard nothing? Such a thing wouldn't pass quietly," Mauna took Amaya's palm and freed it from the burden of the empty bottle, unwinding the cloth.

"She strictly f'rbade disturbin' her, under no circumstances. B'sides, the Radia' Va-Amaya had a habit..." Anweisa waved her hand in the air, "...of purging food, the bodyguar' knew 'bout this too."

Mauna gave the vessel to Anweisa. Now she had two bottles.

"And what's in the second one?"

"Mor' poison, she didn't get to that one," she shook the full one in the light again.

Mauna lay down against Amaya, embraced her, she knew there would be cold, but didn't expect it to be so... cold. She lay like that, and all she saw was the hem of Anweisa's dress, who stood nearby, didn't move away. She wanted to smooth her: smoothed her ears with both palms, and Amaya turned out to be disobedient, hard; the thought came: should have stroked her more often while she was alive, just yesterday it was necessary, and every day it was necessary, probably, for example, morning and evening, and maybe also during the day.

Mauna kissed her on the nose, and then let's move to the...

"No, no, M'stress," a hand on her shoulder, "that's no need. That's bad."

"How can it not be necessary."

"She's full of poison."

"*Vtai*, it's nothing, it's nothing... I'm not sweet either."

She mindlessly bared Amaya's teeth. Oh, what ones, not good.

"Let me wipe her clean."

Anweisa bustled about, found something nearby, and Mauna wiped Amaya's cheek, nose. Foam came from the nose, she wiped it. More came. Again.

"This won't end, there's plenty of that in ther'."

It turned out what this 'something nearby' was: in Mauna's hand she held her own Andarian handkerchief, which she had given to Amaya. She took her palm, tried to clasp with it; before this was easy, now it was—very difficult; one must be honest—impossible.

"I can't clasp palms, Anweiss. Before it was simple. You know, we once took each other like that, so strongly, that I scratched her all over," Mauna recounted, looking at the wall. "You know, she was a very good Messenger."

She watched Mauna attentively, holding the vessels before her on her chest. Taira, forgetting herself, embraced the bed column.

"Mistress," very carefully, quietly asked Taar. "Shall we begin the preparations?"

"Yes... yes."

He left.

"What now?" Mauna asked no one in particular.

"I can wrap her in cloth m'self," Anweisa set down the bottles, "and do everythin', but in our case it's more proper if t'ings are done by an Ashai-K'trah. In Bash there should be an Ashai for mournin'," she frowned, thinking.

Uruz pointed to the bow and spear:

"What about these, Mistress? It's unclear what weapons are doing here," he looked at them, scratching his nape.

"I know. I know everything. I understand everything. Take them, take them."

"Well then. M'stress, then we'll... the Radia' Val-Amaya... We'll arrange everything here as it should be. You'll help," Anweisa said to Taira. "Go call someone else, call Hizaya."

"I'll help," said Mauna.

"No, no, not worth it, Flawless one," Anweisa nodded confidently. "We'll manage ourselves, this work... it's kinda..."

"No, I'll stay. What should I do, Anweiss?"

She looked at the Mistress, matter-of-factly scratched her hand.

"Tie up the plasis sleeves."

Which Mauna began doing, drawing the binding cords from beneath her sleeves to tie crisscross over her chest—something she realized she hadn't done in years. Messengers never bare arms or shoulders, practically never kindle ignimara—most barely know how, many have forgotten completely. What ordinary Ashai accomplish in moments took her sever-

al minutes. She turned, irritated with herself, and looked at the Empire map. Something caught her attention.

Flags: in the center of the Empire almost all clustered together, completely violating the true disposition of Messengers (sixty-one). At the top, in the north, even beyond the Empire, four flags made a lonely square. Below were two more: at the shore of the Southern Sea—one of them, and for some reason black, not red. Mauna took it, examined—it had been dipped in black, apparently tentush. Another, the last one, was located right in the middle of the Southern Sea.

"Taira, come here."

"Yes, Mistress?"

"Tell Hizaya, tell the Medium... tell sire Melim, everyone: don't touch the flags."

You Should Have Seen

Vaalu-Nel, despite every inconvenience of long-distance travel, her packed schedule and gentle hints from her Graph Master about 'the queue getting rather thick' (Listigia to Marna—five days on the road!), would absolutely—without question—accompany her acolyte Vaalu-Mauna to Acceptance.

The trip proved delightful despite the blustery start to Rising Season. They rode together in Nel's massive coach, quite the impressive cavalcade. The mentor's mood was excellent, Mauna's nervously elated. Nights they stopped at residences or in towns. Nel managed her Messaging somehow, and despite her initial protests, Mauna helped clear Nel's entire Message backlog.

Nel especially liked it when Mauna—it came up in conversation, after inquiries, where Mauna had to hoist her sails and skillfully navigate between reefs—told about the Sworn-Bond for her own Family.

"Now-now-now, hold on, you bound them before *that*, not after *that*?" Nel was amused.

"A day before."

"How did you pull that off, eternal Vaal?"

"It just happened that way, mentor," Mauna limited herself to saying. It also 'just happened' with Amaya's death—a perfect (self)murder, absolutely nothing to fault.

"Oh, there you go with 'it just happened' again," Nel looked at her dreamily. She composed herself, why delve into details: "Family, they, you know, they're like an animal—can't speak but understand everything about what's what. They despise weakness. Show weakness—that's it, they scatter. And how are they?"

"Good Family," Mauna said sincerely.

"Fire-clear. Her sisters cobbled together that Family in haste—she never chose them herself. Had she done the choosing, she would have assembled such a one..."

Mauna nodded and took some dried apricots, raisins. She had acquired this habit—eating dried fruits, nibbling nuts. She once learned from Anweisa that nuts are beneficial for lionesses, they even make moondays go easier. Caring, she offered to Nel, who refused:

"No, eat, you eat yourself. My clever one..." she took papers and began reading farsightedly.

Mauna examined the dried apricot, ate it, closed her eyes. *Tophet*. Clear weather. Then none of the Messengers came because Mauna ordered not to delay; she, Mauna, proved quite sufficient for everyone. The mourning Ashai-Keetrah, a northerner in her prime, gave her a torch easily lit from ignimara with masterful skill; she impressed Mauna, but it

seems Mauna didn't much please her. All the Bash upper circles were there, even sire Satarin was there. Karris wasn't there. There were heads from the Chamber of Ashai-Keetrah Affairs and Defence of the Faith^{72,73}, where could you go without them. For some reason fiscals from neighboring Stai came. There were some friends of Amaya whom Mauna had never seen before that, and never saw after that. Amaya had some vague relatives in the most complex relationships, but so far away and scattered across the Empire that without chances. Mauna didn't listen to Amaya: she hid the letter together with the ribbon in a casket, the casket in a drawer, and the drawer—in a reliable place. The reliable place—in a reliable place.

The crime—faith-breaking, it reeks of abomination, theft: Mauna took for herself Amaya's sirna ('S. s. Vaalu-Amaya, Ashai of Messaging, for Glory and Blood'). At the tophet a forgery appeared with her. Mauna hated herself, but couldn't help this. And she developed the habit of carrying it with her, secretly, since Ashai-Keetrah usually don't carry two sirnas, but only one.

Tragedy: the fox mask had vanished completely from the residence. Mauna commanded the servants to ransack every corner. They ransacked everything. Found nothing.

"Marna bridge," was announced from the upper window, and it was slid shut.

"That's it. Marna, Pons-Aures bridge. Stop, stop it! Come on!" Nel demanded, sharply jerking the shutter back. "Maun, get out, I'll show you."

Nel is Marna-born, after all—she adores the capital, knows every street, has family scattered throughout. Just look how gorgeous it all is, there—do you see—even a glimpse of the Imperial Gardens, and there's Sacramontium hill with that incredible spire of the House of Sisters, we'll visit there too, you can't see from here admittedly the famous Saphie bridge, but no matter, I'll show you after Acceptance, we're staying two more days. Mauna nodded along, yes-yes, yes-yes, rather indifferent to landscapes and external impressions in general.

Time to lay out all the cards again, though Mauna had run through this calculus repeatedly. Was she glad to be traveling to Acceptance? Oh, absolutely. Had Nel trained her? Yes, extensively. Had Nel taught her well? Yes, so many things. Nel's joy—was it genuine? Yes. Had Amaya damaged the sisterhood? Apparently, yes. Ketira especially? Her most of all. Nel, Myanfar, Vanaramsaya—had they transmitted the tradition? Indeed! Could Mauna absorb everything transmitted, and more importantly, the Craft of the Inner Empire? No! Whose fault was that? Irrelevant question. Had Amaya instead initiated her into the Craft, dragging her by force into some other (what kind of?) tradition? Yes! Was this secret

⁷² *Ah, Chamber. We just call it 'Chamber'. Eternal love-hate relationship. —S.*

⁷³ The Chamber of Ashai-Keetrah Affairs and Defence of The Faith—Imperial authority that serves as the liaison between the sisterhood and the Suung Empire, facilitating their mutual obligations under the Eternal Concord. —Z.

knowledge? Oh yes, no room for error there. Was Amaya good? Yes. Was Amaya gone? Gone. What should be done? Serve as Ashai of Messaging. No, seriously, what should be done? Do not break the oaths. Which oaths specifically? As if there were choices to be made.

The Acceptance went immediately, took off like a whirlwind right away. Ordinary Ashai-Keetrah, especially disciplaras, have it rough there: trials, lighting ignimara, sitting in aumlan and keeping myein, and then drinking harsh soma on top of it⁷⁴. You can't do that with Messengers, they need to be protected, too valuable an instrument, so you calmly go to the bedrooms of Marna's House of Sisters, where you'll have everything your whim desires, drink a little soma, lie down to Message for the night and simply drive an arrow into all six mengirs: 'Vaal-Mauna, acolyte of Nel, has no doubts and sees Vaal.' Oh, well that is, you don't drive an arrow, of course, but leave a Message. They thoughtfully gave her all six stones from all the mengirs so Mauna would find them all, since this can be quite difficult for acolytes; sometimes they need a couple-three nights. Pff. Pffff. You could overwhelm her with a cart of stones, could give none at all—for Vaal's sake, it's all the same. Oh, naturally, Mauna paid attention to the little stones, got very worried, doubting whether she got a good enough piece from the Nar-Hai mengir, and everyone got very concerned, one senior sister fell into agitation; well, they bustled about, hoped for the best; assured her the piece was very decent, well-messaged, Mauna calmed down and even made little jokes.

Vixen!

The lioness-fox shot all six mengirs; into one of them, amusing herself, she fired in an arc from enormous distance (hit it). Funny thing: if in the Hunting Grounds you shoot straight up, the arrow will fly back to you, there will be an echo-effect for mnemonics: what you shot with will be remembered even better. You can shoot Messages at yourself, my Vaal, it's hilarious.

Not all the fur lies smooth. Amaya imprudently didn't warn her, but prudence and Amaya, as is known, diverge somewhat in different directions, like those very paws on ice. Mauna was beginning to understand that she would have to live and serve with a difficult task, namely: everyone loves little chickens; you can slaughter a chicken, pluck it and roast it, then eat it, you can pour Andarian cranberry sauce on it; everything's simple, chicken is prey, then food; but here, in the world of warm blood, chickens have portraits and fetishes; chickens walk, talk, they enter into conversations with you, sometimes they want with you if not Discourse, then at least exchange of Glances, to maintain Sister-bond; chickens sometimes need to be seated opposite you, and you must look into their eyes and say your 'bawk' to their 'bawk-bawk'; it's important not to snort with laughter, probably; or not to roast them right there, with cranberry sauce. Oh, and yes, yes, shooting other Huntresses turned out to be more

⁷⁴ *All of it is much worse than it sounds. The soma part especially. —S.*

difficult, much more difficult, than chickens, pigs, firrasas, cute mountain goats and raggedy-looking lionesses of the wisdom. The Message-arrows of other Huntresses hit much more painfully than the soft arrows of prey, from them you can even vomit in the morning (hello again, Amaya).

As proper, Mauna delivered to her Medium in the morning: all six mengirs received Messages; and who and when among the sisters will receive them—that's their business, Messengers are busy lionesses. Nel, naturally, took the arrow that same night:

"All mengirs got everything."

"I took it immediately!" Nel was ecstatic.

Amaya never deceived—Mauna had become a much more exquisite thing than a beautiful Marna plasis. Nel didn't leave her side, showing the whole world: 'Here's what happens when an acolyte graduates from Vaalu-Nel, good Suungs.' Mauna didn't interfere with this indulgence, secretly and openly encouraging everything. They visited here, there, and everywhere.

Now—the House of Sisters, and Emperor Akash the Second himself arrived with his consort, no less. Mauna stands in the center of the hall; columns; here is the Circle of Seven sisters, here absolutely decorative, appointed to say 'yes' to everything, because ordinary Ashai-Keetrah cannot evaluate a Messenger's Craft. The High Mother isn't here—duties, far away, couldn't make it. There is Vaalu-Vesta, chief sister of the Marna mengir (Marn-Kaar), first among equals, there is Vaalu-Inliramia, from the same one. There is Vaalu-Naamzira, the Emperor's personal Messenger. By some miracle Mauna's mother and father came, two brothers, father's cousin, mother's two sisters. Many others are present, whom Mauna doesn't know at all, there are senators, and someone else.

Very well.

"Why have you come, acolyte?" asked a senior sister from the Circle of Seven—she had a name, but what did it matter?

"Vaal showed me the path to Acceptance."

"State your nomen, acolyte."

"Vaal-Mauna."

"Great are those who approach the end of trials," the second sister of the Circle.

"For Vaal rewards the courage of those who journey forward," added the third.

Naamzira is very close. She's right beside the Circle sisters.

"Who taught you the ways of Ashai?"

"The Brilliant..."

Oh.

"...Vanaramsaya..."

Oh-oh.

"...Myanfar and..."

Naamzira—the most dangerous lioness present. She knows everything. All the others know nothing. She knows it all. She understands why

Mauna's tentush and distance are dissolving again, why no amount of dabbing will help here.

"...Nel, I... I had the honor of learning from them."

Emperor Akash the Second exchanged a regal smile with his consort. A sweet touch gracing the day: the charming sincerity of tears from a young Messenger who had come to her appointment.

"Aamsuna, Mauna," Naamzira suddenly added. This is outside the ceremony. She's encouraging her (so it looks to everyone). The Emperor's personal Messenger could risk such transgressions.

Yes-yes. I, Mauna-Huntress, am as dangerous here to you as you are to me, Naamzira-Huntress. But don't worry. I can betray you, myself and even Nel, but not her (again).

Now the final touch, only in Messenger Acceptance. She knew they would strike the enormous drum, but for it to be so loud—she flinched. Now no one dares even stir, complete silence is needed. The Emperor touched the solar symbol of the Empire on the monumentally tall, dark standard; four warriors of the Emperor's Guard (Silent Ones) inclined it; now—upward, and then—in the other direction, toward Mauna.

"The Imperium of Vaal-Suungs accepts the Ashai of Messaging," the only words for which the Emperor deigned to come here.

When lionesses bow deeply, they must get down on knees, not just one. Done. Now rise on paws and kiss the solar, but not immediately—they hold it, and then all four lions jerk it right under the nose. This has broken the nose of more than one Messenger, but there's no choice. This time everything was masterful—the solar is right under her breath. Got it.

"To serve the Imperium's power, to Message with Vaal's Gift, to preserve the Suungs' glory," Mauna spoke.

Every lion's favorite moment arrived—time for noise, roaring, clanging weapons against armor, shields, or each other. They'd prudently cushioned Emperor Akash the Second's ears—he despised loud sounds. The sisters placed Vaal's amulet around her neck and escorted her away... Other events followed...

This noise rang in Mauna's ears right until dinner. Actually, dinner with the Emperor was expected, but the Hand of Vaal couldn't manage it, plans changed. It turned out intimate: her, Nel, Inliramia and Naamzira.

Mauna wasn't used to the amulet, she wanted to touch it.

"It was a long road, sisters," Nel said blissfully.

"You mean the road to Marna, or," Naamzira indicated Mauna with a courteous gesture, palm upward, "about Mauna?"

"Oh, about everything," Nel looked upward. "Vaal shall guide, Vaal shall not fail."

"By the way. Mauna, I brought you a sister-portrait. And a fetish," Inliramia noted.

"Me too," Naamzira nodded.

"My deepest gratitude, sisters."

They summoned servants, and Mauna duly received from Naamzira both portrait and fetish—an exquisite fan. But Inliramia had an embarrassment:

"Where's the fetish? I told you to take it!"

"Fire-blessed, we... We didn't take it. We..."

Inliramia spread her hands helplessly, barely restraining herself. With apologies it was announced that Mauna would have it tomorrow.

"Portraits, portraits, portrait," Nel tapped the armchair. "Mauna, wait, you need to get one made! Flew out of my head..." she grabbed her nose. "Let's go tomorrow, it has to be done in Marna. Only way."

"But I have fetishes," Mauna noted calmly. "Sisters. Mentor."

Three enormous bows were carried in—extraordinarily long, towering well above lioness height. Firing such weapons would be utterly impractical (here in the warm-blood world), particularly wrapped as they were in white ribbon.

"I've never seen fetishes that big," Inliramia marveled.

"Mauni is an excellent shot," Nel said; examining the bow, she nearly broke everything on the table. "Yah, you all should have seen it, you should have seen, Naamzira."

"Really? How interesting. Most curious," this was Naamzira. She looked at Mauna, and Mauna at her. "My thanks, Mauna," she thanked impenetrably.

"You can't take such a fetish to bed," Inliramia laughed.

Well, Nel even tugged at its string:

"My poor fingers... How does one draw this?"

"Don't, don't, Neli, leave it to the experts," Inliramia patted her hand. And grew serious: "Yes... Mauna, I don't want to darken this day, but still: how did it happen with Amaya?"

"Oh, Inlirami..." Nel grabbed her nose again.

"I know, I know. It's terrible. Especially, Mauna was with her, to experience such a thing... But how was she behaving before that, surely it must have been noticeable that something was wrong?"

Everyone fell silent, looking at her. Nel. Inliramia. Naamzira. Mauna rubbed her left palm with her right fingers, ran a claw around her wrist, where once long ago there had been a ribbon.

"Of course it was noticeable, sisters. Her habits... Every day I was with her, I witnessed slow suicide. Before that night she drank wine and inhaled arra, they carried her to sleep on their arms. I warned her, I tried to protect her. I couldn't."

"Inlirami, my Vaal, please..." Nel groaned.

"No, how thoughtless of me. Why did I even... Mauna, forgive me."

"Let's talk about nice things. Here, appreciate this: Mauna's empathy opened up quite recently, just two... or three... moons ago. How about that?" Nel kept boasting. She'd told everyone about this already ten times, wherever they'd been.

"She probably learned it from Amaya," Naamzira didn't drop the Amaya topic.

"Amaya didn't have empathy," Nel jealously denied.

Actually, Nel doesn't have empathy either.

"She didn't," Mauna confirmed.

"She did," Naamzira answered this without sentiment, with simple clarity of fact. "Very unusual, only worked through a kiss."

"I had no idea," Nel said with surprise.

"Hm, I've heard of such empathy, it happens, very rare..." Inliramia mused.

Mauna rubbed her wrist for a long time before raising her gaze. Naamzira was looking at her, steadily, lightly swaying the very long bow, resting it on the floor.

And Again, the Bricks

"Nah. That ain't how we do business."

In Huntress Moon were assembled: the Stump, otherwise sire Satarin; Messenger Vaalu-Mauna, back from Helsia these past two weeks (there and back, there and back, four moons at a stretch—going on eighteen moons since her Acceptance); Pre-Messenger Vaalu-Khirana. Sire Stump had collapsed into his chair, swilling beer without ceremony. Khirana grimaced in pain, massaging her knees—they always ached before thunderstorms. Mauna's claws clicked impatiently against her armrest.

"Listen, Sati, quit being difficult," grumbled Khirana, grimacing even stronger. "My great Vaal, what is this... Is there going to be a downpour or what."

It turned out Khirana and sire Satarin knew each other perfectly well, which Mauna didn't know. She had even feared arranging this meeting, but the matter was stuck, and the matter required advancement. But Khirana, it turned out, called him 'Sat,' and he familiarly embraced her.

"Three lions slipped off my hook," Khirana continued mournfully, "just a nightmare. I can't endlessly travel around the Empire searching and seeking, I'm already tired. Help the cause, don't make me mad."

"No, I won't sign up my manes for this racket. That's not how things get done," sire Satarin ate dried fish from a plate positioned on his belly. "But I understand, it doesn't matter to you what kind he is, yeah?"

"It matters, Sati," Khirana reasoned. "Healthy, young, no family, no relatives, some criminal, someone not worth pitying. You've got plenty of those!"

"Who said I gotta give up my own? Bull's got exactly those kinds."

"Who is this Bull?" Mauna inquired.

"Competition..." Khirana dismissed with a gesture, shooting Mauna a look. "So what—I go crawling to Bull?" she demanded of sire Stump.

He looked at Khirana.

"No, don't go to him," he shook his head, the ties in his mane swaying.

"Then how? How do you order his manes, will you tell him yourself?" the lioness wouldn't let the lion be in peace, the eternal thing.

"Don't gotta say nothing," sire Satarin munched his fish with concentration. "I'll spread word you got somethin' Bull's owed by some sheep who's under my thumb now, and you'll hand it over clean—no fuss, no complications. Bull gotta send his tails your way, guaranteed."

"And what do I have?" Khirana frowned.

"Coupla bricks, small change. Bull's real greedy—he won't let this slide."

"Aha. Uh-huh. They come to me, and..."

"...and you grab one of 'em, hand the bricks to the others, everybody's square. After that, waste him or whatever it is you do."

"Aha."

Sire Satarin stretched, almost dropping his plate. Sighed, set it on the table.

"They show up," he said with deliberation, gazing off to one side, "the Excellent here makes an ill-timed visit," he nodded toward Mauna, "somebody says the wrong thing or gives a dirty look, they snatch him up. Haul him off. Bull won't mess with any of it—especially once he gets his bricks."

"Hmm," Khirana mused, studying Mauna. "Look, at least it's something."

"Course it's somethin'. Dream-walking, can I have more beer?" Stump also looked at Mauna.

"Certainly, sire Satarin."

A Visit to the Ashai-Keetrah

Bull summoned them over.

"Paw, here's the deal, there's this Ashai, got it? She didn't return something to one of my tails. Cat's nobody special, but the right Suungs backed him. The Ashai holed up in Bash, called V-somethin'... V-Khirana, got it? Find her and get our shit back, you feel me? Talking shit—that's your thing, licking Ashai's ears—that's your thing. Be careful with her, don't strangle, don't stomp—they say business hitters visit her, the Stump. She might dart straight to him. But try to persuade her, without big dust—we don't have smooth dealings with the Bash crew, gonna be messy to sort if things go south."

"Is she old?" Arzis rubbed his unruly rufous mane, his head hurt.

"Vaal knows. Not young."

"What's she holding?"

"Two bricks."

"What kind, regular ones?"

"Regular, imperial bricks. That's it, Paw, get going, Vaal give strength."

And they went. At first things didn't go well in Bash—nobody here knew this V-Khirana, but Vaal is great, and they tracked her down.

"V-Khirana, V-Slutiana, V-Khirana, V-Slutiana," Bekh chanted as they approached the house.

They knocked. Arzis smirked, eyeing Yatsyn and Bekh while flexing his jaw—limbering up for the sweet talk. Dealing with lionesses—gotta be prepared.

The Ashai proved genuinely elderly. Knitting needles clutched in her hands, she regarded all three males as some petty inconvenience. Disappointment and vexation marked her features.

"You're not the ones I was expecting," she accused, pointing with a needle. "But they... well... will be here soon," she drew out, rubbing her cheek, gaze completely absent to the side. "Oh, Vaa-Vaal..." she waved her hand, and so indifferently began (continued?) knitting. "Inspire our reality, guard our dreams."

Arzis watched her fingers, claws. He looked around the room. So-so furnishing, and considerable disorder.

"Beautiful day, Fire-excellent one," he said courteously, still looking around.

"Indeed," the Ashai agreed. "You wish conversation with me, to make demands and such—I grasp it all, but! Return later. Go now, good Suungs. No time, absolutely no time at present."

Arzis glanced at his companions, expressively so they'd stay silent; but they were silent: Yatsyn leaned against the wall indifferently, Bekh put his hands behind his belt.

"That's totally correct, Fire-excellent one, there's no time. I'll announce quickly: we'll ask you to return two ingots that..."

"Don't walk on the knife, go, we'll resolve everything. But later."

"Let this small matter be resolved now, it's quick. We've made the journey."

"Later, later. I beg you very much, good Suungs. I cannot serve you now."

"But when exactly, Luminous one?"

"I don't know. Perhaps an hour, my precious, perhaps a day. Please go now, I entreat you."

"I understand that conversation will be required not with the Excellent one, but with her..." here Arzis truly grew bold, and decided to pressure her a little: "...partners?"

Vaalu-Khirana sighed, put her needles on the table, rubbed her eyes, groaned from life's burden, stood and approached Arzis. He sensed the scent of an aged lioness.

"Look here..." she said, lightly touching his nose.

Of course, Arzis followed this movement, without any thought, of course, met her gaze, and then it rang in his ears:

"Get out!"

His mother's voice mixed with wind, explosion, death of the world. Mother commanded: take them, get yourself out, away from here. Mother's commands are not discussed. Mother's tears are not bypassed. Yes... How could she... Again these orders! Again these tears! Again this guilt! Again this obedience without any return to you!

Mother was Ashai.

And this one too—Ashai. Therefore probably also his mother, in some sense.

Arzis knew about *straya*⁷⁵. He understood more than males typically should. So instead of obeying the Ashai-Keetrah's command as expected, Arzis, reeling, simply sat down—right where Vaalu-Khirana had been sitting.

"Here's how it stands," Arzis said expansively, voice beaten but clinging to the cliff's edge with his claws, refusing to yield, refusing to submit again, gaze wandering, "we come from Bull, acting for client Tanu, and Tanu expects his gold returned. Time's up. Need to speak with the business folks backing the Radiant one? We're ready. But it's not necessary—return is owed because Ashai-Keetrah... preserve... property. That's their obligation. Their obligation. Theirs. So! Ordained! To keep and to give back!"

He didn't realize he was pounding with all his strength on the table with his fist at the last words. Needles and balls of yarn fell to the floor, the room filled with knocking and ringing of plates on the shelf, rattling

⁷⁵ The direct imposition of will upon another's mind, a Spirit Gift belonging to the Ashai-Keetrah. It may compel action or inscribe vision within the willing or unwilling consciousness.—Z.

of utensils. He didn't notice himself, her, or anything else at all, and spoke unconsciously. Only one thought: *Fuck. Fuck. Don't obey. Don't listen to her. Don't give in...*

Vaalu-Khirana bit her finger with her fangs, rubbed her nose. The friends were no longer standing relaxed, but alert.

"Leave," she said somehow even hopelessly, even pleading. "Come back a little later."

"No. Ingots. Two," Arzis cut off. "Otherwise the matter won't proceed."

A knock at the door, very loud, and Vaalu-Khirana's ears perked up under her hood.

"Seer of Vaal, we are here," came a cheerful, confident, dashing lion's voice.

The visitors exchanged glances. Yatsyn shifted his shoulder and stared at the doors with distrust. The Ashai, after an instant's pause, hurried toward the door. Suddenly stopped, looked at them:

"Be silent, fools. And do nothing."

The knocking repeated, the old Ashai opened.

"Well, here come the partners," Arzis smirked, rubbing his ears savagely. "Right on cue."

"This fast? Something's fishy," Bekh said, tugging at his belt.

"You trying to squeeze her or something?" Yatsyn peered at him, puzzled by Arzis's behavior. "What's gotten into you?... You alright?"

Bekh tried to see who had come through the half-closed door. But he didn't have to look for long.

Five lions in armor entered the room proprietarily, silently; one looked out the window, curtained it. Curtained the second one. Yatsyn, experienced, surveyed the room, smoothed his whiskers, very slowly, sniffed. Bekh scratched his palm with claws and looked at Arzis. Two more entered, it became cramped.

"Don't think of touching weapons. Keep your hands visible."

"Strength in the hunt. Are you from the Chamber?" Arzis asked.

They remained silent.

"Ah, that's what it is. So that's who we're dealing with... Since you're Chamber, listen up. One good Suung left this Ashai-Keetrah two bric... that is, two imperial gol..."

Suddenly Arzis glimpsed, beyond these lions—these Chamber guards, these incomprehensible someones in expensive armor—a lioness gliding past in even more unimaginable plasis. Her profile caught the light: another Ashai-Keetrah! That circlet of pure gold, those impossibly long chaindrops, the brief flash of a hand mirror in her left hand. She didn't glance his way, no gaze exchange, but he needed none to recognize what she was—he knew far too much about Ashai for any ordinary lion, being a son of a lioness of sisterhood and... someone else, he doesn't know who. Best bet his father was some good Suung. Probably.

"Well I'll be!" with the amazement of a hunter who discovered the largest prey, Arzis exclaimed, for his friends. Involuntarily. And involun-

tarily pointed at her with his hand, not a finger—his whole palm. And even stood up from his place.

She turned. Halted.

Something he had apparently said was improper. And he stood somehow incorrectly, for instantly sword points appeared at his belly and right shoulder.

"Insolence can cost your life."

"Hey, easy now," Arzis addressed this to the lions-guardians of this lioness. Now directly to her (she's near Vaalu-Khirana, half-turned toward him, just four steps away, almost beside, watching): "Ashai—a Messenger?"

"Don't speak to the Mistress without her permission," as one speaks to the hopelessly unreasonable, the nearest bodyguard told him, the very one holding the sword at his belly.

"Yes," she answered. "I am a Messenger. What did the good Suung want?"

"Oh, nothing. Never saw a Messenger before."

"You have a few moments. Look," her calm, even voice.

Arzis didn't waste the chance.

She's young, even very much so. She wears a golden circlet, this is the distinction of Messengers. Vaal's amulet, with a red ruby, dominantly large for her small chest. She's not tall. She's Andarian, in this Arzis couldn't be mistaken, connoisseur and identifier of lionesses; with any he'd had even minimal dealings, he always found out her pride; some laughed, and even for some reason tried to be secretive, and all answered "What do you need that for?" But he got his answer, that's what Arzis does. Here there's nothing to find out, all of Andaria is in her, completely pure. Round ears, and...

Enough, looked, that's sufficient.

"Hm..." Vaalu-Khirana hummed, looking at Arzis, looking with suspicion, assessment. Then told him: "Sit down."

Vaalu-Khirana nodded, and she and the Messenger immediately went to another room, simply vanished.

"You heard the house's mistress. Sit," said one of the guards.

"And you, apparently, are the house mistress's assistant?" Arzis smirked.

The head guard showed him a fist in a leather glove, close up; Arzis examined the spikes, rivets, a scratch on it.

"We've got no quarrel here," Yatsyn interjected suddenly. "We're leaving now. Isn't that right, Arzis?"

"Escort those two out. This one remains. He has orders to sit," the head guard directed.

"We..." Yatsyn began, but Arzis anticipated:

"Wait for me on the street."

"Hands visible. Keep hands visible," someone kept repeating to Yatsyn and Bekh, and they went out with limply raised hands. They both cast

worried glances at Arzis, Bekh looked as if he'd eaten something very bitter.

Arzis and five lions remained. Moments flowed by. He drummed on the table. All followed the movement. Three of them were without mane-guards—visible how their ears perked up, listening to the sound.

"Hands visible. Hands visible," Arzis repeated to himself, rhythmically, and clicked his tongue. "Tu, tu-tu-tu-tu."

He studied his guardians. Each, except one, kept his left palm near his sword sheath; but they were all at more or less respectful distance. Arzis saw and felt their readiness, their sense of distance from each other. That last one—closest of all—held a good, short spiked mace on his shoulder, held it unambiguously.

And behind was another one. What he held, what he was doing, and what he had prepared for him in case of foolishness—Arzis didn't know and couldn't know.

"What's this?" Arzis showed with his muzzle, nodded at the chief's breastplate with the steel plate. At the top it read: 'S. s. A. M. Vaalu-Mauna.' Also engraved was Vaal's fire. And there was space below, plenty. Empty and smooth, it should have contained something, probably some inscription, but contained nothing.

No one answered him.

"With you manes, only burning to Vaal."

"Damn right," suddenly answered the lion with the mace, and earned a clearly disapproving look from the chief.

Behind the lions' backs ran a pack of lionesses, hurried, busy, white colors in their clothing, covered ears, obviously—servants, four tails. One looked at Arzis with surprise, he smiled at her. She sharply looked away.

The door creaked, quiet whispering. Arzis drummed on the table again, and then the house mistress approached, Vaalu-Khirana.

"Come to her," she said to the lion who was (seemingly) chief of the Messenger's guard.

He immediately and quickly left, and Vaalu-Khirana calmly took an old chair for herself, took needles in her hands, and sat right beside Arzis. And continued knitting as if nothing was happening.

The head of the guard quickly returned:

"Clean him," he ordered, quietly.

"Just don't do anything stupid, they'll only check you," Vaalu-Khirana immediately warned, touching Arzis's hand.

"Why? I'd rather just go. Today there's business, I see, in full swing," Arzis felt how a hand from behind (merciless, male) passed over his ears, nape, mane.

"Why didn't you go earlier then?" Vaalu-Khirana smiled. "I told you so."

"The lion will be disarmed," the chief still announced-warned him, and from behind they deftly removed the scabbard straps from his belt. In the scabbard—a short sword, which Arzis doesn't much favor, and calls a knife.

"Such a one you are... Insisted you wouldn't leave, wouldn't leave—now suddenly 'let me go,'" Vaalu-Khirana remarked meanwhile, as if nothing whatsoever was happening to her guest.

"With the ingots, of course," Arzis said, as the most obvious thing.

"Well then wait!" Vaalu-Khirana said with true indignation, foreign hands meanwhile searching over his sides. "They'll bring them now. I don't keep them at home. And to wait here, well—you need to be checked. Who knows what you carry on yourself. All sorts come to me, so what: am I to blame that both you and they came?" Vaalu-Khirana was very indignant, as only old lionesses can be.

"It happens. I didn't come in myself, by the way," Arzis hinted.

He wasn't exactly worried about his partners. If they wanted to do something to them all, they would have done it. But still.

"So they're waiting outside, what's it to them!" the Ashai looked him straight in the eyes.

"Knemid knife," they announced the find.

"Don't make a paws to it, it's a good one," Arzis immediately warned.

The find was placed on the table. They also placed: a thin, oldish purse; a key; a hopeless piece of paper; a small leather strap. And a bone figurine of a lioness the size of half a finger, in an old rag, quite skillfully made and horribly indecent (the lioness on all fours was presenting to the viewer, so to speak, her tail raised to the utmost, cheek pressed to the ground).

"Heh," they evaluated the find.

"What a vulgarity," Vaalu-Khirana pronounced her verdict, looking critically, touching it disgustedly with her needle.

Arzis rubbed his nose, slowly and carefully, so they wouldn't think something wrong about his movement.

"I swiped it from a dead shamkhat."

"You were in the East?" the chief asked him.

"Nobody 'is' in the East," Arzis replied, and someone echoed the familiar proverb. "She's my luck—don't lift her."

"We protect the Messenger. We don't steal things."

"Finally, someone trustworthy," Arzis smiled with a snarl, glowing with sarcasm.

Despite the low assessment from the old Ashai-Keetrah, one of the Messenger's bodyguards couldn't resist and took the lioness figurine to examine. Arzis shared advice:

"You can rub her for luck."

"They need to examine you," Vaalu-Khirana suddenly explained, suddenly taking the figurine from the one looking and casually covering it with the rag. "What if you and your... ahem... friends are dangerous. Everyone knows what kind of business you lions are in. And I have important guests."

"Why would I need the Fire-blessed one's guests. I have no business with them. But the ingots are still needed."

"Clean," they quietly announced the verdict about Arzis.

"You're harping on it!" exclaimed Vaalu-Khirana, accepting a tray from a servant who meanwhile endured Arzis's evaluating gaze. "Will you die with this growling about ingots? Here, eat, be my guest."

On the tray were long things wrapped in thin salt pork. Arzis didn't refuse the treat, took one and watched how the Messenger's bodyguards left the room; one remained and stood in the corner. They didn't leave Arzis his things, took everything with them. They wanted to take the lioness figurine too, but Vaalu-Khirana gently waved away the taking hand.

"If I'm going to die now," he began chewing thoughtfully. "Then I'll have to die with such... as the Radiant one said... growling."

Something in the salt pork—seemed like cheese, only with something—turned out to be completely, amazingly delicious. Arzis instantly took another.

"He pays well, apparently, that you're so persistent."

Arzis didn't answer this, but noted:

"Good stuff, Yatsyn and Bekh should try it."

"As you wish. They'll be brought some," Vaalu-Khirana nodded and waved her palm without looking.

Arzis smirked. Yeah, they'll be brought some. But he saw how the Messenger's servant hurried and immediately carried the treat outside.

"What's your name?"

"Arzis."

"Welcome to my home, Arzis," the elderly Ashai said with narrowed eyes.

"Thank you. Here, try it, you won't regret it," Arzis extended the third piece to the bodyguard, who had deftly managed to take one before the servant left; that one, a dark lion of middle age with a completely broken nose, didn't react. Didn't approach, didn't take it, nothing.

"Are you married, Arzis?" Vaalu-Khirana tapped with her needles, drawing attention to herself.

"No. Why."

"Why? You can't buy cubs at the market."

"I heard you can easily buy them, not at the market. Why does the Excellent one ask?"

"One must occupy oneself with conversation while we wait."

"And what are we waiting for?"

"For the ingots, Arzis. For your precious little ingots. Your dear gold."

"By the way, really, why aren't they here?"

"Would that be wise, do you think?"

"No, actually not."

Vaalu-Khirana nodded. Exactly.

"Here's what I'll ask: tell me about yourself."

She made unusual, long pauses between some words, drama sounded in her voice. This revived Arzis's attention. He remembered cubhood, performances in the fairground theater.

"Nothing worth telling."

"Say your family name, introduce yourself."

"What for," Arzis smirked. "Won't help the business."

"What do you like?" Khirana wasn't offended by the refusal; pressing her ears back, she smiled slightly.

"Money. Meat, this stuff they just gave. Spear, I'm good with a spear. And what does the Radiant one like?"

"What could I like, I'm already old," amazingly, she rolled her eyes, just like a young lioness hearing a compliment.

"Now, c'mon, why like that. It's still very far to *Elevation*. And anyway, if I were a bit older, and the Radiant one a bit younger... Is the Excellent one Yunian?"

"Oh, you..." she laughed, tapped her needles on the table. "I'm not Yunian, I'm Yonurru pride. As you all say, Nurrian, though we can't stand it. And fancy that, you even know what *Elevation* is?"

"Well. I've heard. Hung around Ashai a bit," Arzis shrugged, settled better in the chair, legs crossed.

"Such a one you are, hanger around. Tell about relatives, brothers, sisters," she tapped needles again.

"There aren't any," Arzis smiled ironically, as if she was saying something funny or stupid.

"You have no relatives at all?"

"My Circle is my family," he gathered his fist before him, then relaxed and lowered it, thinking he'd made a very reckless move.

"Only your own, business manes?" the old Ashai easily caught what he meant.

"Them," it was pointless to deny the obvious now.

Though she already knew who they were from the first moments.

"No sisters, no brothers, no father, no..."

"None."

He hesitated.

"Let the Excellent one not ask such things. It's not good. I trust Ashai, but what's the point."

"I'm a lioness," Vaalu-Khirana smiled benevolently, "it's forgivable for me to poke into such things."

"The Radiant one is not only a lioness. She's also an Ashai-Keetrah," he looked meaningfully.

The old Ashai sighed. Then stood, threw aside her knitting as unnecessary, rolled up her sleeve and without any difficulty, visible or invisible, lit a thick candle on the table with ignimara. Ordinarily and simply. Arzis had never seen such a thing. *Well now. Saw a Messenger. And saw such ignimara. What a day.* He knew this had to be an Ashai of extraordinarily strong ignimara. Few of them could do this—without any preliminaries light Vaal's fire right in their palm and use it to light a candle or whatever else.

His manner sobered slightly.

"And do you like females?" she moved the bone figurine, covered with cloth, to the candle, right under it.

"All of them," he looked at the candle. "Why?"

"Burns beautifully, doesn't it?" she pointed to the candle, and moved it closer to him. And didn't forget the lioness—pushed her along with the candle. And even removed her covering, so she continued her shameless display in profile.

"Yes, not bad."

"You look, look... It's does you good, Arzis, to gaze upon Vaal's fire."

"What about the ingots?" he somewhat came to his senses.

"They're coming, coming. Today you'll have them in hand, or your friends will, I promise."

An Ashai-Keetrah's promise carries weight—Arzis understood this much. A lioness's word was naturally unreliable, but Ashai-Keetrah were bound by oath to honor promises, compelled by both Codex and aam-suna. He relaxed. Gazed longer at the flame.

Interesting, why all this party came to her. Strange they didn't throw me out. Ah, but I'm insisting on returning the ingots, and she's long owed them. She owes them. She knows, I know, and she knows I know. Would love to bite the nape of that servant, such a little northerner, thought Arzis. For some reason he remembered his first Game partner, a lionessy of unattainable beauty, today's lionesses can't compare: *Wonder how Maysi's doing. Wish she were here now. She'd look at me. Heheh.*

Vaalu-Khirana left him to his thoughts.

Married, probably. And married well. Such a one can't not have children. What daughters there will be.

He suddenly noticed the Ashai wasn't with him. Had left again. He looked around, maybe some female would catch his eye. No, they'd hidden themselves. He wanted to do something with them, urgently. *Should have taken a whore for the night in Bash, like Yatsyn did.*

Vaalu-Khirana emerged from behind the door where the Messenger had disappeared. Approached quietly, either troubled or saddened. She waved to that last one who was watching Arzis—and he, strangely, left, carelessly pulling back the curtain.

"There's one request of you, Arzis," she sat, tragically folding her hands on the table. "Of a delicate nature."

She spoke clearly, but extremely quietly.

"Not particularly skilled at delicate matters," he replied equally softly, leaning in.

"This sort of thing you certainly understand. How to begin..." She sighed deeply, melancholy eyes fixed on the flame. "I'll speak plainly. The Messenger visiting me came with purpose. You're an honorable lion—I perceive this, one can confide in you. She journeys throughout the Empire seeking cure for her condition. So," helpless gesture, ears flattened, "she arrived at my door..."

"What's wrong with her?" Arzis asked without particular sympathy.

Something was spinning in his head and heat was going through his blood, and here someone started complaining about illnesses and troubles. The old one, found a good time.

"She needs to get pregnant," she said sharply, confidently, like a goal, like meaning. "Lionesses acquire bad diseases if they don't get pregnant when young."

"And what's the problem?"

"She can't, Arzis. It doesn't work out."

The obvious answer:

"Probably caught cold there as a cub. Or her suitors can't manage, apparently," Arzis immediately said everything he knew about conception and female health.

"Apparently so. She—and I, and not only I—think: they can't manage."

"Big deal. Go to the nearest Circle and pick three or four..."

She interrupted, seizing his palm:

"But you—you would manage."

And indeed. This is obvious. This is obvious to anyone and everyone.

"Vaal himself sent you today. Such a day. Such a coincidence!"

And truly. Vaal. Coincidence. Such a day, it dawned on Arzis.

"But how... well..." Arzis, growing excited (a wave through his body), tried to reasonably determine the order of things, what comes after what, because it doesn't happen like this, that you just appear—and they surrender to you without preambles, come on.

"Right now," Vaalu-Khirana resolved everything.

And indeed, everything was falling into place in Arzis's mind. *When, if not now?*

"Good. But wait, so: I simply go in, do her, come out. And that's it?" he determined all the necessary steps and pitfalls.

"Exactly so. Money, forgive me, we won't offer," she rubbed the table with her palm. And sternly added: "For such things it's not proper."

"I don't need it anyway."

Vaal-Khirana lapsed into silence, as did Arzis. He scratched his neck and tugged at his mane.

"She liked me?" not doubting, even no longer quietly, Arzis asked.

"Yes," Vaalu-Khirana made a gesture, as if to say hush-hush. "She senses: you're what's needed."

"She senses correctly," he said viciously. "A proper Ashai. Senses what's right."

Vaal-Khirana smiled widely, nodding silently, her ears pressed close. Yes-yes.

"So here's what," she said quite ordinarily. "Now you'll be washed, put in order. She's pure, and the matter is pure. You sit. I'll pour for you meanwhile."

"Not too much, or I'll perform like those other suitors."

"There won't be much."

Wine was brought.

"Here. You're not sick with anything?"

"Nothing I know of."

"Well, drink, I'll tell you what's what when you're clean."

"I know what's what there."

Arzis drank wine, looked at the candle, wind in his heart, dust in his head.

"I didn't get a good look at her."

Vaalu-Khirana seemed actually offended.

"You'll see yourself there. She's twenty. What more do you want? Best of the finest daughters of the Suungs."

Noticing his pleased expression, she pushed his shoulder.

"Perked up? Give you males an opportunity..."

"You bet."

You Won't Miss

"Lively lifestyle you have. Your Messenger frequently brings street lions to her chamber?"

No response.

"What's her name at least? I forgot."

Still no answer.

"By Vaal, what's your name then?"

She pointed to her mouth, crossed her fingers. Mute.

She walked past, and Arzis couldn't resist—pinched her under the tail, quite hard. The lioness jumped, and then he got a wet towel across the muzzle.

"Just a test. Thought: if you roar or squeak, that's it. I'd have figured it out."

Another towel to the muzzle.

"Interesting, can you purr though?"

Of course, she won't answer.

"I'll say this, I'd even agree: it's good to have a mute wife. You, I see, are married. Lucky guy, eh."

She waved him off, glanced at him sometimes with quick looks, tears appeared.

"Now what's wrong with you, really? Lions haven't tormented your tail? Come on, you're a beauty. I mean no harm."

She pushed away, broke free.

"Stubborn one. You also look like an Andarian, like your Messenger. Your mistress. Or however you call her. Andarian lionesses, faithful wives. It's for the better."

She nodded her head, as if to say 'no.'

"Ashnarian? No. Naysagrian? Ahhh."

He climbed out of the bath.

"And the Messenger is Andarian, right? Well now. And they say such things about their modest nature."

He winked at her.

"All lies."

She furiously pointed to her mouth: 'Shut up already!'

"All right, all right. We're just talking. Don't be offended, good one," he made peace while the lioness's pleasant hands dried his mane. She shuddered, covered her mouth with her hand, turned away, waved at him from over her shoulder: go, go.

These females, Arzis thought to himself as he left. *A trifle, and so much fuss.*

When he came out, just like that, in bath cloth, he discovered: two bodyguards at that very door behind which the Andarian Messenger was; and Vaalu-Khirana.

"So," Arzis encouraged himself, cracking his knuckles.

"That's it, let's go," the old Ashai hustled around him, took his arm. "Go over there. You're expected. Pay attention to no one, only her."

"What, there are many of them, willing ones?"

"Go on, don't be ridiculous."

He looked at the bodyguards. They stood by the door, as if nothing, not looking at him. He thought: *Worst job in the world: guarding a door behind which they're fucking.*

"Agree to give strength to the matter?" asked Vaalu-Khirana.

He nodded.

"Agreed."

"Promise: not a word to anyone: neither what you see, nor what you hear, nor what happened," was whispered quietly near his ear.

"I promise."

"Fuck her like no one, so she knows."

He nodded, exhaling. Enough talk already. Everything will be.

"You won't miss."

Again the death of the world.

Arzzy

He was ten, perhaps eleven. He'd lost track of which house this was—he and mother constantly relocated, she restlessly roamed the Empire. Once again she returned home drunk. She never collapsed, never, but the smell emanated from her. Females smell different than males when drunk—more frightening. First, she'd loudly kick off her knemids, abandoning them anywhere. Second, she'd claim her seat at the table. Third, she'd call with excessive cheer:

"Arzzzyyyy!"

He already suspected everything from her voice, was convinced by the strange, wide smile so like a snarl, oily eyes. He sat opposite, the wine smell of the female overwhelming everything.

"Arzzy, how are you doing, sweet one?" she offered her palm for his cheek. And with a broad gesture swept the table, on which crumbs always lay scattered—it's her gesture.

He had to answer carefully, but not too much. Confidently, but not too much. Matter-of-factly, but not too much. This was a whole tactical game: with tricks, traps, territory maps, cunning—mother could instantly change sugar to disfavor. Or—worse yet—straya.

"Caught many fish, mama," he had to boast about something, first of all.

Somewhere below her paw dangled, her tail beat.

Usually boasting about something, good news—worked. But not that day.

"Found yourself a pastime..."

Mother—beautiful Ashai-Keetrah draped in red plasis—regarded him as her life's greatest disappointment. But moods shifted swiftly:

"You tell me: have you played yet?"

A new question, there hadn't been such before, answers weren't ready yet. Usually she asked: "Well, do you have lionessy friends yet?" While his mind darted searching for the right answer, she leaned forward, her elbow slid across the table:

"Have you kissed a lionessy?"

"No, mom."

He'd already learned to lie about small things. In big matters it was still impossible—mother would crack him like a rabbit bone.

"Why?" she was surprised.

"It hasn't happened yet, mama," he excused his weakness.

"Uh-huh," mama thought something to herself, and stared at the wall. "You know what I'll tell you?"

This boded nothing good. Experienced, Arzis tried to press his ears back and quickly count to ten in his mind.

"Listen up."

He raised his ears. She noticed. Now would come her voice, now would come straya, and...

"Never, Arzis, sleep with Ashai-Keetrah," mama said in an ordinary, but very sad voice.

"Never?"

"You know, with Ashai—you can. But not with Messengers!" she warned very angrily, incredibly angrily.

Arzis already knew everything: both what '*the Game*' was, and what 'sleeping' meant, and even roughly knew who Messengers were. They are such Ashai-Keetrah, priestesses of Vaal, best daughters of the Suungs, only special; Ashai, they're all special anyway, like mama, but Messengers—completely-completely special, they can communicate at a distance. Message. And there are very-very few of them.

"Don't have... dealings... with us," she whispered, and a tear rolled down her cheek.

Arzis knew—if mama cries, you go to her immediately. When he was smaller, he would climb onto her and start crying too, for company; mother would embrace him, and crying together was good. Now he was big. Now he was protector and obedient helper, good son. Now he tries to comfort. Probably, this time, besides all the other vile tails, the Messengers had offended her. How dare they! Interesting, where did they even come from here, in their little town...

"Mama, did they hurt you at service again?"

Mama was constantly being hurt by someone. In her life every day someone betrayed her, abandoned her, dared to scold her, lecture her, set her up, stab her in the back, twist her tail. And once she was even raped, or even twice. So mama said. That's how it was.

She looked at him.

"Or you'll miss!" this played as an echo in his consciousness, like in a huge cave. Straya from mother, how many times now. 'You'll miss, you'll miss, you'll miss...' the idea grew in his consciousness like a huge wave, occupied everything, became meta-thought and background, became another 'I' and quieted for several days, during which he missed everywhere and literally: couldn't put on sandals and knemids, hit his nose with a spoon, and never once hit little fish in the stream with a sharp stick, and never once hit a target with a real bow that even a female, lionessy Maysi (!) hit on the second try, taught by his friend—later rival and enemy—Tasay. This became the last straw, Arzis couldn't bear it, such shame, and he, gathering unprecedented audacity and courage, simply went to mother's former lover, with whom they had lived for some time, and whom mother already hated and blamed for everything, and asked him, who had given half his life to the Legate, only one thing: to teach him to shoot a bow and throw a spear. Not to miss.

"Arzis, come on, archery—that's for Yunian huntresses and tail-lifters from Hustru," mother's former lover chuckled, beer mug in hand. "Long as I don't load my crossbow ass-backwards, that'll be Vaal's day."

He swigged his beer.

"What's it to me? You ain't my son. Your mother..." He circled a finger near his temple. "Go on, scram."

"Sir Krres, mother won't teach me."

He laughed.

"What's suddenly got you itching?"

Arzis didn't answer, and already gave up internally.

The lion set his mug on a stump; bare to the waist, with crumpled mane on his chest, and Arzis remembers like today, how it fell and spilled, but he paid no attention. He took a nearby pole for washing windows.

"Spear... Maybe..." he weighed this pole in his hand. "I'll show something today, both throwing and not throwing," he beat it against the ground for some reason, as if trying to break it, this way and that. "Just don't tell your fool mama," and with a terrible roar, snarl he stood before him in a stance, one of several he would learn later, and Arzis somehow understood that sire Krres was serious, not joking. The tip of the pole ended up near his nose, Arzis didn't even understand this.

He went to him for several years, almost every day, free and for nothing; he was with him both hunting, in other villages and towns, in strange places and dives, and in countless training duels, and several times they pulled off a couple of dirty jobs; mother, of course, found out about everything and first tried to gnaw through these male relationships, but nothing came of it—they lasted, they stretched on incredibly, until Arzis ran away at sixteen to the Legate.

Kill Me (Him, Her)

Vaalu-Khirana nudged him forward, and he—half-unconsciously—stepped through the doorway. The door shut behind him swiftly, as though sealing him in.

Arzis grasped immediately how bizarre his situation had become, what an alien place he'd entered. Mental fog lifted rapidly. Standing in this dim bedchamber—windows completely shrouded, candles scattered throughout—Arzis felt foolish, unpredatory, and deeply uneasy. A lioness his mother's age occupied the corner, dressed plainly, hands folded on her knees, observing him with blank expression. Fear shot down his spine, and he flinched upon turning left—there on a bed heaped with pillows of every description sat the Messenger, positioned ceremoniously on her haunches. Arzis recognized her by mouth and chin contours since her eyes were bound with cloth, ears similarly wrapped. Beside the bed a lioness approximately his age—clearly northern—knelt submissively, palms placed on the mattress edge, awaiting something. The Messenger's hands formed a boat shape at her abdomen.

And though Arzis said nothing, and wasn't planning to speak, the northern servant turned to him and pleadingly pressed a finger to her mouth: be silent, please.

'You won't miss.' 'Or you'll miss.' The foreign will, so carefully placed in his soul by old Vaalu-Khirana through straya, turned out to be mortally shattered by a cubhood memory of his mother. Two streams of intention, one from the present, another from the distant past, collided in his consciousness and crumbled into a thousand pieces, destroyed each other, leaving him in confusion, anxiety and complete, clear sobriety.

Arzis scrubbed his ears vigorously, as he'd done before when battling his mother's power and her sisterly gift for soul manipulation (he'd grown practiced over the years, recognizing when it occurred). He drifted thoughtlessly toward a side table. The bathing cloth impeded movement—he let it fall to the floor without notice, standing completely nude. He selected some fiery dried ginger and chewed contemplatively while planning his next moves.

They had lured him here with influence and warm persuasions. Why? Would a Messenger really sleep with the first stranger and bear his children? Even if so, why did Khirana enmesh him in nets and seal him at the end, to be sure? Old huntress, you missed your mark with this prey. What do they need? Oh, danger, again you, old broad...

The Messenger still sits without stirring, and the northerner still obsequiously watches over her.

Chewing ginger and burning his mouth, Arzis thought they had decided to drink his blood. Foolish, ridiculous, he laughed to himself, that doesn't happen. Still, the best daughters of the Suungs don't...

"He's here, Mistress," the daughter of the north said at the needed, right moment, in a flowing beige chiton for bedrooms and intimate moments, already holding the Messenger's palm in hers. And the words were hardly meant for her, rather—for him, this Arzis understood without knowing how.

She, after a moment, began removing the blindfold, and the servant immediately came to help. The second one, the old one, still sat in the corner, doing nothing. Arzis suddenly thought—now the blindfold will come off, and she'll have void instead of eyes; and then death for him, he thought, a childhood nightmare would become reality. But no, the nightmare didn't turn into reality, her calm eyes looked at the servant, and then at him.

The northerner hurriedly bowed and immediately left, taking the blindfold and cotton from the ears with her, all very quietly; brushed Arzis's shoulder and tail with hers, apparently in such haste; and didn't look at him at all. Meanwhile the old servant moved closer, repositioning her chair directly opposite the bed. And threw on a hood with white veil, shutting herself off from the world and transforming into death from children's tales.

Arzis approached, sat on the edge of her bed, close to the lioness who was offered to him today—and silently pointed with a piece of ginger at the servant. The Messenger turned her head, obeying Arzis's indication, her shadow on the wall with Andarian ears.

"Do not doubt. Her presence will dissolve," her very smooth, quiet, most calm voice. *With such a gentle voice one could lure into Naheim*, Arzis invented for himself.

Arzis smirked, looked into her eyes. Then immediately lower—at her neck. The insignia on her neck, on the heart's side—the mark of a patrician House. All his life it had been curious to have a look, and he touched, smoothed her neck, more carefully than he usually handles lionesses; incredibly—she raised her neck for him. He smirked again. An abyss. She probably can enter the Emperor's presence without extra invitations. He probably wouldn't be let even into this town's Magistrate. By the way, touching a Messenger without her permission is punishable by death. All Suungs know this.

He pulled back from her, sat on his haunches on the bed, like a master. Intelligent, calm, dark eyes, without a hint of predation. Incomparable Andarian ears, so ordinary and so beautiful at once. Thin nose, fragile chin, pleasantly built, neither thin nor broad, medium height and very amber. She still sat on her haunches, in a long white nightgown, very simple. Her tail was hidden somewhere. Vaalu-Khirana spoke truth—twenty years, no more.

Arzis looked the Messenger in the eyes; she was in complete expectation and absolutely didn't wish, didn't dare or didn't intend to begin first,

even a movement, any. He didn't even know yet what else to do. He knew, understood that he should leave here. He didn't know how yet. He had to think of something... He had to manage himself. Her measured breathing, chest, her fragility and his strength, it all so invited itself, it was all so simple. Take and do what you want... He gripped the sheet with his claws.

Any, any lie. Now, even the most foolish. Otherwise you'll perish. Her eyes are straying itself, fool. Forbidden. Forbidden.

She closed her eyes, raised her head, parted her lips slightly—an invitation to kiss. What a modest one. Dares nothing herself, just waits. Arzis began getting angry at himself and wanting her simultaneously. Actually, why not? What the... why restrain yourself? What kind of overthinking in bed with a female? You'd have to be insane to refuse now.

Anything, say anything.

"I know everything," he said, and with amazement discovered he had said exactly that.

She opened her eyes.

"I know. I remembered everything."

"What do you know?"

"Everything will happen. Probably she'll kill me," he pointed at the servant in the corner. "She has something sharp. Or you. I don't know what you've planned here. Something cheerful."

"Who granted you such knowledge?"

"No one. I just know. You don't need children from me."

For a moment they looked at each other. From her the veil of waiting availability fell away veeeery quickly, the air of desire dispersed, the room breathed with cold.

"Guessed right?" he smirked.

"Don't talk," she stood on her paws, nimbly and quickly. "You've wasted much time."

"Tsa, sorry. Nothing will work out, I can't get hard. I'm leaving."

"Wait," she put her palm before his nose. "Call the sister," this to the servant who looked like death.

She immediately left.

"Why did you agree?" now the Messenger stood straight, hands on hips. "You came in here."

"I don't know," Arzis climbed down from the bed and stood before her, her ears not higher than his neck, looking down at her. "Before this somehow... I forgot. When I came in, I remembered."

"Remembered?"

Yes, quite the composure. Very sparse gestures, precise movements, restraint, directness of gaze (hard to look away). But look away he had to—Vaalukhirana burst into the room, and first thing let more light into the room, tearing down the heavy curtain. Then:

"What is this? Arzis, why are you letting us down? Are you impotent or what?"

"He knows," the Messenger accused, and turned away from him, also taking some burning ginger.

"Knows? Why did you agree? I saw you agree!" Khirana pounced on him like a cheated trader.

"I remembered," Arzis suddenly felt like it, and he too (and again) reached for ginger, earning a surprised look from the Messenger (their fingers briefly touched), "that I don't need to do this. Just understood. It happens. I have a fiancée, conscience bit me, we're getting married, right in two weeks," he chewed and winced from the burning. "It would be wrong, you know."

"Don't lie, you're glowing all over," Vaalu-Khirana struck his shoulder with her palm like beating a carpet with a stick. "How do you know?"

"Know what?"

"Who is she, who told you?" Vaalu-Khirana quite unceremoniously took him by the chin, then by the ears, while terribly stretching herself up, try stretching for the ears of Arzis, no small lion; but the Ashai knew her business tightly, forced him to look at her (he wanted to hit her, but something not...). "Do you have Ashai friends? A sister? Mother? Ah, Vaal," Vaalu-Khirana read it instantly, old huntress, experienced master. "His mother is an Ashai-Keetrah."

"Was," Arzis only added.

"What happened? Did she leave the sisterhood?"

"Died," he explained calmly. "I'm leaving."

The Messenger shook her head, no-no:

"You can't simply leave here."

"Well, then I'll leave not simply."

"There's only one way to leave alive: swear to me in service and loyalty."

If Arzis had been looking at Vaalu-Khirana at that moment, he would have noticed how she jerked and frowned, looking at Vaalu-Mauna.

"Whoa, you're suggesting working for you?"

"Don't address her as 'you,' Arzis," Vaalu-Khirana told him. Then to her, openly: "That's it, thing is ruined. Let's call your..."

Vaalu-Mauna waved her hand. Not yet.

"No, I don't want to. I'll never be a servant to a lioness, or to anyone. I'm leaving."

"Remain."

Having quickly decided, Vaalu-Khirana also attacked:

"Serving a Messenger—is pleasing to Vaal. An offer that isn't refused. What's wrong with you, what's not right?"

"Well, I'll be the first."

"Then you'll die," the Messenger concluded.

"Really?" Arzis asked again.

Both Ashai looked at him. He pondered, then pointed his finger at the Messenger, for Vaalu-Khirana:

"She's so calm, as if talking about duck for dinner," Arzis's sarcasm painted his predatory, merry muzzle. "I won't."

"He's a fool," the old Ashai-Keetrah waved at him, went to the exit. "He's not a Suung. Suungs serve Vaal. Never seen such in my life."

She left, and lions entered. Arzis instantly found himself surrounded.

"Bind him," Mauna ordered. "Bind his friends."

The bodyguards knew their business: with clubs they twisted his arms back; someone already incredibly quickly and skillfully bound his shoulders, palms.

"Hey. Hey! What do they have to do with this?!" Arzis roared at the indifferent floor. He didn't see how Vaalu-Khirana covered her ears and bared her teeth, and the Messenger wrinkled her nose and closed her eyes. Moments flowed during which they methodically and masterfully bound him; he could appreciate it because he himself knows how to bind lionkind. Bound by legs and arms, they seated him on the floor. His tail got twisted, damn it.

"We'll have to execute them together with you," crouching near him, at the same level, Vaalu-Mauna, the Messenger, now explained with a calm gaze. Arzis saw how the hem of her nightgown covered part of his paw. She was very close.

"Are you serious? Why them?"

"Yes, Mistress," three bodyguards departed, the remaining three stayed in the room.

Stunned by the speed of events, Arzis nevertheless tried to reason and appeal:

"They did nothing to you, Messenger! You're like, you know, an Ashai-Keetrah! Kind of a sister of understanding!" he spoke to Vaalu-Mauna with instruction and obviousness.

"Yes," she agreed very simply and very serenely. Tilting her head slightly to the side, she still sat on her haunches beside him. Someone from her guard offered a hand to help her stand; she gently waved it away.

"This is complete tail-shit: demanding service from me in such a... way. I'll just escape!" Arzis tried to make something coherent from this, looking into her eyes.

"Address her properly," a guard cuffed his shoulder.

"Escape is impossible," the Messenger shook her head, closing her eyes. "To serve me, one must take the Sworn-Bond. From the Sworn-Bond there is no escape."

"Promises shatter like glass! Oaths are broken every day, left and right. Obviously! What the fuck is happening?"

She shrugged. And with a gesture ordered him lifted.

"The Excellent one will hear, I've changed my mind. Messenger Vaalu-Mauna, listen, there's a proposal."

"Is that so."

"I won't tell anyone anything. About what I saw. About what I know. I swear by my mother and father's blood!"

"Good."

"So will you release Yatsyn and Bekh, will the Noble one release them? Kill me! Or let me die in single combat! This isn't how things are done!"

Arzis, heavy, tall, strong lion was carried to the neighboring room and seated on a chair. On that very one where he had chatted with Vaalu-Khirana, curse her, and looked at the candle.

Mistress

"Mistress, why here?"

"These ruins caught my fancy during our journey—I marked them. Left side, I recall. Lovely spot."

"Yes, Mistress."

Bound Arzis examined the covered wagon in which they found themselves among all sorts of junk. Yatsyn and Bekh looked at him. No one could speak—their mouths were wrapped with rags.

They were brought outside, in the middle of ruins of an old mill, the rags were removed.

"Paw, you mothafucker! What'd you do, what'd you say in there?! What the fuck got us all trussed up?!" That was Bekh.

"Shut it."

"We came to grab gold, that's all! We did nothing to the Radiant old Ashai! Why the fuck are they executing us!" Bekh yelled, trying to attract attention, though fat chance—Bash was far away. "Paw, you fucker, what have you done?!"

Since Bekh turned out to be an expressive lion, they gagged him again. Yatsyn was silent, spitting and grunting. They were led out, lined up against the mill wall.

"Today, Suung called Arzis, fate confronts us with choice," Mauna positioned herself before them. "Yours remains unmade: death awaits now for reasons my Messenger oaths forbid revealing, yet Vaal witnesses their validity, and companions shall share your premature, needless demise. Alternatively," she paused meaningfully, "pledge loyalty and service to me until your blood cools."

"Release them, they're not involved," Arzis rejected everything. "Execute me, I don't know for what, but release them. And the day will end well."

"Ashai, uh... uh... don't execute him. He can say a lot, yes, from youth and in the heat of the moment, he likes stupid jokes," Yatsyn tried to reason with her.

"Will hamanu Ashai releashe ush, eh?" Bekh pleaded, trying to squeeze everything from his wrapped mouth.

"Arzis, do you reject my offer?" Mauna paid no attention.

"What do you need? You won't trust me, I won't trust you. Knife in the back at the first opportunity. Is that what you want?"

"If you don't agree to serve me, your friends will die. And you too."

"This is all some complete tail-shit."

"Bash crew fucked us!" Bekh concluded.

"Prepare to execute them," Mauna said and stepped away.

Sire Uruz announced:

"Execution by the Mistress's command. What do we have for the head?"

"Nothing," Kharg answered.

"We didn't bring anything," Taynaz confirmed.

"Well, with a sword, it'll be fine, I'll take it off," Tai offered.

"We didn't bring large axes. Short trip, traveling light," Narzimmai pondered.

"Hmm..."

They fell silent.

"There should be a falchion, I bought it recently," Narzimmai found a solution. "With it it's not like with an axe... but it'll do."

"Where is it?"

"Should be in the wagon. Let me..."

"May the Radiant forgive him," Yatsyn tried to reach Mauna, who had already stepped away, pleading to her back and tail hidden by plasis. "Forgive them. I've already lived, they haven't yet."

"Why do you so resist serving me? It's pleasing to Vaal and the Suungs, it's honest service," Mauna turned around, again everything—only to Arzis, as if the others didn't exist.

"It's not pleasing to Vaal for an Ashai-Keetrah to execute three lions without even explaining why. And to demand service under threat of death," Arzis explained the obvious.

"Oaths forbid explaining the reasons. I'm free to either execute you or take you to myself. There's no other choice. We don't choose."

"And I choose: I won't grovel under the paw of a maneless one. And if the reason is in me—release them, execute me. End of matter. What's their guilt?"

"Their death will be on your conscience," Mauna accused.

"Really?" Arzis smirked, looked around, at everyone. "What's their guilt?"

Silence descended.

"Paw, don't be shtubborn, agree," Bekh pleaded.

"I thought Ashai-Keetrah meant 'sisters of understanding.' But here it turns out to be 'sisters of who-knows-what' or 'sisters chop-everyone-to-pieces' or 'sisters take-others'-bricks-and-don't-give-it-back,'" Arzis gave definitions, and everyone listened attentively as he talked himself into a death sentence, though what was there to talk into—seemed already condemned.

Oddly, Vaalu-Mauna smiled—her first throughout this entire affair.

"Free those two."

Meanwhile they brought the falchion.

"There, I released them," Mauna showed, and indeed, Yatsyn and Bekh were released, though not given back their weapons. "So, will you accept the Sworn-Bond?"

"Nope. I'm tired of this! Come here, chop away," he said to Narzimmai. "I hope you'll hit it on the first try."

"This is unheard of," said Vaalu-Mauna, and looked around. She nodded to sire Uruz.

"You're foolishly stubborn," someone began telling him from the side, leading him to the old wall, almost destroyed to its foundation. "Vaal-Mauna is an excellent Messenger. Such glory of the Suungs... The best Messenger-Mistress. And you're a ram."

"Single combat decides who's the ram. Though what's the use fighting a lion who has a mistress."

"What's the use fighting a lion who has no brains," the head of the bodyguard jerked him, positioning him by the wall.

"Get on with the chopping—enough drama. Time for some action, eh fox!?"

Mauna perked up, came alive.

"Come on, kneel," Tai told him, it was him. "Put your head on this, on the wall... Mistress?"

Mauna, sharply hiding the small mirror on her belt, approached Arzis, who hadn't knelt and stood straight; from the sheath, all in precious stones, a large dagger-sirna migrated to her hand—the eternal weapon of the sisterhood.

"Stand back. No one approaches or helps me, whatever happens. I myself. Did everyone hear? I—myself."

"Oh, those promises to hack down. But seems it's time for some little throat-slitting."

With her sirna Mauna began cutting the ropes on Arzis's arms and shoulders.

"How did you put it there? You won't trust me, I won't trust you... Knives in the back... Other unpleasanties..."

This was difficult: there were many cords, the dagger wouldn't obey; everything went slowly. Finally it worked, and first thing Arzis rubbed his wrists, and glanced sideways at sire Uruz, who—confused—raised the falchion with both hands for a quick strike, but didn't dare anything more. Then Mauna with all her strength shoved the sirna into Arzis's palm, and with some effort pressed his heavy hand to her neck. The point ended up right next to the insignia.

Universal amazement could be felt even with the tail.

"This is a terrible idea. You're fucked," Arzis said.

"All true. Not a knife in the back later, but a dagger in the neck, now. You'll take me with you to Naheim, Arzis. Vaal is displeased with Messengers whom Suungs refuse to serve."

They looked into each other's eyes.

For Arzis the world vanished—grass, wind in his mane, sunset rays, everyone else—suddenly only she remained. The smallest details, asymmetries, imperfections of her muzzle. He took in his left palm, still numb from the ropes, the tip of a long chaindrop from her ear, touched it. Then moved to Vaal's amulet on her chest, exactly like a cub, stroked the red ruby.

"Displeased," he slowly agreed.

He moved the sirna away from Mauna's neck, gripped the blade in his palm, strongly and very painfully. With his left hand he held her now almost limp wrist and felt on it the beating of the lioness-Messenger's blood.

"Agreed. I'll work for you."

She closed her eyes and drew a deep breath.

"Akhas?"

"Yes, Mistress?" he hurried over, looking warily at Arzis. Meanwhile Arzis returned the sirna to Mauna, all covered in streaks of his blood.

"This Suung has the will to pronounce the Sworn-Bond for Vaalu-Mauna and the Messengers," Mauna herself declared.

Everyone approached, briskly, including Arzis's freed friends, and formed a loose, uneven circle around them.

"I thought a blood-oath and 'I'll work' was sufficient," Arzis noted, pointing to Mauna's sirna, which she continued to hold mindlessly in her palm. He shook his hand, spattering blood on the grass.

"No, you must pronounce the Sworn-Bond if you're going into service to a Messenger," she answered matter-of-factly, shook her head, and sheathed the dagger. "This is—for life."

"Eh," Arzis scratched his mane.

Akhas dictated to him, like in school:

"You should kneel on one knee before the Mistress. Um... lions, if they consider battle their main trade, may take weapons in hand. For example, a sword."

"Or a spoon, right, fatty?" Arzis laughed. "All right, all right, what lion doesn't consider battle his business," he looked around. And addressed the head of guard: "Alright, I'll choose a spear from your lions."

"Mistress?"

"What is it?" asked Vaalu-Mauna, as always—calmly.

"Give him a spear?"

"Go take it, Arzis," she permitted Arzis directly.

First thing Arzis stretched, then slowly walked around the circle. Four had spears.

"You have good gear," he approved.

He took one, looked at the size, returned it. Took a second, bigger one. Beat the shaft against the ground, tapped it. Stood in stance and with a roar directed it toward the setting sun. Then returned back, stuck the spear in the ground, knelt on one knee.

Coughing, Akhas instructed: "Say: 'I will serve you, Mistresses.'"

"I will serve you, mistresses," Arzis repeated loudly and monotonously, and immediately shot out: "That's it?"

"We listen, Vaal sees, Suungs witness," Arzis's 'that's it' mixed with Mauna's response.

Akhas sighed, scratched his nose, looked at Vaalu-Mauna, who had frozen with outstretched hand over his mane, then at him.

"No. I'll tell Arzis when it's finished," Akhas said patiently.

"And why 'mistresses'?" apparently Arzis wondered, looking directly at Mauna's belly, at her very-very-dark blue belt, very wide.

Someone exhaled, chuckled among the Messenger's guard.

"You swear not only to me, but to all Messengers," Mauna explained gently, and Arzis suddenly noticed how her palm trembled slightly, and generally all of her seemed to be shaken by a small tremor. "But to me—primarily. Should I perish—you'll serve another sister."

"Got it," Arzis knuckled his nose. "What's next?"

"They'll prompt you," she again extended her palm toward his mane.

Yes. There was a slight tremor in her hand.

"Look at the Excellent Mistress," Akhas continued. "Now you'll pronounce the Sworn-Bond of personal loyalty to our Radiant Messenger Vaalu-Mauna and all sister-Messengers, according to the Eternal Concord^{76,77}. Repeat after me, look at her."

"I'm looking," which Arzis was already doing, gazing at the lioness from below upward.

"I, Arzis of..."

"I, Arzis of the Gallen-Mvash, true Suung of Yaamri pride..." Arzis improvised.

"...swear to be faithful in all things to Radiant Vaalu-Mauna, best of the best daughters of Suungs..."

"...swear to be faithful in all things to Flawless Vaalu-Mauna, of the finest daughters of Suungs..."

"...who serves, as Ashai-Keetrah, with the gift of Messenger..."

"...who serves, as lioness of Vaal, with the gift of Messenger..."

Akhas twitched his head sideways slightly.

"...and, then, to all her sisters by Gift."

"...and, then, to all her sisters by Gift."

"I will keep secrets."

"I will keep. Secrets."

"My spear shall preserve her life and carry out her will."

"My spear will guard her life," Arzis became quite animated, and struck it against the ground. "And carry out her will."

"I have entered this Sworn-Bond, and shall not leave until my blood cools" Akhas spoke, and rubbed his nose with a delicate handkerchief, usually carried by lionesses.

"I've entered this oath... this Sworn-Bond. And shall not leave. Until my blood cools," Arzis meanwhile hammered the words into Mauna's ears while maintaining eye contact.

She calmly accepted the driving and gaze, responding with evenness, peace. She seemed to stop trembling.

⁷⁶ The sacred compact between the Ashai-Keetrah and the Suung Empire, whereby each pledges service to the other. —Z.

⁷⁷ *The sisterhood predates the Empire by centuries. Possibly millennia. Everyone who tells you how old it is? Lying.* —S.

"Your Sworn-Bond is heard by Vaal and me, Arzis," she answered thus. "I shall preserve your life, command you against the enemy and maintain true intentions. For the glory of Suungs, by Vaal's will."

Sire Uruz exchanged glances with his bodyguard. Akhas hesitated, but continued:

"Now... now cut your hand... ah, you already have. Stand, touch the Mistress's cheek."

Which Arzis did. Surprise: Mauna also drew her sirna, likewise cut her own hand and touched his chin.

"Mistress... 'against the enemy'... Is he getting bodyguard Sworn-Bond?" Akhas asked uncertainly.

"Yes."

"There's no wine," Akhas found a reason not to take the Sworn-Bond for Arzis as for bodyguard. Though it was already late.

"No matter. Wine symbolizes blood," Mauna licked her palm clean.

No substitute, then it would be the real thing.

"Now, Arzis, you need to kiss the Mistress," Akhas announced tragically.

Further were supposed to be his explanations and precautions, how best to pull off such a responsible operation. But in vain, because Arzis:

"Dangerous business. I love such things."

He looked around, even behind. Thoughtfully examined Mauna, from ears to paws, and she couldn't help herself and also looked down—what had he spotted there? But quickly composed herself, it seemed, even too quickly.

He took her by the hand, pulled her strongly toward the ruined wall by the mill; well, they didn't remain alone—the bodyguard hurried after the stolen Mistress.

"Where are we going?" in Mauna's voice was a mixture of curiosity, surprise, alarm, demand, patrician coldness, Messenger willfulness, lioness caprice, and something else.

"Doing what we can," Arzis defined everything, as it is.

And here before them was a piece of wall, overgrown with grass. Dangerous! Narrow, and crumbling.

"You need to stand here, Mistress," Arzis showed.

"Why?" Mauna immediately demanded.

Yes, arguing with lionesses is no good. He took Mauna by the waist, by the belt (here's what's good about Ashai-Keetrah: you can take them by the belts and move them as you please, no need to fear, nothing will tear anywhere for anyone) and placed her where needed.

"You can't do that!" sire Uruz was losing patience with these outrages; it seemed sire Narzimmai was also losing patience with the outrages; Tai, it seemed, was tolerating the outrages, and smirking.

"Why so? Look," Arzis again showed what he could do. Lionesses usually like to struggle or kick with their legs when lifted; but Mauna, being a Messenger, apparently wasn't supposed to perform such antics. "Hey, this is my Sworn-Bond. You've already had your fun."

"Yeah, not a great idea from the Mistress," Khagal quietly noted, next to Tai.

"What?" Tai asked, not looking at him.

"The Mistress's idea isn't great, I'm saying."

Tai didn't answer.

So. Now she was level with him, even slightly higher. They overdid it, tsa! He threw her arms over his shoulders, took her muzzle in his palms, and simply kissed her; so there wouldn't be misunderstandings, clumsy meetings—tilted her head slightly to the side; also smoothed, pressed with fingers behind her ears—they love that. He'd discovered this long ago, back with his first lionessy, Maysi, simple things work, no need to complicate. Nothing wrong, tasty (not the tastiest of all he'd kissed), pleasant (acceptable), smells good, all tense and quite shy; you can learn a lot about a lioness by kissing her. Then, when parting, his ring on his right hand caught on the long streams of the Messenger's ear chandrops.

Surprisingly, Mauna didn't squeak, and didn't roar, and didn't yelp. She simply silently stretched after the pain, and tumbled from the pedestal of the ruined wall onto Arzis; he, naturally, caught her, it was inevitable. No apologies, conclusions or other excesses followed, and he simply, taking her hand once more, led her a couple steps and released her into the world.

She pivoted. Likely indignant, or some such emotion.

"Now you, Arzis, are personally devoted to our Mistress, Radiant Vaalu-Mauna," Akhas concluded with resignation.

"Well now," Arzis summed up everything. "For the glory of Suungs."

"Glory forever," Mauna said as if nothing had happened, adjusting something near her ear. "We're leaving. Arzis, why did you come to Vaalu-Khirana with your friends?"

"We're from Stai. There I worked for a business lion nicknamed Bull. He gave us the task to take two gold ingots which belong to, eh... what's his name... I forgot. Ingots had been given her for safekeeping. Vaalu-Khirana didn't have the ingots at home. And then here came... Akhas, what's correct?"

"Say 'sire Akhas,' Arzis," Mauna corrected.

"Sire Akhas, what's the correct way to speak? 'Mistress'?"

"'Mistress,' yes. And you can use any pre-addresses if you know worthy ones."

"And then the Fire-bold mistress came. And what happened, happened."

Vaalu-Mauna gestured for Yatsyn and Bekh to be called, they were brought over.

"Akhas, give four such ingots to these good Suungs. The sisterhood creates reality above expectations."

"Yes, Mistress," he bowed slightly. "Come with me."

Mauna turned and noticed that Arzis had quite managed to move away.

"Well then, thugs, shall I liven up your dull crew?" he was saying cheerfully, approaching the spear owner. The one stood beside the body-guard commander with the falchion that hadn't been needed. They all looked at Arzis, let's say, with skeptical caution. With something like that, yes.

"Arzis," Mauna called softly.

"Yeah? Er... Mistress," he turned, flipping the spear back to its owner, who fumbled the catch.

"Bid farewell to your companions. They'll depart with what they came for, don't worry. Then see sire Akhas."

"Yes. Mistress."

"Sire Akhas will provide initial clarity about your immediate duties and our way of life. Follow his instructions."

"Yes. Mistress," Arzis said, and returned to his accomplices.

"Fast learner, Paw," Bekh complimented, thrilled to be breathing.

"That's right. Don't know what to think about all this shit," Arzis scratched his nape.

"You, Arzis, be careful. Figure out what she needs and what's going on," Yatsyn warned.

Arzis thought about this, looking at the ruined mill, the road and other twilight things around.

"Tell Bull how it played out. Pass along my respects."

"We scored pretty damn good," Bekh was happy with the day's work.

"Oughta give you one brick," Yatsyn figured. "Two to Bull. One we split between..."

"Keep it for yourselves. Looks like I can scrape together more ingots here," Arzis waved it off.

"Damn, Arzis, you're the real deal. We'll pocket a brick each," Bekh persisted with simple joy.

"Listen: split one ingot, two to Bull, and give the last one to our guys for business," Arzis gave final advice. "Can cover a lot of things, especially that deal with Farai, his bitch and his fucking *flis*. Well, good luck, lions. Smooth dealings."

"Go on, Arzis, Vaal give strength."

Gambling, Prostitutes, Murders, Banditry, Desertion, Hangings and Suchlike Affairs

"Sire Taar, please."

Vilius settled himself, crossing his legs. Following his custom, he positioned one palm beneath his elbow and began fidgeting beads through his fingers—Hustrians cherish such thing.

"Have you introduced Arzis to our way of life?"

"Yes, Mistress. Um... it's impossible to do immediately, naturally. What's good is that he's generally literate. And possesses elementary knowledge about Ashai-Keetrah, oddly enough."

"Where is he now?"

"He went to Stai, to collect his belongings and his bloodline papers. Should return by evening."

"What can you tell about him?"

"Bandit, murderer. Even hanged someone. Deserter from the Legate. Dealt with gambling, prostitutes and such things. Yaamrian. He's twenty-four years old. Cunning, to a certain degree, within the limits of his development. Even... quite reasonable and can show some measure of courtesy, if he wants to. Loves stupid, strange jokes, and isn't hot-tempered, smooths over provocations. Asked me several times what his role is and what he should do."

"Your response?"

"Uncertain, my Mistress—no guidance was provided," Taar replied with restraint. "Uruz will likely resist integrating him among his guards. Difficult to assess his potential utility presently. Er... what directions shall I provide Arzis?"

"None. When necessary, I'll summon and instruct him personally. List him temporarily as 'servant for special assignments.'"

Taar nodded, and that was all.

Next, sire Uruz presented himself.

"Beautiful day, Excellent Mistress, may I?"

"Strong day. Sit. Drink tea with me."

"I'm honored. Thank you."

"Something sweet. As you like it."

"Most grateful, Mistress."

"You spoke with Arzis?"

"With that new lion? No. He's in household, which means," Uruz sipped tea, squinted with pleasure, "he answers to Taar."

"You weren't interested in his abilities, skills?"

"If the Mistress orders, I can speak with him, and everything else."

"I want you to speak with him, test him. And check what he's capable of as... what he knows with weapons, in combat, military experience and such things. All such things."

"Yes, Mistress. Do you wish to add him to the bodyguard? I should warn this isn't the best idea."

"Why?"

"I'm open to different heads in the bodyguard, but his past is too problematic, as far as I know."

"What do you think of him?"

"Nothing definite yet. Too early for conclusions," sire Uruz ate sweets with enthusiasm. And then made some conclusions: "Seems like a poser, and overconfident."

"Good. I won't assign him to the bodyguard. I rely on you completely: you decide."

"Thank you, my Mistress."

Don't... eh... the Mistress

An entire week had passed without anyone troubling him, assigning tasks, nagging, or compelling action. Absolute liberty, and Arzis found it entirely agreeable. Vaalu-Mauna remained unseen—the Mistress could be effortlessly forgotten.

Servants. It turned out they were all rather old. Except one, Atrissa.

Taar—always thoughtful, unhurried, busy—inquired whether he could read. At his nod, he shoved a book at him called 'In Service to a Messenger: Five Decades for the Glory of Suungs.' Ordered him to learn it. Everything was simple—in this book some old lion, having blindly devoted his whole life to serving one Messenger, instructed youth how to do the same. Arzis responsibly leafed through it for a whole minute and realized he couldn't force himself to read it. He approached it creatively: took gouache and with a brush for painting dishes, which the servants fearfully gave him (they'd been afraid of him from his first day at Huntress Moon), he boldly wrote chapter titles on huge papers for street announcements, slightly correcting these titles to his taste. And he hung them around the little room they'd allocated him in the basement, next to the storage and cellar. There was nothing there except a hastily dragged bed, a candlestick stand and a very square nightstand. Perfect—at this time he could sleep in the garden and not experience discomfort.

Which, incidentally, he wanted to do today.

But first awaited cheerful exercises in the back yard, which were happening right now, and which he'd already made routine here; then awaited idleness, then bathing in the river, then random evening affairs.

"Go to town," Arzis threw a dart and grimaced at the unsuccessful throw, "in the evening. Stop by 'Beer Naheim.' Drink," he took the next one. "Pick up that expensive Hustrian lioness. She charges a lot... I'll sell my sword. Get a new one tomorrow from the blockheads, they promised pawwear and to clothe me, but still nothing... They'll arm, clothe, deck me out, hehe."

'Blockheads' was what Arzis privately called the mistress's guard; without particular reason, there were good lions there, just for mischief. They didn't take him into their circle, he wasn't one of them, so why bother with them. Besides, well, screw them anyway.

And here they were, just in time. Noon, and the Mistress was returning from a horse ride, with five of them, those very ones. Usually Vaalu-Mauna immediately dismounted near the residence entrance, and the guard somewhat chaotically-scandalously shouted-searched for the groom (he was completely hopeless, and it seemed to Arzis that he should be executed), but no—she rode in his direction; no wait, clearly

toward him. Arzis wiped his muzzle, nose, straightened up, and stuck a new dart in the ground.

"Strong day," she greeted. Then for them: "Good ride, my bodyguard—you're free."

That perpetually tranquil voice.

Vannaren nodded for all, quietly ordered: "Perimeter," and surveyed all of Arzis and all his simple possessions with bags, darts, targets and other nonsense. Dismounting, they all silently led the horses away.

"Mistress, Vaal protects," Arzis briefly replied.

"How are you?" she simply asked, easily leaping down from the female saddle; she touched the mare's side, and it trotted off to join the others that had been led away. One could see a good rider. Whip in both hands, held before her, posture; no, such things are only possible with patricians. Amazing to see her in these black riding pants, tall knemids, gray ribbons on her tail, simple white shirt. None of the female bulkiness and elaborateness, everything fitted. Moreover, her belt, sirna, circlet, mirror, amulet, even chaindrops—everything was with her.

"I like everything."

"Excuse me," Vannaren returned, and accusingly pointed at Arzis. "The Mistress will forgive, but an important question."

"Speak," Mauna permitted, looking into the distance, still the same way: whip in both hands, before her, horizontal to the ground. And her paws, paws—not together. But like a male—shoulder-width apart. She has narrow shoulders, female ones. But paws not together.

"Arzis, you took darts with hard tips, I hope?"

"My tip's always hard," Arzis chuckled, rotating the dart between his fingers.

"My attention?" Vannaren asked with contempt, looking at the mistress; surely she should whip Arzis. Or order him punished for insolence. And in general, they should have executed him then. In general. But Vaalu-Mauna, Messenger and Mistress, continued serenely and timelessly contemplating the east.

"Yes, hard, hard, sire Akhas. I won't take combat ones, I won't."

"Good. Mind that," Vannaren nodded, seemed to want to add something else, but left.

Arzis observed his departure while rotating the dart. He inspected it from base to tip, then spat on it for fortune.

"Well, for the glory of Suungs. Mistress," and threw it at the sand target.

No joking—forty paces distance, not easy to hit.

Vaalu-Mauna remained silent, continuing to stand immovably. Only her tail stirred.

"Hit?" she asked, after a little while.

"Bull's-eye!" Arzis raised his fist triumphantly.

"Eternal glory."

A servant came with two lions from the bodyguard, brought a table and a beautiful chair for lionesses, semicircular, placed it under the tree;

for all this, apparently, Vaalu-Mauna was waiting, because she transformed from a statue into calm liveliness, sat down. There was bustle, a teapot appeared, cold lemon water, all sorts of delicious things. Vaalu-Mauna gestured with her hand, as if to say thank you, go away; with the usual half-bow and other courtesies, the servant and her assistants left.

Noteworthy detail: since the execution-turned-Sworn-Bond, Arzis and Vaalu-Mauna hadn't conversed or properly encountered each other. Not once.

It turned out that Vaalu-Mauna (the Mistress), before sitting, had dropped to the ground a leather, hard belt pouch worn at the back. Now she rummaged in it, holding a cup in one hand, and it was inconvenient, and she even bit her lips from effort. But finally, she pulled out rolled papers and threw them on the table:

"The servants informed me," she began, pouring herself deep red tea. "of discoveries in your quarters. I'll say right away: don't worry, they took them by my order. They themselves wouldn't dare take your things."

Arzis approached, took the papers. So this was his art gallery—brief summaries of chapters from the book about serving a Messenger, which he'd written and also illustrated with gouache. He had hung them around his room (not someone else's), and the servants—right there—took and stripped them down. And also reported them.

"Three? There should be fourteen of them."

"They didn't take all, only three."

She arranged them on the table, and the large sheets occupied impressive, important space.

First one. Caption: 'Don't touch M's stuff and junk.' Drawn, amusingly, but not so badly: a lioness in profile (in a dress, but with tail free) in company of floating things—a hand mirror, papers and an open book. A funny, thick arm in a sleeve reaches toward the lioness's tail. The hand is crossed out.

Second sheet. Caption: 'Show respect to M's like to Vaal.' A big, angry lion's muzzle with huge fiery mane looks at you, he's snarling. From him an arrow (wavy) down-left to a lioness in profile (in a dress, not tail-free), she holds something resembling a mirror in her hand. On the other side—a lion in a cloak with sword raised to heaven; he's absurdly broad-shouldered and strong. To him also an arrow, from the upper lion (straight). Between the lower lioness and lion there's also an exchange of arrows: from her—wavy; from him—straight. At the bottom it's crookedly added, and quite tiny: 'For the glory of Suungs!'

Third one. Caption: 'M's watches, and I'm honestly naked.' A lioness in profile, sitting on her haunches, her location—a symbolic, hatched surface; she's tail free. Her palms covered her little muzzle. And stands a lion, arms to the sides, and indeed naked, with all necessary details.

Vaalu-Mauna looked meaningfully at Arzis and sipped her tea. Claws tapped discordantly on the blue saucer.

"This is from the book that Taar gave," he pointed at his creation, just like at someone else's work. "Sire Taar. I decided not to read it all, but just

draw these, brief... to remember what's what there. These are chapters from the book. I drew them. Then hung them around the room. That way it'll be remembered. Need to get up to speed quickly, it's my first time working for a Messenger," he shrugged and went to get himself a bag to sit on.

"You don't work for me. You serve me," Vaalu-Mauna told him, right to his back as he walked away.

"Mm-yes. Yes. Let them bring the book, it's all written there like that," he was already returning with the sand bag.

"Written exactly so? *Vtai*, I'm intensely curious about sire Taar's reading recommendations."

"It's called, like, 'Serving a Messenger...'" he placed the bag beside the little table, but didn't sit, just put his paw on it. "Eh... 'Rules...,'" he frowned. "It's lying on the nightstand, in my room."

Vaalu-Mauna attached the table bell's ribbon to her whip and began ringing by rotating the handle. The bell performed admirably—chiming loudly—before spinning loose and launching toward Arzis. He ducked with flattened ears as the bell sailed past, clanking mournfully in distant grass.

"Apologies, I didn't mean to. Oh, dear Alamut..." she rose from her chair.

Alamut? Andarian, thought Arzis.

With profound contemplation he observed Vaalu-Mauna and the arriving servant hunting through grass: Renaya crawling on hands and knees, Vaalu-Mauna bent forward with palms braced on knees, whip secured at her belt. Her tall knemids, her stance, the gray ribbons adorning her tail.

The sun of Rising Season blessed the noon.

"Got it, my Mistress, found it!" the servant announced joyfully.

"Phew," Vaalu-Mauna straightened up. "Renaya, go to his room," she pointed with the newly found bell at Arzis, "and take down all papers from the walls that you find. And take the book from the nightstand. Bring it all here."

Glancing fearfully at Arzis, who turned away from such a look, Renaya whispered something in the Mistress's ear, pressing her ears back. She listened, nodding, ears perked. Arzis looked at them once more. Turned away again.

Meanwhile Vaalu-Mauna returned to her chair, carelessly flicking her tail aside with a gesture. Arzis continued sitting on his bag, rubbing his mane and looking aside.

"Forgot to tell Renaya to get you a cup too," Mauna threw her whip on the table.

"Water? Mistress?" he pointed at the crystal pitcher. Ice floated in the water.

"No. After a ride—only warm things. Cold drinks invite illness, which I cannot permit."

Arzis took the pitcher and began drinking ice water directly from it. Some spilled on him, and his mane got wet. Having drunk it all, he ate a piece of ice and devoured all the lemon slices, just like that, with the peel; the remaining ice he rubbed into his nape. The pitcher returned to its place. As if nothing had happened, Arzis continued sitting, just like that, bare to the waist, thoughtfully rubbing and tugging at the mane on his chest.

Their eyes met. Among all the lionesses he'd locked gazes with—and there had been many—she possessed the most serene expression. Remarkable... As though they were conspirators, not against any individual but against existence itself. They shared knowledge unknown to others. Logically they should discuss business—specifically, she as Messenger and Mistress should define his duties and role, provide direction. Instead, heavenly light descended to reflect in her gray, tranquil eyes while she sipped tea peacefully. She knew something, hence the silence.

She can't be trusted, Arzis drew the inevitable conclusion.

He also knew something. Everything was simple, a simple game: remember yourself and your advantage. Still, it was better to be alive and earn a thousand imperials per moon (so the accountant told him, Arzis forgot his name) than dead and headless.

Renaya returned with the book and a pile of his creative efforts. She carefully handed everything to the Mistress, bowed, and left without words. Mauna extended his poster-sheets:

"Hold these."

She opened the book, placed it on her knees, frowned, took her cup again and swirled it in her hand, stirring the tea.

"In Service to a Messenger: Five Decades for the Glory of Suungs," she read, thoughtfully.

"Yes," Arzis nodded. He saw how, having legs crossed, she freely swung one under the table.

"I'm not familiar with this, though I've heard Taar's favorable review. So your sheets are a brief summary of the book?" Vaalu-Mauna leaned back in her chair.

"Yeah. Like a map," he almost threw the sheets on the table, the wind nearly carried them away, and Arzis didn't try to save his work, but Mauna quickly pressed everything down with the pitcher. "This book can fit on one page if you remove the excess."

"Like many. Show me," she demanded, pointing at the sheets with her whip.

Arzis rubbed his nose, then gathered all the sheets from the table.

"They're out of order," he clucked his tongue. "There's chapter one, two... Everything's mixed up."

"That doesn't matter," her calm voice, that indescribable (somewhat familiar now) tone: a bit of arrogance with almost ceremonial monotony.

"I need the book. I'll read the chapters," he extended his hand and received what he wanted. "So..."

Arzis stood, with the book in hand, just like a reader or announcer.

"Chapter ten," he leafed through. "Accept the Mistress's displeasure as a necessary lesson, not as vexing punishment.' Please," he demonstrated to the world, as if there were plenty of spectators here, then handed her the sheet.

"Mistress. Can. Spank," Vaalu-Mauna read on the sheet. She examined it carefully, since the inscription didn't quite match the picture: there a lion, having positioned a lioness on his knees, was spanking her, and with something very similar to a Messenger's hand mirror.

She slowly set down her cup.

"Arzis," she looked at him, "there are alarming inaccuracies."

"Let the mistress feel no alarm. A little chaos won't hurt," Arzis waved the book and reached for the next sheet. "Chapter thirteen... 'Multiply the Mistress's honor and glory, sweep away rumors and gossip about Her.'"

"Honor. Glory. Me. She," Vaalu-Mauna read, receiving the sheet from him. Drawn: the sun from the War Banner of the Suung Empire. Sun with ray-arrows. Under it—the words 'Messenger' and 'Ashai-Keetrah.' All in high script.

He let her look; squinting and grimacing slightly, he looked around.

"You even use high script," she found something to comment on.

"Yes," he nodded. "Chapter three: 'Do everything possible so the Mistress can serve the Suungs with the Gift of Messaging,'" and he waved the book at a fly.

The Messenger and Mistress, so young, briskly took the next sheet.

"Non-possible," she read the solitary title. Drawing: furiously crossed-out 'Non.'

Placing the sheet on the knees of her tightly crossed paws, Mauna smoothed her ear, took her cup; and remained sitting with it, holding the cup in the air and thinking. For some reason she stared at exactly this sheet, and Arzis gave no rest:

"Chapter two," Arzis announced, and scratched himself. "Defend the Mistress at the cost of your life and the lives of others."

He handed her the sheet, and Vaalu-Mauna took it somehow not immediately, with hesitation. She didn't look at him—still looked at the previous one.

Caption, title: absent. Depicted: a spear against the sun's backdrop, piercing straight through a wolf's head right through its snarling maw. Around it thick-ended crosses—Suung death symbols. They draw such things on tophets, on burial cloth.

"My Vaal," she pressed her palm to her chest, but all restrainedly: both the exclamation and the gesture, careful. The silver ring of sisterhood glinted.

Arzis paid no attention, continued: "Chapter eight: 'Don't touch the Mistress or her things without her permission.' We've already seen this."

"When precisely?" Mauna suddenly became very animated and looked at him.

"Well, the one where 'Don't touch the Mistress and junk.' I told you—everything's out of order."

"Let's continue," she demanded, placing the reviewed sheets under the pitcher. She took her whip, positioned it at her stomach, leaned back.

"Chapter eleven. 'Find common ground with all who serve your Mistress, so as to serve her better together.' His words are kind of crooked, right?"

Vaalu-Mauna reached for the sheet, had to give it to her.

"Drink with her manes," she slowly read. "And beat... drum... drum... beat her maneless ones. I'm lost... in the meanings, I'll ask for help."

"Drink some beer with the lions, beat drums for the females, have fun."

Vaalu-Mauna lapsed into silence.

"Are you skilled in drumming?"

"Yes," Arzis didn't exactly lie—he could play something.

She turned the sheet toward him. Ah yes, familiar drawing: beer mugs flying about. A hand in a sleeve holds a lioness by the muzzle, having crept up from behind. The lioness has closed eyes; pretty eyes, incidentally, they turned out well, with such dashing corners.

"Here are mugs with drinks. But here—why the violence of silence for the lioness? Her eyes are closed..."

"Well, so she won't sing, won't interfere with playing. Mistress, shall we continue?" he asked. And decided himself: "Let's continue."

"I'll allow: you should have simply drawn a drum, not myein for the lioness. The mental chain is too long, you'll lose it."

"Yeah, should have," Arzis inhaled more deeply, "both drum and mineinin," and went further: "Chapter nine..."

"Arzis, not 'mineinin,' that's incorrect pronunciation. It's 'myein.' Repeat after me: myein."

"Myein," Arzis repeated, not as smoothly and mutedly as she, of course.

He had no idea what myein was. Decided he'd find out later. If he didn't forget. And he'd forget—bet on it. So he wouldn't find out.

"Accept this as a correction, not as an assessment of education. I dare assure—I see your considerable education, despite the roughness of manners."

"Right. Continue?"

"Yes, please proceed. Only remember: myein is a Silent Secret," Vaalu-Mauna suddenly grew somber, adding in her characteristic level, frigid tone: "Dont talk".

"Sure thing. Shall we go on?"

"Please, continue."

"Nine: 'Be near the Mistress at all times—you may be needed. Be skilled and masterful in what the Mistress has sworn you for.'"

An awkward silence stretched. Arzis handed her the sheet, after a pause. On the sheet the inscription: 'M's swore me because.' And a huge question mark.

"The Mistress swore you because..." Mauna read. She smoothed the corner of her mouth, looked at him, then at the residence, turning

around. Then she told him, pointing at him with her whip: "I'll determine your service very soon."

"Of course. Mistress. Everything will be determined."

Her hand with the sheet dropped, simply fell, she looked aside. Arzis noticed her white teeth in a brief moment of snarl, and how she blinked several times.

"Further," she said, not looking.

"Chapter twelve. 'Mercilessly expose any conspiracies and plots against the Mistress, especially among those who serve her.'"

"There's even such a thing," Mauna drawled somehow unusually ironically. "Let me see. Mmmm... 'Don't get played, and don't let the Mistress.'"

Illustration: nameless, muzzleless smiles with grins. Many of them.

"Getting played means falling into a trap?"

"Something like that," Arzis answered. "Chapter one: 'Worship the Mistress as embodiment of Vaal's power and greatness, and his Fire.' Already was, the very first sheet, where respect, and so on. Chapter seven: 'Don't harm the Mistress in thought or deed.' Uh... here."

On it Vaalu-Mauna read: "'Don't tear the Mistress apart,'" she read smoothly, as if a bedtime story.

The drawing showed the following: a funeral pyre—tophet, fire and a lion stupidly spreads his arms to the sides, as if to say, well, it happens.

"On the tophet—the mistress," Arzis commented. "Chapter five: 'Guard the Mistress's smallest secret better than your own greatest one.' Here."

Vaalu-Mauna saw this: 'SS'. Silent Secret. And around it: scribbles, blots, complete chaos.

"This isn't bad," she suddenly noted.

"And the last one. Sixth," Arzis continued. "'Follow completely the orders of the Mistress and her sisters.'"

"The Mistress spoke, and you understood everything," Vaalu-Mauna frowned slightly. In the image something like violence of silence the lion was already performing on himself: covered his muzzle with his palms, as if in shame or grief. "Hm."

The daughter of Andaria looked at him, the Yaamrian lion. No, she wasn't rolling her eyes, and wasn't sighing. Meanwhile he sat back on his bag, the performance finished. She touched her nose with a claw and said:

"I observe you possess another sheet."

"But it's empty, I didn't have time to draw on it. And no need—thirteen chapters, and thirteen sheets."

Arzis observed her eyes narrowing, her mouth's corner twitching with ironic superiority. Pfff. Laughable. Attempting to deceive a Messenger. Indeed.

"Don't talk. It was brought with the rest. Give it to me."

"Really, no need," he scratched himself. "Failed sketch."

"Arzis. Don't talk," she pointed at him with her finger. Then turned her palm over: "Give."

He wordlessly rotated the half-folded sheet in his palm. Rising, he delivered it and withdrew. Approaching the spear propped against the nearby cherry, he nudged it with one claw—it tumbled into grass and vanished.

Meanwhile Mauna was unfolding the fourteenth rule that Arzis had deemed necessary to invent. It read: 'Don't fuck the Mistress.' The image vividly illustrated what was forbidden to do with the Mistress.

The silence stretched and boded no good. Finally, having stopped contemplating the spear in the grass, he picked it up and returned with it to the little table.

Vaalu-Mauna sat gripping the sheet between two fingers like contamination. She rose with tail-swish and positioned herself before him. The height differential—a head taller, even with thick-soled knemids. Vaalu-Mauna methodically, ceremonially shredded the sheet repeatedly until achieving tiny fragments. She cast these into grass where wind dispersed them.

"You have insulted me," Vaalu-Mauna grips the whip tightly.

"I told it: no need to look," he crossed his arms, placed the spear shaft against his neck.

"And all this hung on your walls," she stated.

"Yes," he replied plainly, removing from her neck a sluggish, drowsy, and oddly fat bee. Arzis observed the Mistress's slight recoil (ears and tail) at his abrupt motion. "What a big one."

"That's not a bee, that's a hornet, Arzis," she took a step back.

"Really?" he wasn't very surprised. "No wonder. Whoa, fat bee, like an old Helsian broad."

"They sting much more painfully," Mauna looked with disgust at the evil and buzzing thing in Arzis's hand, harboring great fear of everything that flies and bites (all small and sharp things), which she didn't work through, since Messengers don't need to work through such fears. You can't work through everything, life isn't long enough.

"Yeah," said Arzis, and without ceremony moved away from Vaalu-Mauna and threw the hornet into the empty crystal pitcher, and covered it with a saucer. "By the way, a servant came."

Vaalu-Mauna turned her tail to him, and just in time, because:

"Mistress," Renaya stopped at a respectful distance, "it's time for clients."

"When?"

"Now. Everything is ready, Mistress. They're waiting."

"I'll be there soon."

The servant bowed, and the young Messenger turned. Sighing, Vaalu-Mauna took the remaining sheets from the table; rolling them into a tube, she pointed at him with them, and sat back in the chair.

"Sit."

Arzis unhurriedly returned to his bag.

"I observe you comprehend Silent Secrets, yes?" she proceeded as though nothing had occurred.

"Yes. Sheh-sheh. Shashan."

"Shaan-shaan."

"Right," he pointed at her with his finger and adjusted the sand bag better; positioned the spear on his shoulder, it slipped, he corrected it.

"Our entire conversation falls under this cover. And all past ones. And all future conversations."

"Clear," he shrugged.

"I'll take your mental maps," she waved the tube of sheets. "They can't be hung on walls."

"Better to tear them up. I've already memorized everything."

"Better to burn them. How have you settled in?"

"Everything's perfect."

"And what about sire Taar? And sire Uruz?"

Arzis spread his hands, not quite finding himself with an answer to such a question.

"Sire Taar doesn't need me. Sire Uruz and his manes—neither."

"Are you in difficult relations with them?"

"No. Just don't fit in. Uruz has decent guys there. I even had some beer with three of them. Wrestled with two in the Circle, solid dudes."

"I mean with Taar and Uruz."

"No. Why would the mistress think that? I'm new, they don't know me, and they bare their teeth. They're acting right, I'd do the same thing," he looked at her mockingly.

"Have you chosen clothes, equipment, weapons? A mount?"

"I'm not particularly good with horse stuff, radiant mistress. The armor thing is, let's say, resolved."

Conversation withered, branching into minor streams toward dead ends.

"I have an assignment for you," she suddenly said, as if giving up.

"I'm listening, radiant. Mistress," he nodded, and tapped with his spear. Here, finally about business.

"I need you to find yourself a replacement."

"Should have torn up that fourteenth rule right away," Arzis laughed, flicking his tail. "Thought I'd live a bit longer. Let the manes not forget the axe now," he noted the important thing with exaggerated seriousness.

"Not a replacement in your service," she negated with a gesture, paying absolutely no attention to his antics. "Listen: you remember that day, eight days ago? Vaalu-Khirana told you to enter my bed."

"Well, more like, enter the Mistress so cubs would appear," Arzis corrected, sniffing. He rubbed his nose. "She said children were needed and all that."

"It's a figure of speech. That's how they say it: if a lion sleeps with a lioness, then 'he entered her bed.'"

Arzis scratched his mane, turned his spear.

"You must find someone who will agree to enter my bed."

"I think this will be very simple, Mistress."

"As you see, with you it didn't turn out simple. It turned out more complicated."

"Stupid, yet not stupid, yeah?" He maintained his grin, then apparently sobered: "No problem. I'll find someone."

"You should know several things," Vaalu-Mauna looked ahead, at her cup. "He shouldn't suspect anything, like you did. He should be young, healthy and strong, not sick with anything. He should be of low birth, ideally—without family or relatives. You understand."

"Will they kill him after, or during that? How will it all happen?" Arzis inquired curiously, not hoping for an answer, even a dishonest one.

But she answered:

"No, he will—most likely—die within a week without pain, in sleep, from aching, endless fatigue. It will be like a strange, unclear illness. Dissolution in peace."

Arzis looked aside. There again was the servant, Renaya, and another of the scribes. Waiting for the Mistress. Arzis pointed at them, as if to say, look, we're making them wait. The Mistress turned and showed them five fingers.

"Why is this necessary? I've never heard of Ashai-Keetrah engaging in such things."

Without regarding him, she selected a nice apricot piece from the table. Shortly after, he claimed an entire handful.

"Oaths forbid the answer," she replied, and bit off a smaller piece from the small piece; an even half.

"I see," Arzis chewed, stuffing more in his mouth and breathing noisily, "other Messengers also do this?"

Vaalu-Mauna didn't answer, so Arzis answered for her:

"Tsa! Oaths forbid the answer," he spread his hands. Dried apricot scattered from his palm, the spear nearly slipped from his shoulder again, and had to be stuck in the ground.

"Don't talk. This isn't a matter for mockery," Vaalu-Mauna answered thoughtfully. "Yes, they do. At least once in life."

"And some—more than once?" he nodded with swagger—impressive dedication, eh.

"Not merely twice," she met his gaze directly.

"Great," he confirmed with satisfaction. "I understand, my work will be finding these... what to call them... enterers. And how many are needed per year, per moon?"

"I need only one for now," she showed a solitary little finger. "Hopefully..."

Arzis rejoiced like a tavern owner before a wealthy drunkard.

"Ah. No problem," he opened his arms again, shifted the spear and the long-suffering thing went from stuck in the ground to lying again.

Vaalu-Mauna watched his merriment smoothly and calmly. She licked her lips neatly, almost imperceptibly; swallowed, nodded slightly.

"When you successfully complete this, you'll move to other assignments," she pointed at him with her whip.

"Good. The main thing is to give me everything more fun, something like... Fun, snarling," he looked at her cheerfully and evilly, even flashed a snarl.

"The main thing—he shouldn't know anything about the death awaiting him. And shouldn't suspect—either."

Arzis raised both palms, as if to say, we'll do it.

"Have no doubts. This is for the glory of Suungs and in my service."

"I have none," Arzis squinted in sarcasm. "If it's necessary, it's necessary. There are much worse deaths."

"Sometimes they even survive, but this happens rarely," she tried to explain to him, but pointlessly, since he affirmed his position:

"I'll find the Mistress a good lion, strong as a firran. Will be the best."

Vaalu-Mauna nodded and clapped her hands, looking at him. Renaya quickly approached her, the scribe, and probably someone else, and they left to receive clients, or whatever else Messengers do.

Exit and Entry

All of this ends—and it becomes clear that it has ended—when you are visited by the familiar, heavy feeling of your own body. You don't yet stir, still in fear of moving even the tip of your tail, but you already know: here is the stomach, here is your hand, the other one, legs, nose; dry, warm breathing, closed eyes, covered by the complete darkness of several layers of blackest blindfold. When she was mentored by Myanfar, this took several years, this ability to reliably understand that you're no longer *there*, but here. She spent entire moons of life and shed hot, hopeless tears for this, and not only them. You already know when you've been thrown out, you already know about yourself, you've returned back, home, to the world of warm blood, and now awaits the final battle, the ultimate feat; and with it you must hurry, while your memory is not yet erased by the colors of the world; when you still cling with a claw to the Hunting Lands of the Inner Empire.

You, in this world known as Mauna, extend your hand into nowhere, and amazingly—someone catches it, someone surprisingly caring and tender, interlacing fingers as if meeting a traveler from a journey of a thousand years. You see nothing, you hear nothing, you only feel the touch, but you knew the touch would come, and now you know—you are heard. They hear you, they attend to you. Infinite gratitude for this touch, the sign that you can free yourself from the burden of Messages:

"First. From Nyys to Mauna. Who: Fiscal Regulate, Eastern Andaria. To whom: circular to Fiscals' Regulates. Immediately cease accepting promissory notes with seal A-M-seven. Multiple forgeries confirmed. Upon discovery of notes with seal A-M-seven, immediately notify Regulate of Law. Signature: Water-Arrow-Gold-eight."

"Sixth..."

An exhale. Squeeze the Welcomer's gentle palm until it hurts, dig in with claws. She must endure Mistress' claws. This will help remember. It must.

"Seventh..."

"For the glory of the Suungs, by Vaal's power, our Mistress," — this is what Vaalu-Mauna hears so sharply, as soon as they remove the cotton from her ears. Then the blindfold from her eyes, and here it is, good morning, new day. Today with her: Atrissa—Welcoming; Melim himself—the Graph-Master, acting as a Graph-scribe; and with him—her already favourite Mizuri.

"Good morning," Mauna murmured sleepily, squinting as she sat up in bed. Atrissa immediately piled pillows behind her back—there were a monstrous number scattered across the bed and even the floor, of all shapes and sizes, from enormous to tiny.

"Beautiful morning, our Mistress," Mizuri replied, meeting her gaze.

"Beautiful morning," Melim echoed, swiftly transcribing his stenography into clean copy.

"Melim, make another note: Vaalu-Vanaramsaya has gone silent for the coming three nights."

"Yes, Mistress."

"Why would Andarian fiscals route anything through Nyys?" Mauna asked, drawing the words out slowly.

Neither Mizuri nor Melim knew the answer, but Mizuri ventured:

"Perhaps some Andarian official ended up in Yunian."

"Melim," Mauna yawned, scratching hard at one ear, "give me the lion's truth about promissory notes."

Melim considered what clever response to give — he had a reputation for explaining anything and everything (half of it nonsense improvised on the spot, but he did love his reputation). But Mizuri spoke up instead:

"Radiant one, a promissory note is, sort of, a debt receipt, but not a simple one. It's a paper where one promises to pay another a specific sum at a specific time. But the difference from a simple receipt is that a promissory note can be transferred—like coins. They're given in guilds, trading houses, banks..."

"Hmm. Oh yes, safer to pass paper than to haul caravans with gold. Or haul sacks of mail instead of Messengers, back and forth. And why haven't they thought of this before," Mauna tries to joke, and the Medium smiles greatly at the Mistress's joke. "Let Stan look if we have any such... promissory notes... A-M-Seven. Yes, Atrissa, tell..."

From the direction of the main gates came the crudest roar, and then—an explosion of male laughter. Then for some reason a rooster's crow, though there were no roosters nearby, for noisy creatures don't live where Messengers are. This is impossible.

Everyone exchanged glances, and Vaalu-Mauna — too.

"What time is it?" asked the Mistress with surprise.

"Half past seven in the morning."

Until nine—no noise. And usually Mauna returns at eight. Everyone in the Family knows this. What the... Atrissa ran to the window, quickly and anxiously.

"I love you life, and I waaaant you to get betterrrr!" something huge bellowed.

"That's sir Arzis," Atrissa reported, holding back the curtain. "And some lion I don't recognize. Sir Uruz just approached them. Someone else too, but he's got his tail to me, can't see who. Oh..." the servant sighed.

"What is it?" Vaalu-Mauna frowned, setting her paws on the floor while fumbling with her chemise's silk belt.

"They seem to be arguing."

"Run to Taar and tell him I order to receive the arrival Arzis has brought," Vaalu-Mauna said hastily.

"Oh, right, an arrival?" Atrissa caught on. "Should I—should we prepare him for bed?"

"Yes, yes. Wait! Remember, about the arrival: don't let him drink, don't let him overeat. I'll look at him first. Then I'll indicate whether to prepare. Run."

Atrissa vanished, and Mauna sat on the bed slightly bewildered; just as bewildered, Melim looked at her.

"My Vaal, so quickly," the Messenger whispered to herself. "So sudden..."

...Taar, who'd fallen asleep late and badly, woken early and badly, strode quickly toward Arzis and the stranger, already surrounded by four of the Messenger's bodyguard on the cobblestone path to the main entrance.

"What's going on here?" he inquired.

"Sir Taar, check this out—we have a guest," Arzis indicated the guest, oh my Vaal, what a sight. "We made a little noise here, mess happens, we're already done."

"I ask the sir to introduce himself, on what matter..."

Standing slightly behind, Arzis was furiously signaling the following: soundlessly mouthing 'mistress' and poking his finger through a circle made by his left hand's fingers. And winking.

"...actually, allow me a correction—what is the sir's name?"

"Mine? Manu."

Right then Renaya ran up and spoke sweetly to Taar: they were ordered to receive the guest, he has arrival passage, he's expected, please-please. Smile to the guest, smile to Taar, smile to everyone.

"Oh, yo, is that her?" the enormous lion pointed his finger at her.

"Are you kidding me, bro?" Arzis gave him a familiar shove. "This one's old. Things are about to get real."

"I'd fuck her anyway," Manu laughed.

"Me too!" Arzis also laughed. "Well, Renaya, show us where to go, what to eat, and everything else. Come on. We were joking, good Suungs understand jokes. Come on, brother, let's go, it's all nonsense. Renaya! Come on, Renaya, set us up a nice reception, this and that," and Arzis took the enormous lion by the elbow, just like a lioness would, and walked with him toward the estate, paying absolutely no attention to the wary bodyguards and other props.

Taar gestured to the bodyguards to stand down and followed after Arzis with measured steps.

"Sir Arzis, a word?" Taar called.

"Yeah, yeah, sure," came the cheerful reply, and he spoke confidentially to Manu, barely managing an arm around those shoulders: "Go with her, hang tight, everyone's all so serious here. Keep it cool, they just pucker their asses."

"Got it, bro," Manu clapped him on the shoulder.

"I'll be right there," said Arzis, and stepped aside, beckoning the steward with a gesture.

Taar asked, holding his fist to his mouth:

"Poor planning. Why'd you bring him here?" barely audible.

"Where else?" Arzis countered, quiet, calm, and vicious, leaning down.

"We need to ask the Mistress, make a schedule, squeeze him into the day," Taar whispered loudly. "Determine a place. To the residence, this..."

"So squeeze him in already. The matter seems important."

Taar rubbed his eyes with thumb and index finger. Then the finger pointed at Arzis:

"What does he know?"

"That he's supposed to, uh, enter the bed of some very beautiful and rich lioness, since she adores lions the size of cows. I lost our mistress to him in the Circle."

"How is that?" Taar asked helplessly, though this wasn't his style at all.

"It's like cards, only you have to wrestle. Sir Taar, don't worry about it, go tell the mistress everything's in hand. Wash him up there, give him that special wine, well, you know the drill. And careful, he's an idiot."

"What do you mean—'idiot'?"

"Idiot, sir Taar, idiot. Id-i-ot. The opposite of you," Arzis was walking up the stairs, looking at him.

And then he didn't leave Manu's side. Two bodyguards at the entrance indicated for Manu to stand so they could inspect him; but Arzis demanded they search him first, which they did. Saying that beauty loves cleanliness, Arzis looked at Manu and bared his teeth. He did the same thing when they were inspecting Manu. They sat down at the table together (right in the main dining hall, where Arzis had led them, though initially Renaya was leading to the small atrium—either from fright or she didn't think), which the servants—to their credit—extremely quickly and deftly set, and Manu praised them for 'getting it.' Arzis poured wine on the floor when he saw they'd brought them 'shit' (the servants in their haste didn't think they should serve not the expensive Kafna wine, but heat up that special one, with honey), and this greatly amused Manu. Arzis said that now they would have a bite, and then wash up and go 'have fun.' He told tales and dirty jokes.

Then—suddenly—Vaal-Mauna entered, accompanied by four bodyguards. Arzis very simply, like to a female-friend, waved his palm at her, and pointed her out to Manu, but with a certain special gesture, for the latter made no obscene outbursts and made no comments, but only nodded with a smirk, devouring a chicken leg whole. Arzis noted with satisfaction and recognition that the Mistress was without any sisterhood distinctions, and even her dress wasn't sisterly, only with a silver ring.

She gestured her guards to stay back and approached Manu, coming very close. Arzis watched her study him, one hand at her side, the other on her hip. He saw the big lion's stunned amazement, mouth falling open, breathing loud. Saw Uruz's strained muzzle—the guard couldn't help himself and moved to the side instead of staying behind. But it ruined nothing.

"A lion's desire is a lioness's life," Vaalu-Mauna said to him, and left.

Manu transformed. The laughter stopped, the responses ended. After draining both wine and water, he demanded to wash. Arzis went with him, literally driving half-naked Merine and Kara from the bathhouse, roaring at them to stay out and go find the Mistress or wherever. Inside, Manu expressed himself exclusively in profane exclamations and extreme, passionate, violent threats, of which the most decent was... none were decent.

"I go first!" he warned Arzis grimly, climbing from the barrel.

"Of course, brother, you're the guest," Arzis agreed easily. "Dry off. I'll tell the tail-lifters to make some grub."

In just a bathhouse cloth he went out and very, very conveniently caught the servants Atrissa and Taira by the door. Both were sitting there and clearly waiting for them.

Atrissa rushed to Arzis:

"Why are you washing?" she hissed.

"You want to sit in there with him? Shut up and listen here: run to the mistress and tell her to throw me out when I come in."

"What?"

"When. I. Come in," he grabbed her shoulder, "with this lion to the mistress, she must throw me out. In the most terrible and humiliating way. Let her say something like 'get out.' Go on, move your tail."

"Why are you throwing me around!" Atrissa suddenly hit him in the chest, the northern lioness. "*Tsanna!*"

Oh no, nobody hits him for free.

"Shhhhh now," he embraced her while grabbing her muzzle. "No fighting. Where's the mistress?"

"Mmmm..."

He let go of her muzzle, but not before some torment—yanking it around, tormenting her like he'd done to lionesses as a child, then as a teen. No chance she could break free without serious clawing.

But now there was no time for terrible clawing—she had to serve the Mistress!

"Guest wing, there are bedrooms there," Atrissa gasped. Then back to her complaint: "You were choking me! I'll complain."

Unconcerned by the tragic accusation and inevitable consequences, Arzis told her angrily:

"Run there!" and shook her shoulder, not gently. It worked: not only she ran off, but Taira too, the living witness to the torments.

Watching them go, Arzis headed back to the bathhouse, but didn't make it, because Manu emerged from it—still wet, feral and serious.

"Where to go?"

"This way," Arzis led him.

And he led him in a complicated way, not directly, buying time for Atrissa.

And so they walked, half-naked, through the whole residence, then up the main stairs. Approaching the bedroom and seeing Mauna's body-

guards at the door, Arzis suddenly realized he'd missed a detail: they might let Manu through but not him. Also crucial—was Mauna ready or not?

He remembered his own entry. Then she wasn't ready. She was sitting with her eyes bound. Or was that how it should be?...

Just then Atrissa emerged, and with some mockingly radiant smile said to them:

"This way, good Suungs," and gestured at the door with theatrical flair.

And without any difficulties or obstacles they both found themselves in the bedroom.

Or rather, Arzis knew this wasn't her real bedroom—that one was straight across the residence. You didn't just stroll into her real bedroom. Probably couldn't enter it at all.

Everything was different: more light; the servant—Arzis recognized Khizaya, the most experienced—sat at the paws of the bed on a floor cushion, impassive, and Arzis could tell something cold and lethal hid in those wide sleeves and folded hands. Most importantly, Vaalu-Mauna stood leaning one shoulder against the canopy post, left leg crossed over right in apparent languor, almost wanton. Her nightgown reached her claws but left her tail visible. Dark gray, oddly, not white.

Pointing at Arzis with her finger, perfectly straight arm, Mauna said:

"You? You—no. Get out."

Her cold gaze and contemptuous gesture were so annihilating that Arzis even snorted. Manu looked at him, but instantly, not lingering, not interested.

A moment—and Arzis left, quietly closing the door behind him. He inhaled, exhaled, began to draw the door curtain to seal and close the successfully completed deal, but a hand in a gleaming-studded glove stopped him.

"Don't close it," whispered the guard at the door, Tai, a Hustrian and great knife enthusiast, and generally a complicated type, as Arzis had already understood. The bodyguard on the other side—Arzis didn't remember his name yet—pointed to his ear. Meaning, they needed to hear everything.

Arzis nodded understandingly and said quietly:

"Well, off she goes," and raised a victory fist at the door.

Tai turned away, snorting with a grin.

Standing mid-corridor, Arzis surveyed the scene, wrapped only in white cloth but hands confidently on hips. He eyed the Mistress's bodyguard—four more manes plus Uruz—but they showed no interest in his triumph of a job well done. Only Tai wore something like a smile, though that could mean anything at all.

"Go. Don't interfere with guarding the Mistress," Uruz squeezed out, and nodded his head toward the stairs down. The armor plates creaked when he crossed his arms.

Rubbing his cheek and rolling his shoulders, Arzis left silently. They could at least say 'thank you.' And he sat right as he was, in the dining hall

where they'd recently eaten and drunk. He took a goblet, unclear whose, and drank what was there. Turned out to be wine at the bottom, that same one, with honey, and not ordinary honey. He liked it. Another tincture sat on the table, and another. Poured both, drank both. Good.

Servants scurried past, one, then another—clearing the table. Atrissa approached too, grabbed something. Looked at it, put it back, and pounced on him (ambush!):

"Why are you sitting here, and naked too?"

"I'm not naked," answered Arzis, draining drops from the goblet's bottom. He still wanted that wine, but there was no more.

"Oh, under another Mistress you'd be punished ten times over. Or executed."

"Under this one they wanted to execute me once. Still nine in reserve," he took a chicken leg; he gnawed it (the leg), thoughtfully, feeling tired—he'd practically not slept this night.

Still clearing the table, Atrissa muttered softly:

"Our Mistress, noblest, bravest, kindest... Rushed to you herself... Ah-lia! You know nothing about her, fool. Born under a falling star, you were. Vaal shamed you into sense at the last second."

"Listen, go get me something to wear. From my room, anything."

"Go get it yourself," Atrissa refused him and took what she needed from the table, carrying it away.

Sighing, Arzis continued lazily gnawing the leg, his gaze wandering around the dining hall. Nothing came to mind, nothing wanted. Tired. He searched the table more, in vain hopes of finding more of that wine. There's another bottle here, he drank from it, a lot. Closed his eyes, sat, leaning on the table.

"Where did you find such a boar?" Atrissa appeared from somewhere behind.

"They're everywhere. Hope this one suits the mistress," he said slowly.

A decisive, light-furred hand handed him something large and soft from behind his shoulder.

"Don't talk about this, sheh-sheh," she whispered hurriedly.

"You brought it up. What is this?"

Fumbling, Arzis dropped the thing, and it pooled across the floor in beige fabric.

"A toga."

"I don't have a toga. Where did you get it?"

"We have everything, Arzis. Come on."

"I don't know how to put on togas. Or pasnas," he said almost truthfully.

She looked at him reproachfully:

"What kind of lion doesn't know how to dress in a toga? Stand up."

Arzis was so completely lazy about everything that he simply stood and spread his arms to the sides. The bath cloth fell from him, and he remained without anything.

Without any reaction to this, Atrissa deftly wrapped him up. Then, pressing his shoulders, sat him back down; with a small grooming brush lionesses typically used, she began mercilessly working through his mane. Honestly, Arzis would've happily passed out right there at the table; but as always, no luck—either shamhats wake you mid-night with roaring, or brothel brawls, or northern lionesses grooming you.

An already not-young dhaar female came, removed the tablecloth from the table, laid a different one.

"Sir-master will drink more-more?"

Arzis knew: in this Family, with this Mistress, dhaars were allowed to serve food and drink, except for serious and ceremonial occasions. Dhaars were allowed here and lived somewhere in the basement, same as him.

"No."

The goblet before Arzis disappeared. Atrissa didn't fail to use hierarchy and position, and snorted at the dhaar female to hurry up, and not get in the way.

"Thank you, sir-master."

Silently, very quietly she left.

"I'll complain about you. To Taar. And the Mistress."

"Why?" Arzis asked without interest.

"I told you! You grabbed me and choked me. You wanted to kill me."

Arzis made a dismissive sound.

"Tell me what happened while I was gone."

"You were gone two days, what news could there be?" Atrissa started grooming more gently. Then he felt something different, like she was adding mane ties.

"Ties or what?"

"Yes. Oh, well except our dhaar youth got stung by either a bumblebee or a wasp. Says it was in a pitcher when she was washing. Little liar, wants to wash fewer dishes. She got herself stung."

"In the pitcher, you say?" Arzis perked up. "And what's with her?"

"Nothing, her hand is hurting."

"And which dhaar was it?"

"Why do you care so much? She's one of ours, youngling, her mother also serves the Messengers. We call her Toyka."

"Toyka?"

"Uh-huh. Her name's actually longer, you'd tie your tongue in knots, but we call her Toya," Atrissa said pleasantly, scratching him with her claws as she worked through his mane.

"What breed is she?"

"Mramri. All of ours are Mramri stock—decent, permitted breed. Obedient."

"Where is she?"

"How should I know? In the kitchen or the basement. Or the chicken coop. Where else would she be?"

"I thought all our dhaars were old. Huh."

"Nope," Atrissa said and sighed, managing his mane.

He couldn't picture who she was talking about. Though the dhaars lived not far from him in the basement, he practically never saw them—they huddled together, kept hidden, and didn't dare look anyone in the eye; they all seemed middle-aged, in their forties or fifties.

"Is she someone's daughter from our dhaars? Or great-daughter?"

"No, I told you: her mother also serves a Messenger, she's in Denenai now. What's with you and the dhaars, like there's nothing else to talk about."

She stood opposite him, on the other side of the table.

"You're tired, go sleep it off."

Suddenly a muffled roar was heard from the second floor: possessed and triumphant.

"Ahlia! Vaal..." Atrissa pressed her hands to her chest. "Oh, Mistress... Vaal protects. Vaal does not permit."

Arzis yawned and wiped his nose:

"Vaal's in hunt. Vaal covered the business," he stood up and, as he was, walked out of the dining room. "I'm going to sleep."

"You're welcome," Atrissa threw accusingly after him.

Going down the stairs to the basement floor, he rubbed his nose. He should get himself water in a big pitcher, since he'll be drinking when he wakes up—he loves that so much.

"Fuck."

Arzis turned and swayed back toward the dining room, but Atrissa had vanished. He wanted to call for her, then thought better of it. He headed for the kitchens, but found them oddly silent and deserted—no servants, no dhaars anywhere. He continued toward the western service exit—there was a street well out there. But he needed something to carry water. Where the hell could he find one?

Where do these females go when you need them to give you a pitcher?

And where do they hide everything?

**The dhaar who was ignorant of many important things, but
knew one—the most important**

So be it—he kicked the storeroom door open. Surely he'd find something useful. And he did: sacks, bottles, baskets, pig legs and garlic dangling from the rafters, and also—a lioness. A lioness with her tail to him, though her tail was hidden beneath a long gray dress that reached the floor, patched and re-patched. She wore two aprons for some reason: one properly in front, the other turned backward and dirty. A heavy cloak draped her shoulders, its ends tucked into her belt—the sort Suung lionesses only wore in foul weather or bitter cold. Three iron rings each on gray ears that peeked out from torn slits. One of the dhaars.

Crouched down, she was retrieving something from beneath the longest shelf, close to the floor.

"Hey, there," he knocked on the wood of the door, "gimme a pitcher."

The dhaar hurriedly got up, something there overturned for her.

"Strong day, sir-master Arzis," a half-bow from her, and immediately straightened her cloak on her head, her ears stood better in the slits, pressed back.

Yes-yes, Arzis now understood who Atrissa had been talking about; and exactly, she hadn't lied—thin, a thin young voice. This was the very one, what was her name... tail take it, he forgot. Well, young, in short. A hornet had stung her, yes. But you couldn't really see her properly—hidden away, only her muzzle and eyes, but even those looked downward.

"Tsa, you know my name?" He scratched his mane, leaning against the doorframe.

"Must know all-all in Family, sir-master Arzis. Pitcher empty or full?"

She spoke Suung well, almost without accents.

"Empty."

"Pitchers not here, sir-master comes with me."

Carefully and quickly she passed by him, went through the door down the corridor, directly opposite. Arzis followed her into what turned out to be the dish storage, glancing around as he entered.

"Please, sir-master," Arzis was offered a large, handsome red pitcher. Since he wasn't hurrying to take it, improvement followed: the dhaar quickly wiped it outside with cloth she got from her apron.

"Is it you who was recently stung by a hornet?" Arzis took the pitcher and set it on a shelf by the door, not looking.

"Yes, sir-master. Was washing dishes. It stung," the dhaar confirmed everything, ears pressed back, looking down, well, only her gray little nose was visible.

"Where?"

Silently she pointed to her forearm, tapped it, and folded her hands in front of herself.

"I know everything about stings. Everything. Come on, show me," Arzis sat down on a table made of roughly joined boards, which squeaked pitifully. "And take off the cloak, I can't see properly."

Hurrying a bit, she first began untying the ties on her right sleeve, but then decided that removing the cloak was more urgent; the dhaar accomplished this guiltily, raising her gaze to him for the briefest moment, and then—immediately lowering it.

Guiltily for no reason. What a... however... interesting female. So, wait.

"What's your name?" he poked his claw at his nose, looking at a small window under the ceiling. "Um... Er..."

"Toamliaana, usualcall—Toya," she answered, and extended her right hand forward. She touched her forearm, on the inside. How gray she was. Perfect grayness, you wouldn't see such among the Suungs, not in Norramark, nor in Suungkomnaasa, even in Mstvaash. "Belong to dhaars, breed—Mramri," she said by rote, clearly.

"Dusk-hued," he said to her, hinting at her gray coloring, but it seemed Toya completely didn't understand that this was meant for her. "It stung here?" Arzis took her hand. And even turned to examine it in better light.

He felt how she flinched at the touch, all of her.

"Yes, sir-master," she said uncertainly.

"You're lying," he said certainly.

Terror filled her eyes.

"No, I truly-truly, sir-master Arzis," Toya began speaking quickly and quietly, not daring to take back her hand, which he continued to hold. "I truly. In pitcher was hornet, I was washing, hornet came out and stung. Hamanu Kara said also-also that I want less to wash dishes and got stung on purpose, but it's not truth, not truth..."

"It didn't sting your hand," Arzis said with loaded thoughtfulness, then studied her, taking stock of the situation.

The situation reeked of panic and terror so thick you could slice it. The dhaar female seemed unable to catch her breath, struggling with it all. Her dark gray nose had gone wet. Such a pretty muzzle, though.

"That hornet into the crystal pitcher—I put it. So I'm guilty of everything, and must make amends."

"Yes, crystal pitcher. I wash such very-very carefully, with vinegar. Yes. Sir-master nowhere guilty. No. I beg forgiveness."

Arzis wasn't really listening:

"And it could only bite in one place. Right here," he showed her the corner of his mouth.

"No, was here, sir-master Arzis," she showed with her left hand on her right, helplessly. "Here."

"You won't deceive me, I see everything. To heal the sting, to make amends," he looked attentively into her gray eyes, "can only be done one way."

"I beg forgiveness, sir-master Arzis."

"So do I," he told her, pulling her hand toward him. She resisted—not from defiance but from overwhelming, paralyzing terror. His right hand shifted from briefly touching her lips to claiming her neck and nape; his left pinned her shoulder. He drew Toya to himself, calmly and without unnecessary movements.

Arzis felt something strange—nothing happened; absolutely nothing at all. He might as well have kissed the lips of a statue of a fine, young lioness; one that, even if she very much wanted to, couldn't respond. The only act of will from Toya was one—she closed her eyes; still, something had prompted her that at least this must be done, for many reasons. Or perhaps not even that, but blackest shame, or fear.

"Ever been kissed before?"

She opened her eyes and shook her head very slightly—'no.' The horror in her eyes became pure, animal. After thinking a bit, Arzis embraced her waist with both hands, gripped her belt.

"Right then, once more. You'll figure it out."

"Sir-master..." Toya said very quietly, offering something like resistance with her hands (pressing her palms against his shoulders). Something like, practically nothing. Rather—truly a plea. "I beg."

"What?" Arzis simply asked, looking at her and digging his claws into her belt.

"Sir-master Arzis, I cannot burden myself. Cannot have cubs... Who wanting to take me in marriage if dishonest? Dishonest lioness not needed by good lions. Sir-master will not take honor... Or..."

"We're barely getting started."

"Cannot. Honor will not be taken. Or..."

He swayed, and they nearly fell, both of them.

"Come now, come now. We'll learn some licking, it'll be useful. At least that."

"No. No. I am begging."

"No?"

"No. I will become pregnant. To burden oneself just like that—simply—cannot. Great shame and sin."

"Well, you won't get pregnant from kisses."

"I will. Lioness gets pregnant if lion wants her, just like sir-master now... I know..."

"Wait, Toya, no you won't," he frowned, shook her a little, hey. "You don't get pregnant from kisses."

"We always get pregnant if lion possesses and wants. From everything, from his desire," Toya said convincingly, believing.

Arzis scratched behind his ear, marveling.

"No, but I told you! What are you, like a lionessy! You'll only get pregnant if... listen, come here, I'll explain everything to you. Give me your hand."

Toya, motionless as if lifeless, didn't come and didn't yield to movement. Unless to drag her by the hand, or by the tail, or simply take her on the shoulder.

"Just trust me, Toyusha," Arzis shook her again. "No one can be trusted! But me—I can."

"Toyusha?" She suddenly sighed, truly coming alive. "Ahey..."

Arzis went with her further away, to the very farthest corner of the storeroom, and for some reason she didn't resist very much. Some sacks with something very soft came in handy, he threw them on the floor, many of them. Just like cotton.

"Cotton," Toya noted timidly. "Ordered to store..."

"Well, sit on it then."

She really did sit, though not as he'd expected—settling on her haunches atop a sack, carefully arranging her dress in a full circle and tucking her tail away. He settled beside her, smearing his entire toga with grime from the sacks and floor.

There they sat: Toya gazing straight ahead; Arzis lounging against the sacks, elbow propped, rhythmically tapping his bronze ring against his knee while scanning the space with thoughtful, predatory interest.

"Has no one ever told you about this?"

"About what?" asked Toya, still looking ahead of herself.

Arzis noticed that she had folded her palms on her chest in a strange gesture: pressed them tightly together, straight.

"About love."

Arzis had wanted to say something much more vulgar, but at the very last moment changed his mind.

At first she didn't react at all. It seemed she didn't even understand. Her profile in the dusty light of the basement. She shook her head, even with dignity: 'No.'

"About lions and lionesses," he looked at her, Toya frowned slightly, her ear flicked. "And what can happen between them. And you need to know, yes, everyone needs to know," he looked at her once again, but all the same: she sits on her legs on the sacks, looking ahead, palms in a gesture, just like the Ashai-Keetrah, he had seen similar ones, including from his mother (she really knew about gestures, mother was generally an interesting Ashai-Keetrah, but a completely dissolute lioness). He thought, added: "Do you, well, want to get married?"

"Yes. Yes. I want to," finally she looked at him, turning her straight palms on her chest into clasped together ones.

"A Suung, I'd guess?" He winked, pleased to finally get some conversation flowing.

"To good Suung, if granted," Toya confirmed with a small bow of her head.

"When do you want to marry?"

"When he takes me," she nodded once more.

"And how old are you?"

"Ahey granted eighteen."

"Ahey? Is that your father?"

"He is father to all Mramri," she said confidently, "to all of us," more modestly, "to all living and non-living," she finished uncertainly, glancing at Arzis sideways.

He thought a little.

"Ah. You're this, well... I understand, dhaar thing, how is it... belief. So. We need some wine, without it learning will go poorly. Where's the wine here?"

"There, there," Toya pointed somewhere into the wall, and also down. "Here too there are some, sweet Hustrian ones."

"Go get two."

Toya briskly rose, as if she had only been waiting for the request (order), and quickly returned with two bottles—a large one and a small one. The small one had cheerful patterns in sealing wax, the large one looked stern.

"Listen, what's the difference between them?" he tossed both bottles in his hands.

"I don't know," Toya obediently returned to her place, sitting on her legs again. "These are Mistress's hamanu who know. I am not learned in wines, I cannot drink wines."

"Why can't you drink them?"

"No-no. Mramri lionesses don't drink wine, nothing that leads to... to..."

She seemed to be struggling to translate from her native tongue into Suung. But Arzis cut short her translation efforts:

"Well, imagine you're already a Suung. When you marry—you'll be a Suung, and you can even get drunk. You'll even need to. So, where's my knife?"

Arzis remembered that he had left everything in the bathhouse when he washed with firran in lion form, prepared for the Sacrifice to the Mistress, and now on him—only a toga and ties in his mane.

"Do you have a knife?" he looked at her from under his brows, from bottom to top, sprawled on his side.

Gazing at the low ceiling, Toya rummaged carefully through her seemingly bottomless front apron (she had a rear one too) and produced something resembling a worn knife nub with a disintegrating handle.

"Only such-such."

"Will do. So. Well, let's open the big one, shall we. Not the little one," he smiled at her.

She didn't smile back at him, only barely noticeably bit her lower lip.

"What should I do, sir-master?" she asked.

"Be with me," Arzis decided.

Surprisingly, her amusing knife stub removed the sealing wax very well and quickly. With the cork he had to fiddle a bit. Arzis sniffed the bottle, took a sip and grunted.

"Right, sweet one. Your turn," he offered her the bottle.

Dust-covered, the bottle caught the window light with an interesting green gleam.

"I cannot," Toya pressed her palms to her chest near her throat, fingers spread wide. "Sin."

She spoke everything quietly and in despair.

"Toyusha. Don't be stubborn," he moved closer to her, put his arm around her shoulder and showed how to take the bottle in her hands—one, two (taking her wrists in his palms). "You don't drink it all, just a little, and this sin will be small. Come on."

He has heard the word 'sin,' but don't really know what it is.

She, with his support, sipped from the bottle. It seemed she suppressed a cough. So it all was: the dhaar lioness Toya, looking ahead at the bottle and sitting on her legs on cotton sacks, drinking wine with the help of the Yaamri pride son, Arzis, who sprawled to the side and above.

"More, yeah."

She obeyed, and drank more, holding the bottle with both hands, very straight, as if at a ceremony.

"Right, that's enough for now," he took the wine from her, took another gulp, and set it somewhere on a shelf, not looking.

Toya licked her lips clean, wiped her mouth with her sleeve. She snorted softly.

"Sweet-sweet. Like jam," she cautiously commented on the experience. She whispered: "*Vergib mir meine Schuld...*"

"Yeah," Arzis nodded, looking at her ears, her nape. "Now we wait."

"Wait?" she asked timidly.

"Yes."

He shifted back to his earlier position, to her left side. Taking her hand in his, he toyed with her palm, flexing her fingers, examining her claws. Then he sniffed her palm, even gave small nibbles. Toya couldn't resist stealing a sideways glance at him, though her hand stayed utterly passive. Then she turned away again.

He took another swig of wine.

"How's it going?" he asked her.

"I have such shame."

"Very good."

He easily took her by the shoulders and under the tail, with expertise. Oh, light. Unaccustomed, Toya didn't think to and didn't dare grab onto his neck. But all this—not theft, this only to seat her on his thighs.

And again repetition of what was covered, carefully. Closer, closer, to her wet nose, to her warm breath. But, unexpectedly and again:

"Sir-master... Please I begging. I will burden myself, cubs... Won't be wanted... Mramri lionesses cannot so... Only if marriage, only must take..." she covered her mouth with her palm, turned away.

He pondered this, rocking her gently on his knees.

"Toya, listen." Arzis frowned, reaching for more wine but stopping himself at the last moment. "Nobody gets pregnant from kisses. Look here"—he grabbed her pathetic knife from the shelf—"I swear this to you

in blood. Here." Even with that dull blade, he managed to slice the base of his palm.

"*Fus!*" Toya put her palm to her mouth.

"Right. Blood's not pleasant, but we'll do this..." He poured wine over his palm and wrist. "Sweeten it up. Mix them together. I swear to you, watch"—he smeared the blood-wine mixture across her left cheek, chin, throat, all over her small features. "This isn't some tail-crap, Toya—I swear by my ancestors. Now hear the truth: if someone kisses you here"—he cupped her chin—"or here"—he touched her deftly through her dress, back by her tail—"or anywhere else, you won't get cubs. Children only come if, well... I'll explain how it really works. No pregnancies today, I swear—I'm finished with all that." His words came thick and slurred, drunk and weary, while Toya listened with the attention of one receiving divine revelation. "Marriage, you said? If you do get heavy today somehow, you can run straight to me and be my wife, understand? For as long as you want. See? I'm risking everything, putting my neck in the noose! I stand by my words, got it? So... Now you'll know everything necessary. We'll give you away properly prepared, with claws sharp, to a good Sung."

"Yes," said Toya, unexpectedly. And she was again looking for something in her apron, gazing at the same ceiling.

"There, yes, you see," said Arzis, and drank wine, lazily watching her.

"I agree," Toya confirmed something, pulling out an awl wrapped in cloth.

Arzis chuckled:

"If I'd known you had an awl, I'd have used that instead. Oh." He looked surprised. "Well now."

Toya pricked her finger, and quite strongly, fiercely. Her blood also flowed. She took the bottle from him, looking into his eyes as if asking permission, and Arzis, hesitating slightly, gave it to her.

"Now that's the spirit. Really getting into it."

But she didn't drink the wine, but—like him—poured it on herself, only on her finger. Then she applied her finger to his right cheek, lightly and very carefully. And she sighed all over and tensed.

Arzis, extremely tired and merry, agreed with everything:

"Exactly right, Toyusha, this way we'll win. Repetition—mother of this very... something there. Into the blood of victory..." speaking, he waved the bottle. "Here. A little," he gave it to her.

Toya held the bottle in her hands, and then, sighing and already without his help, drank, and then set the wine away.

Things progressed better: she still couldn't respond properly, didn't know how, but she was becoming pliant. Their teeth clinked together—something that hadn't happened to Arzis in many years. Toya was learning. Everything felt sluggish and weak to Arzis; he couldn't manage anything even if he'd desperately wanted to. But it felt very good, just like back then, like back then, not like nowadays. He tugged her ears and she leaned toward him; he buried his nose against her neck, beneath her

dress collar. So many scents: Toya, his blood, Hustrian wine, kitchen, soap, stables, chicken coop, inexplicably garlic.

Well, excellent.

"Look, lionesses need to be sniffed. Well, you see... He will sniff you. And you don't really smell us much, it's not really interesting to females. Or is it interesting?..." he told her, holding-stroking her neck; they both looked at the shelf with plates and pitchers before them, and Arzis described large, generous gestures in the air, and Toya followed them. "Toya, is it interesting for you to smell me?"

She checked—very carefully sniffed his nose, and even his mane. She shared her experience with him:

"It's like... getting-to-know."

Claws tapped in pawsteps, someone passed by the door, so distant from them. Toya and Arzis fell silent; he continued holding her neck. And just as he described a new gesture in the air to continue his important story, then...

"*Toya!*" an displeased lioness voice called her from the corridor.

"Shhhh," he covered her mouth.

Pawsteps again.

"*Toya! Wo steckt die-die...*" they said in dhaar.

The storeroom door opened where they lay sprawled among the Mistress's cotton sacks; shelving concealed their entire tableau; the door shut again. "*Zum Teufel...*"

Arzis meanwhile looked down at her from above, choking with laughter, and stroked her wet little nose. She blinked.

They seemed to have left.

"Listen, what were they saying?" he released her from the captivity of silence.

Toya explained everything, pricking her ears toward him, as if seeking an answer, or support, or guidance, or an order:

"They were looking for me."

"They're looking for you," he gestured toward the whole house, continuing to stroke her nape. "And we're here with you, this... so..."

Amazing how quickly someone can learn when caught at the right moment in the right place. Toya discovered that responding was possible; that tongues mattered; that heads could turn; she mastered breathing; realized teeth-clashing wasn't mandatory; finally understood she could (so lightly, weightlessly!) rest her palm on his shoulder—timidly, but genuinely. Arzis missed this detail entirely: the past few days had drained him, and wine delivered the final blow.

He drew back; Toya instantly withdrew her hand from his shoulder.

"How's that wine working?" He glanced at the bottle while maintaining her on his lap in his carelessly sprawled position. "Hitting yet?"

Toya, grabbing the sack so as not to fall, shook her head slightly—'no.' And then, breathing in—'yes.' And she grabbed the sack just in time—his paw slid along the floor, and Toya almost fell; but she didn't make a sound, not even a frightened gasp, but deftly caught hold of him, her tail

twitched, then she just settled better on him, straightening her terrible, very simple and re-sewn dress.

"Done. How to kiss—you know," he folded her finger, frowning. "How to smell—you know. Best school of this... Arzis... master Arzis. You, uh, ever went to school?"

Toya shook her head 'no,' looking down and tearing the sack with her claw. She looked up, toward the windows. At him.

"Can you read?"

"Little-little."

"Well then..." he showed her the bronze ring on his left hand, removed it. "Read what's there."

She turned it this way and that, carefully and gently.

"Tra...", Toya frowned, ears pressed back. "Trust. No-t. Wor-ds. Trust not words."

"Perfect," Arzis returned the ring to his finger. "Now, as I said... About how to become a mother. I'll show you."

Toya fell silent and contracted, swallowed.

"Don't be afraid, I promised. Today we have... everything... honestly," he brushed with his tail the small, closed bottle of wine that had been successfully hiding on the floor all this time, and it rolled away. "You'll remain completely honest. Give me your hand. Here. Lions have such a thing, right here," he placed her palm where it belonged.

Toya covered her eyes with her other palm, and also squeezed them shut.

"Oh, Vaal. Well, you're something," he laughed. "See, if this thing gets here," he covered her muzzle with his hand, "then there won't be children. Understood?"

Strangely enough, Toya nodded, completely hidden from the world by both his hand and her own. 'Yes.'

"Right then." He spat on two fingers, considering. Even scratched his mane thoughtfully. "Do you know what oleamor is?"

"No," she replied honestly, emerging back into the world.

"Good—I don't think much of it either. Go fetch some oil then."

"Mmmm... Sir-mas..."

"Don't call me 'sir master' or I'll eat you alive."

"Mmmm... A... Arzis?"

"Smart lionessy..." Arzis murmured dreamily, breathing out while gazing at the ceiling.

"Arzis, cow oil?" She started to rise.

She suddenly noticed the mess—that bottle on the floor. Set it on a nearby shelf.

"Cow oil, that's something... Cow oil is butter, you know. No. Olive or flax. Something like that."

"Need to go out," Toya noted cautiously. "There are no oils here."

"Smart thinking. Too early to leave yet. Maybe we don't need to leave at all. We'll just live here."

Arzis breathed deeply. He'd completely forgotten what he meant to say. Or do.

"Live here... What was I talking about?"

"That needing oil."

"Ah, yes. Not needed, it'll work like this," he nodded, and poured the wine remnants on his left fingers. Then he lay on his back and told her: "Lie on me."

Arzis expected timid protests, frightened justifications and the like, but Toya—very slowly and carefully, constantly looking either into his eyes or at her position in space-time—modestly and gracefully lay down on him; her head with gray ears in iron rings ended up somewhere very far away, on his left elbow. Arzis corrected everything: her head—under his neck, everything else—properly on himself.

"We don't need oils. You now melt, like oil in a pan. Just trust me."

Toya gave no reply, burying herself somewhere in his mane.

"Look into my eyes. Only at me," Arzis pulled her from this shelter; Toya, so serious, blinking, stared into his eyes with an expression of heavy female burden. She felt that his hand, after some dealings with her dress, and also an unexpected underskirt, had begun a journey upward.

"Afraid of tickling?" he wandered around her knee with his claws: front, back, everything as it should be.

Toya silently denied this weakness, but uncertainly. Despite the order to look into his eyes, she sometimes quickly glanced down where the inevitable journey was happening. Suddenly she squirmed with her legs, letting out several stifled, forbidden giggles; Arzis grinned—well of course, above the knees between lionesses' legs you can find giggles.

"Things go more merrily, don't they, Toi?"

She couldn't respond—pressing her nose to his chest, utterly lost on how to escape these ticklish torments and shame. Arzis thought she might have bitten him through his toga's fabric (saying much to call it a bite)—either accidentally, or perhaps he'd imagined it, or something.

"So, what do we have next..." Arzis grew tragically serious. "Tail. That's it, we follow it. Long. How long, Toya, well really," he moved his palm along the tail. "Like the road to Marna. Are you listening to me?"

She nodded her head, burying her little muzzle in his chest, with closed eyes. Listening.

"So look at me then," he told her, she raised her gaze for him, but Arzis had already changed everything: "Ahhh. You don't... oh... don't want to look at me. Then closer, I'll tell you. And hide as much as you want. A journey in the night."

Here, after a small delay from her (as always), here it is, her left ear—right to his mouth; the dhaar rings chilled his nose.

"What do we have here?"

"The brush for my tail," Toya suddenly said, very quietly, somewhere down there; evidently, it was easier to speak without looking into his eyes.

"Tail-tip," Arzis confirmed. "Time to celebrate—we've reached Marna. Go on, kiss me on your own."

Lifting her gaze after hesitation (longer than before), Toya looked as though condemned to... well, condemned to something dreadful.

She even seemed to lean forward. Then stopped.

"Where?" she whispered.

"Wherever you like," Arzis shrugged.

Exhaling and bathing Arzis in warm breath, Toya stretched toward his right cheek (though the left was nearer and far more accessible) and licked him. The nearly weightless edge of her teeth. After such boldness, Toya went slack and collapsed.

Saying nothing, Arzis swiftly returned to her tail's base. After reconnaissance, he understood—hips clamped tight. This needed discouraging, and Arzis bent his knee up; it settled cunningly between her legs. With his free hand he took her palm and guided it where needed; then, changing his mind, even pushed back his tunic and placed himself entirely in her grasp. He pressed her palm down from above, since her passivity was total.

"If this," he shook her unresponsive hand on 'this', "gets here," he reached under her tail, gently and not deeply, but Toya jerked all over from fright and violation, "then there won't be cubs."

Arzis remembered that he had poured wine on the wrong fingers, not the ones he was now using.

"See?" He waited for Toya's reaction, but none came. "But if it goes here—then there will be. Lots."

He'd known, even partway there, that heat would greet him, abundant wet heat; but reality exceeded his expectations.

"Yes, Toyusha, you definitely don't need oleamor," Arzis noted melancholically. "We have a flood here, need to save ourselves. We'll drown in the basement."

She breathed nervously, a wave passed through her, and so Arzis understood that she had understood everything; and seeming to know nothing, she understood everything.

"But getting there isn't enough," he took the second wine bottle, examined it. There he didn't release Toya, no, but didn't do anything either. "You also need to finish. When a lion finishes in you here—then you'll get pregnant."

"What does he finish?" she asked suddenly, not even whispering.

You'd think this was still innocent Toya. No. That familiar catch in her voice, carefully but unsuccessfully stifled. How similar they all become when you find yourself not just anywhere, but there.

"He does..." He smashed the bottle neck against the shelf—this violent motion somehow didn't startle her. "A lion does this into you"—he poured wine on the floor. "He spills into you, only this is red wine, understand? But his will be like milk." He stopped pouring on the floor and poured directly onto her, right between her ears.

Toya bore this ordeal with extraordinary tenacity and resolve. Her ears flattened, eyes shut, she became entirely soiled and dark crimson—streams flowing down her neck beneath her collar, across her dress, down her nape and spine. The luckiest rivulets traced her nose and mouth, completing their journey by dripping from her chin onto his mane.

Then she opened her eyes—without shaking off or wiping away anything—and regarded him, blood-colored.

"I won't show you, Toya, how lions really finish and spill," he closed his eyes, throwing his head back on the sack. "Because I'm very tired and somehow merry, completely... Besides, yesterday there were whores, I had to for business, you understand."

All this time he held her, but here his finger went deeper; Arzis didn't see how she half-closed her eyes, fangs seemed to show; didn't see, but felt the familiar hip movement.

"And we had an agreement, I'm honest, you're not dishonored with me," he freed her intimates from captivity. "Stupidly honest. Others won't do the business properly."

"Stupidly honest," she repeated in thoughtful-questioning echo, and made something of a weak smile.

His hand successfully returned to the world from under her hem, and Arzis applied it to his muzzle and nose; her legs came together again, Toya watched him, completely dark red. Only now she either came to her senses or decided, and wiped herself with her sleeve.

"No, Toya, don't think anything like that, everything will be... as it should," said Arzis, and thought himself. "And listen here. If someone offends you—tell me immediately, understood? I'll kill him."

She seemed to try rising, but Arzis prevented her. Initially. Then he reconsidered, and Toya promptly settled back on her haunches. Pleasant—he felt her weight against his left leg, and somewhere in that tangle, her tail flowed.

"Later you'll come with me to Bash, I'll show you what's where and how... Otherwise, sitting in the kitchen, you won't get married, there are no lions there. You'll definitely come, you'll still walk with me. I used to, you know, I used to be... what kind... when I had no mistress, we had merry lion-lads, we worked, this and that," he opened his eyes.

"What did you work?" she wiped herself with her apron, and turned into something terrible and extremely attractive at the same time.

"Calm, business setup. We covered whorehouses. And there... Do you know what a whore is?" he looked at the ceiling.

"Bad word," Toya looked at the rich wine traces on her apron. "That's how they scold dishonest lionesses."

"They scold them everywhere, the dishonest ones. Well said."

Moving entirely to the floor, she stripped off both aprons and folded them neatly. She looked busy, almost mundane, if you ignored all the sor-did artistry coating her.

She regarded him.

"Arzis... What now?" she asked. Then suddenly added: "Do."

"We get out of here."

He rose first; Toya stood with his movement. His tail caught plates from a shelf—two or three shattered on the floor.

"Fuck."

Toya looked toward the door, Arzis surveyed all the carnage they had made. It seemed several cotton sacks were ruined with wine. Fragments.

"Right," he took her hand.

"I clean this, please."

"Leave it, let's go," Arzis didn't release her.

Arzis simply walked out of the storeroom; Toya shut the door behind them. The kitchen was already bustling, and evening seemed to be falling—hard to gauge space and time. Arzis swayed unsteadily. Toya suddenly pressed against the wall, snuffing the nearest candle as though this might hide her, make her invisible. She fearfully studied him from mane to paw-claws in his ruined toga-like garment, while he regarded her with interest—dirty, anxious, lips pressed tight, wine trails untouched on her neck, fingers splayed with claws biting into stone. Her other hand gripped the bundled aprons.

"Ahey..." Toya suddenly whispered, but with such desperation. "Arzis. I go."

She hurried off, hands folded against her chest, toward the basement quarters of the dhaar lionesses.

"Bye," she suddenly threw back to him half-turning, almost disappearing around the corner.

"Later," Arzis weakly lifted his hand, rubbing his neck.

Then he went to his place, with only the thought of collapsing into his den; and there it was, nearby, praise Vaal and all ancestors. He somehow undressed and lay naked, covering himself with something there.

Lioness-catastrophe

"*Fus, heavens... not 'bye! Why 'bye'!?*" Toya demanded of herself wildly, rushing down the corridor to the dhaar corner (that's what they call it here—custom dictates dhaars always get a corner; never a house, never proper rooms or quarters or dwellings or anything) toward her small chamber.

Yes, she even has her own room. One must value service to a Messenger.

She closed the door with her whole body. She looked at herself in the large mirror that had recently been given to her by aunties Selestina (all Suungs usually called her 'Sele' or 'Seli') and Bastiana ('Basti')—two Family dhaar lionesses; an expensive thing. In the gifted mirror she discovered a lioness-catastrophe.

Having thought, she ran to the corridor to somehow wash herself from the tub, but not so. She only managed to splash her muzzes with water once; hearing steps, Toya darted back to her room. No, that's definitely aunt Sele.

"Toya! Been chasing you through the entire household!"

She'll come in now. The age-strong dhaar heard her fussing. How untimely! How terribly untimely everything is!

Sele indeed opened the door, and discovered a humble young lioness (daughter of windy, cold, damp, coastal Mramri) on her knees beside the symbol of Ahey.

"Toya! No time for prayer. Come, there's work."

Hurried nods of the head, like, right now-right now. But Sele didn't like that Toya somehow turned away to the window, adjusting her cloak on her head. What was all this oddity?

Everything happened quickly and horribly after that. A few steps from aunt Sele:

"Why are you all dirty like this?"

Then two more steps:

"Why do you stink of wine like this?"

Then:

"Where have you been?"

After several more questions, which went from demanding to frightened, aunt Sele herself removed her cloak and saw the brown-disheveled lioness-catastrophe.

Aunt Basti immediately appeared at the lamentations.

"You drank wine? How is this possible?" they were dismayed.

"Did someone beat you?" Basti carefully touched her ears, nape, neck, cheeks.

"I didn't drink," Toya lied pitifully, already standing before them.

"*You stink of this all over. You're all filthy,*" accused aunt Sele, and so ambiguously: smell of what 'this'? dirty with what 'this'?

"*I... I...*" she sat on the bed, clasping her hands before herself.

The life-experienced dhaar lionesses began to suspect which way the wind was blowing.

"*And if that one, the new one...*" Basti looked at Sele.

"*Yes, he returned today...*" Sele looked at Basti. "*Toya. Taamlianna. Did he take you by force?*"

They sat beside her, on both sides.

"*No,*" Toya denied with her head, strongly.

"*You gave yourself to a lion willingly?*" aunt Sele pressed. "*Or did he beat and get you drunk, then took you?*"

The question was so complicated that Toya actually squeezed her eyes shut:

"*I didn't give myself. I didn't willingly. We... I... He didn't beat me,*" her ears pressed back, claws scratched her palms. "*We drank some wine a little.*"

"*If you didn't give yourself, then he took you by force, Toya,*" aunt Basti concluded reasonably, stroking Toya's paw.

"*What's his name again...*" Sele frowned.

"*I forgot too,*" Basti waved her hand.

"*He didn't beat me,*" Toya told the truth.

But the elder dhaars weren't really listening. What was the point.

"*Toya, it was him, the new one?*" Sele asked confirmingly.

"*Yes,*" the young lioness hesitated. "*But he didn't dishonor me,*" she reflected. "*No. Everything is fine. I am sinful, I have sinned greatly,*" she wiped her wet eyes with the back of her palm. "*But the All-Seeing saw why. He took wine, and blood, and...*"

Toya spoke, holding her left cheek.

"*Fus-fus-fus... Lie on your back,*" aunt Sele pressed on her chest.

"*I drank wine, but I am honest,*" Toya began to lie down. "*Ahey, have mercy on me.*"

"*No, wait,*" Basti objected, "*have her take off the dress first.*"

There was no help for it—Toya slowly and laboriously pulled it over her head. Their gaze fell upon formerly light-gray underclothes (skirt and shift)—all wine-stained, spotted, and heaven knew what else. With practiced knowledge aunt Sele reached down into Toya, felt around where necessary and everywhere, and with a sigh looked at aunt Basti.

"*What?*" asks aunt Basti.

"*What indeed. That's it.*"

"*Aunt Sele, I am honest. I was with him, but he didn't rape me.*"

"*Oh, Ahey, have mercy,*" aunt Basti also reached in and also confirmed that it seemed to be 'that's it'.

"*Toya, I also denied it when lion first committed sin with me. Everyone does that,*" aunt Sele sighed.

"*He didn't... he didn't take me,*" Toya said in confusion.

"Don't lie, don't lie," aunt Basti said sternly. *"You're all dirty and hot down there, that only happens with a lion. Especially if they force you."*

"True, true," aunt Sele confirmed. *"And there's no blood?"*

"Let's look."

They examined her. None visible. Though hard to tell—everything was wine-red.

"I'm not deceiving. I am honest. It just happened," Toya looked at the ceiling, lying on her back. *"I am sinful, I... He simply... I only..."*

"If there's no blood, then..." Basti scratched behind her ear, didn't finish.

"Fight back—there'll be blood. Submit—there won't be," aunt Sele shared her experience.

"Everyone knows this."

"Yes-yes, that's right."

Toya fell silent. She fiddled with her collar. Her eyes gleamed with moisture, but everything was calm. Even peaceful.

"There now. Such things happen. Happen to everyone. Happened to me, and to aunt Basti too. Take everything off, get yourself clean. Then pray, then lie down, lie down," aunt Sele concluded.

Looking at Toya and concluding that she could be left to herself—she wasn't crying, wasn't cursing, but quietly dealing with her affairs—aunt Sele and aunt Basti went out into the corridor, closing the door.

"What are we going to do?" Sele began.

"What can you do about it."

"Says he didn't force her," Sele carefully determined things. *"So she gave herself, then."*

"Can't be, she's honest. She's making excuses for him, got attached. That happens in youth, especially the first time."

"Maybe so."

They thought.

"Well, try to figure out if she gave or he took. No blood though. And she's not biting her tail," Basti was reaching a conclusion.

"She gave herself," Sele delivered her verdict.

Grunting, Basti also gestured dismissively:

"She gave herself."

"Got her drunk with wine, well and..."

"Why didn't she run away, growl, scratch?"

"Well, did you see him?" Sele asked meaningfully.

"That's true," Basti answered even more meaningfully.

"But why-why is she covered head to claw in wine? What was he doing with her? I've seen everything, never seen that."

Both shrugged.

Toya came out of the room cautiously:

"Aunt Basti, aunt Sele. Forgive me. Let no one find out..."

"Go wash, be clean," they directed her, and she went to fulfill everything—to become clean.

Sele waited, then said thoughtfully:

"We need to tell hamanu Khizaya."

"We'll get in trouble. Everyone will know. Listen, Sele, say nothing."

"What if she becomes pregnant?"

"Then... that's her lot. No marriage then, none at all."

"No one will have her. But perhaps luck will hold," Sele sighed.

It seemed they'd reached a conclusion. But no. Nothing is simple in reaching conclusions and decisions when lionesses undertake them:

"But if we don't tell, he'll have access to her. What then?" Sele found the weakness.

"True, he'll get bold. And then you can't order her to forbid herself. She won't listen."

"She'll give in."

"This one will think, not her head," Basti tapped herself on the front.

"What then? Then she'll definitely get pregnant, and definitely won't be given in marriage."

They had to think further.

"She'll be like us," Sele resigned herself. *"So what. No one asked us either."*

"No one asked."

"And nothing, we lived."

"We lived. And raised children."

The matter seemed decided. But then:

"Let's tell," Basti proposed. *"Let hamanu Renaya go where needed, and they decide there. Or she herself will talk with this... what's his name..."*

"Did you see him?" Sele asked for some reason.

"I'm terribly afraid of such types, Ahey have mercy," Basti covered herself with her palms.

"Yes, we must tell. Otherwise he'll visit Toya like it's his own home."

Both nodded.

"Exactly. There'll be no order at all, he'll completely dishonor her, we'll be afraid, and they'll demand why we stayed silent."

"Exactly. Though they probably don't care anyway."

"Probably."

What a Lovely Day

On the lovely following day, Arzis, as always, having bathed in the river, which helped him greatly with hangovers and fatigue, was throwing javelins behind the servants' house.

But he wasn't really thinking about anything, and especially didn't know much about anything.

First thing he didn't know: Toya had scarcely slept all night, alternating between prayer and lying in bed with palms beneath her cheek (or doing both simultaneously). Anxious beyond measure, she'd resolved by dawn—she must go to Arzis and warn him that others knew of their encounter, that someone would likely scold someone, scandal would erupt, accusations would fly (at him? her? both?) and she needed to know what to do. Standing outside his door, she'd hugged herself and slumped against the wall, but ultimately couldn't bring herself to act—it was simply unthinkable, unprecedented for a lioness to visit a lion's quarters at night. The only casualty was an expensive white night-candle that Toya—usually nimble and careful—had knocked over in her agitation and doubt. She'd finally collapsed into bed at dawn, utterly exhausted.

Second thing he didn't know: when he emerged from his den in the morning, sleepy Toya—awakened for work by the dhaar lionesses—saw him, started to run after him and say something, but couldn't manage it.

Third thing he didn't know: the big lion Manu had safely departed on his own without his help, though Arzis had promised they would both leave together. He also didn't see that Mauna hadn't gone out for her usual ride, and in general the residence was unusually quiet and peaceful. But he wasn't very interested anyway. What did interest him was when the pain in his strained wrist would pass, which was interfering with his throwing.

"Fuck it," Arzis concluded, realizing that his wrist wouldn't let him throw javelins normally, or anything else. He went and took one of the spears, which he borrowed without asking from the armory, and began winding carrying cord around it. He wanted to go to Bash to the blacksmith, so that he would change the spearhead, he didn't really like the spearheads of all the spears in the armory anyway; but everything else Arzis liked very much. The shafts, for example, were of the highest quality, and what more could one desire in life than a good spear shaft.

And the fourth thing Arzis didn't know: having determined his location with the help of all-knowing servants, sire Taar was already hurrying toward him in the company of four lions from the Mistress's bodyguard: Vannaren (once more about him: experienced, had been head of bodyguard for another Messenger, prudent, principled, proper, with legate experience he never speaks of, married), Khagal (he's hot-tempered, with

some unimaginably difficult past, free from all family ties), Taynaz (a very silent type, also with legate experience, also unmarried) and Tavu (behind his back they call him 'Clink', got into the Messenger's bodyguards from the capital watch through amazing circumstances, lover of females; he also very much likes to mess around with cubs, the Bash folk especially remembered how he threw them into the river by their paws, spinning them around, they'd come back, he'd throw again, and so endlessly; married). Uruz, the Mistress's chief shield and head of guard, knew about this punitive expedition, but decided that participation in this farcical nastiness was beneath his dignity.

Which he would deeply regret afterward.

"Sire Arzis!" Taar hailed him as they emerged from behind the servants' quarters, halting five paces from the weathered log where Arzis had settled himself.

He raised his head, lifted his hand in greeting to them, and continued winding the carrying cord around his spear.

"Vaal to the day, sir Taar. How are things?" he still sat on the log.

"Thank you, things are in order. Please, stand up."

Arzis raised his head again, but now squinting. His eyes quickly ran over all five of them, then he turned around on all sides with pricked ears, and even sniffed. Only then did he rise, sticking his spear into the ground and standing with it, placing his paw on the log.

"I've received reports that you violated one of the Mistress's lionesses," Taar began formally.

Arzis was silent for some time.

"Who reported it?"

"That's irrelevant. I was also at the place where it all happened," Taar lied. He hadn't been there. He was relying on the words of servant Khizaya.

"Who did I rape?"

"Toya, the young dhaar."

"That's what she said?" he squinted with a sour, distrustful expression.

"As you can see, everything became known," Taar concluded impassively.

Arzis scratched his chin.

"No, I didn't fuck her. We drank together and fooled around. Bring her here, she'll confirm it."

Suddenly Khagal's tail twitched, as if he'd been lashed across the back.

"You won't wriggle out of this! You violated a dhaar who serves the Mistress," he pronounced clearly, accusingly, "and abused her. Listen to what I tell you, Arzis. An assault on the Mistress's property and Family, this..."

Taar glanced sideways at Khagal.

Arzis raised his palms up and squeezed his eyes shut, unable to bear all this:

"We broke a couple of plates and had some drinks, had a good time. That's it. Either you didn't understand," Arzis pointed at them, "or Toya is lying," Arzis pointed at the house. "Need to bring her here to tell us."

"You'll intimidate her!" Khagal roared, he who was a secret romantic, defender of all things beautiful, he who...

Vannaren also glanced at him with displeasure.

"So, Khagal, I'm speaking. What I'll tell you," Taar continued, staring into the sky behind Arzis where a little cloud was floating, "you know, this dhaar Toya—she's a lioness from Mramri lands. A Mramri female. All Mramri females are supposed to believe in their god—Ahey. Ahem," he coughed. "And she believes too. And, what I'll tell you, in their faith there's this thing: a lioness cannot know a lion before marriage. Otherwise she's considered spoiled, unfit for the lineage. You spoiled her life and forbade her the joy... of matrimonial union."

Listening to him silently, Arzis scratched his fang with his claw. He breathed as if he was about to groan, and seemed to speak some short word inaudibly, unclear what.

"Spoiled and forbade," he said. "As it should be with females."

"Come with us," sir Taar even gently invited. "You're ordered to receive ten lashes of the whip."

Taar is no fool. He understands that the Mistress took this lion for something. Nevertheless, chaos in the Family cannot be tolerated. He found—from his point of view—an extremely rational compromise. Something was done? It was done. Ten lashes? Well, that can be endured.

"Nope, forget it." Arzis yanked his spear from the earth. "How about all four of you just execute me right here—Taar not included. Though you tried that once already, somehow didn't work out."

"The Mistress saved you," Tavu said mockingly. "Joker."

"What's that got to do with me? Go ask her why she needs this."

"So you're refus..." Taar began.

"Shut the fuck up!" Khagal suddenly raged. "You, you!" he pointed at Arzis. "Not you, sire Taar!" he pointed at Taar, and Arzis laughed. "Him! Exactly like you: they rape, then don't even remember what they did, breaking lives! That's what happened with my sister! And my great-grandmother was also a dhaar!"

"The fuck y'all want from me?"

"I'll ask you to watch your language. You committed an offense against the Mistr... Khagal, be quiet! Khagal!"

"What 'be quiet,' he should have been killed long ago, the scum, the thug among us!" Khagal raged.

"Right, I got it long ago—you don't want me in your circle, so let's settle this between ourselves. Come on, cool it. I'm not a thug, I'm business..."

"You'll cool down now, I'll put down both you and everything! Shut your mouth and stick out your ass for the whips!"

"Go fuck yourself!"

"You go fuck yourself! I'll kill you, goon! You'll answer for everything!"

"That's it, Vaal sees: I challenge you to single combat," Arzis pointed his spear at him, pulling it from the ground.

"I'll execute you on it! Vaal sees!" Khagal drew his sword.

"Perfect. Let's do it tomorrow morning."

"Come on, come on, let's do without all this nonsense..." Tavu groaned in suffering, restraining Khagal.

"Tomorrow at dawn—what's wrong, someone trim your mane?" Arzis needled him.

"Yes, tomorrow morning!"

"With spears. And no armor. Come on, without armor it'll be faster, come on, well..." Arzis taunted even more.

"However you want! Even with knives!"

"So, stop it, that's enough, enough. Come on," Tavu intervened.

"That's it, nobody whips anybody, nobody challenges anybody. Are we really going to fight over a dhaar..."

"This isn't about her, it's about him. He insulted me for no reason. He wanted a response—he's getting one." Arzis indicated Khagal.

"That's right," Khagal confirmed.

"You got heated, that's enough," Tavu-Clink tried to make peace with everyone.

"Can't bury this now. Two Suungs agreed to single combat, everyone witnessed it. Spears, no armor. Done," Arzis declared.

"Duels within the Family are forbidden," said Vannaren, who had been silent until now.

"Well I'm apparently not your type, don't fit in the Family anyway, right?"

"I don't care. I'll kill him tomorrow morning and accept punishment from the Mistress," Khagal said, turned around, and left.

"Khagal! Halt!" Vannaren ordered him.

But he didn't even turn around; and Tavu quickly went after him, glancing at everyone with an anxious look, and then—Taynaz, slowly, with a gloomily puzzled expression. Vannaren looked at Taar, then at Arzis, and also left.

A little bird landed on the nearest branch and began loudly screeching. Not singing, but screeching, and Vaalu-Mauna's steward stared at it. So he stood, with lowered hands, and the wind tugged at the tails of his red robe.

The winding of the carrying strap around the spear continued. Hands in his pockets, sire Taar paced back and forth, studying the grass. He kicked a branch with his paw, a piece of it got stuck in his knemid.

"This wasn't in my plans."

"That's for sure," Arzis wound the cord while sitting on the little log. "Born bad, dying worse. What, sir Taar, wanted to flog me but something went wrong?"

Having finished winding the carrying strap, Arzis straightened his legs, yawned and stretched. He slid off the log onto the grass. Sire Taar still didn't leave.

"Clearly I failed to account for certain variables."

"I'll tell you some mathematics you'll like. Per session with a whore who's twenty-five years old, we charged about two hundred, on average. For one who's seventeen—six to eight hundred. As you see, smaller numbers there—bigger numbers here."

"Supply and demand sets the prices," Taar agreed.

Arzis studied him through narrowed eyes.

"By ancestors' blood, to your health, sir Taar," he drank from his water flask and threw it into the grass.

"This is all unreasonable, very unreasonable," Taar applied his claw to his chin. "We don't need this duel. But," the encouraging tone of a lion who found a solution, "I see a good option: just leave, right now. No one will search for you."

Arzis looked at him (uncomprehendingly, mockingly), and then laughed relaxedly, hiding from the world with his palm, and his reddish-grey mane fell in tangles over his muzzle.

All Things Must Be Done Right

The dining hall of the guard house of the Messenger's residence 'Huntress Moon,' Northern Listigia (here too, in this building—the armory, sleeping quarters, bathhouse for six heads, internal well), the guard house is called a 'barracks' out of habit and tradition. Here also live two families (temporarily, uncomfortably, wives grumble and growl, but the children like it). And, more importantly—an excellent grinding wheel, of Kafna stone.

Evening. In the dining hall twelve lions sit and stand, wherever and however, and hold council.

"He simply needs to be removed," Manaru declared.

"How will you simply remove him? What about the Mistress?"

Uruz raised his hand, sitting at the table, and the noise subsided:

"The Mistress, due to her excellent patrician origins, doesn't understand how dangerous to the Family's wellbeing and how unstable this lion is. If we don't resolve the question with him—one way or another—he'll bring shame and troubles upon us more than once. Besides, I cannot risk Khagal's life because of this fool. This is obvious."

"Nobody's risking anything," Khagal spun around in the center of it all, "I'll kill him, and everyone's happy!"

"I propose telling the Mistress," Taynaz suggested.

"She's recovering from yesterday."

"Nobody. Says. Anything. To the Mistress. It's clear what she'll say. And that won't solve our problem," Uruz determined.

"But if we tell her everything: about the raped dhaar, about... his challenge to Khagal, then... perhaps..."

"That genius Taar with his wretched dhaars completely botched everything," Vannaren fumed.

Coming from pretty high bloodlines, he deeply despises dhaars of any breed, even those deemed acceptable.

"Taar's playing the same game," Tai noted. "Just with his own methods."

"Which game?"

"He wants him gone too."

"No, no, he just wanted to discipline Arzis, put him in his stall," Taynaz remarked. "Simple lion thinking. Didn't work out for him. Never understood who he was dealing with."

"And who, who are we dealing with?"

"He can be respected, I've talked with him, and stood in the Circle, and we drank beer. He's not bad."

"Yes, yes, Taynaz, not bad, very not bad."

"Khagal, you lost your temper for nothing then—everything went wrong," Tavu said.

"Why for nothing? Why for fucking nothing?"

"You started pressing Arzis into a corner with insults, leaving no choice," Taynaz added. "And it should have been Taar speaking, not you."

"He raped a lioness of our family! Today—a dhaar, and tomorrow who? Your wife?"

"In which hole would anyone rape my wife? I don't have a wife," Taynaz shrugged.

"I'm speaking generally! Tavu has one! Manaru has one! There are daughters, there are..."

"Well, raped, fucked, who knows. Bad, but listen, that's usually how it goes with dhaar lionesses. They put themselves out there. Everyone who served with me at Vaalu-Mainuna knows this. Well, manes, remember what went on there?"

Several nodded. They remember.

"My great-grandmother was dhaar. My sister was violated."

"Come on, Khagal..." Tai chuckled, dismissing with both hands.

"So, let's talk business. Since there's such a mess, this is an excellent chance to take him down, why not?" Manaru said. "Khagal will kill him."

"Of course I'll kill him," Khagal confirmed everything.

"And if things don't go according to plan, we'll help a little. No one else will be there besides us."

Silence fell in the dining hall.

"I disagree with this," Vannaren raised a finger on his crossed arms. "A Suung challenged a Suung. And it's not about dhaars, but about insults."

"Exactly. Quite right," Uruz suddenly agreed. "Everything by honor."

"But in general, I consider this duel extremely unreasonable, and all this should be forbidden. Duels in the Family are prohibited," Vannaren added weightily.

"What was Khagal saying to him?" someone was curious.

"Present your ass for the whips' I liked best of all," Tavu noted ironically.

"Everything will be tailed, don't worry," Khagal assured, settling right on the floor in the middle of the dining hall.

Watching him, Uruz rose and approached. He placed one hand on his subordinate's shoulder, the other on his sword:

"Listen up. Vannaren's correct—this whole business is unreasonable. Tomorrow at dawn"—he clapped Khagal's shoulder twice—"we deploy: myself, Khagal, Tavu, Tai, and..." his gaze swept the hall, "Manaru. We'll resolve matters and report"—another pat for Khagal—"that dueling is prohibited. All others remain at the residence. Vannaren—you're in command until our return."

He stood straight and nodded.

"Yes, commander," everyone answered.

Everyone sat down, calmed down, silence fell.

"Dismissed."

Everyone dispersed. Well, almost everyone.

"Vanka left. What will you fight with?" Tai asked in this silence, smoothing his claws with a knife.

"Agreed on spears. No armor," Khagal answered, sitting on the floor and hitting it with his fist, slowly and thoughtfully.

"Shields or no?"

"Hmm. We'll find out on the spot."

"He's not great with a sword, by the way," Tai said. "I tested him then. Remember, commander?"

"Yes," Uruz nodded.

"And it's foolish without armor."

"He doesn't have any. I didn't issue him any," Uruz began to leave. "And I won't. He won't need it. I'll handle the Mistress myself, I'll tell her everything. After everything happens. And everything will happen as it should. Our Khagal here is no slouch."

The Knife

Toya early in the morning, having prayed, washed and dressed (all quickly), was already hurrying to the chicken coop: she needed to catch five hens, slaughter and pluck them. With a knife carelessly tucked behind her belt, large and mercilessly dull, she was about to set off, but remembered that she'd forgotten Ahey's neck symbol in her room.

This was actually unthinkable for her. Toya hurried to her room immediately, worried.

Their basement dhaar corner, it was beside Arzis's little room, which, as is known, was a former storeroom for something or other, and generally unsightly and a hole. And here—suddenly—the door opens and he himself comes out.

Rather early for him. Toya knew his usual schedule.

"Oh, Toi, you're already awake," he wasn't very surprised, passing by.

"No. Strong morning, mast... Arzis. Arzis," she followed him with her gaze and movement.

"Arzis-Arzis. Strong, that's right. You have no idea."

"And... And where so early-early? Throw spears? Practice?" she flared up with an unexpected question.

Arzis stopped, turned to her and leaned against the wall, looking up.

"You throw javelins. You can throw a spear too... but not far..." he answered thoughtfully. "You can throw a lioness too. Into hay. There's a tale about a lioness and hay. Ever heard it?"

Toya peered at him intently, ears pricked.

"No, never. Arzis."

"Never mind, I'll tell you sometime."

Catching his movement (he began to leave), she said:

"Good luck... to you... in everything here... rather, there. Where you'll be. Where."

"Grateful," he stopped his movement to hear her out.

"Good. That's good," she stood there. "I mean, thank you."

Remembering that touching females before a duel is bad luck, Arzis turned and headed for the exit. Then he waved his hand. While we were reading omens—life ended.

"Ah, tail with it," he said loudly. "Toya, come here."

Then he went to her himself, and they met somewhere in the middle. He embraced her, and she, not expecting it, buried her nose right in his chest. Then turned her head to be more comfortable. She freed her hands, her knife fell from her belt to the floor, she hugged him back. They did nothing more, just stood there; Toya only felt that he was crushing her in his embrace, but didn't admit it and endured.

"I was stained with wine," she said with stifled despair, "they thought the wrong thing..."

He covered her mouth with his palm, gently. He moved Toya by her muzzle, tormented her so. No one tried to fight back, no one tried to run away, no one laughed, no one got indignant, but only a mystery appeared that he couldn't solve: it seemed she had just licked his palm, captivated; either licked, or bit slightly, or was it his imagination? He even pulled back, stared at his palm, puzzled, trying to figure it out. But not for long. He showed her the ring ('Trust not words'), clearly showed it, here.

"Give it back tomorrow. Today it will get in the way."

He grasped her hands, attempting to slip his ring onto her thumb. Really? Too large. He tried every other finger on both hands, slowly and purposefully, but hopeless—her slender fingers couldn't retain Arzis's ring.

"Well then. Doesn't fit. You know what they do in such cases?"

His charming plan went like this: Toya says 'no,' Arzis tells her to come closer for the secret, then simply kisses her ear. But once again everything went wrong. She reached behind her collar, lifted Ahey's symbol on its cord from her neck, without permission (!) drew his knemid blade from his very knemid (you'd need to know it's there and spot it!), severed the cord, threaded the ring through, returned the blade, and quite skillfully reknotted the cord. Finished, she replaced everything around her neck and gazed obediently at Arzis.

"Doesn't get better than that," Arzis praised, and raised his hands to the sides to show—really doesn't get better.

He cupped her muzzle and licked her nose. Typically when you lick lionesses' noses, they snort, giggle, pull back, babble nonsense, and display various silliness. Toya licked her lips.

Aunt Sele was walking down the corridor, as usual, and caught them. She turned around and went back. Aunt Basti was following her, but aunt Sele blocked her path, gesturing for silence and stillness, and to listen to everything.

Arzis released Toya, winked, and began to leave.

"Arzis, you're going far, yes?" Toya dared to ask after him; though, probably, she should have stayed quiet and thought about what all this meant.

"Can't say. We'll find out," he called back over his shoulder, nonchalantly.

Toya stood there. Then looked through the basement window, climbing with dirty paws onto the wash table (oh, horror), as he walked away toward the stables. Nothing on him at all, just belt, tunic and pants; who sets off on a journey like that? Sensitive to nuances, emotions, feelings—a lioness—Toya determined that Arzis was somehow not himself. She actually didn't know what he was like (well, you couldn't say that), and shouldn't know supposedly (that's debatable). No. But he just wasn't himself to her today, and that was that.

Completely forgetting about the fallen knife, Toya went after Arzis. More precisely, not after him, but somewhere in the direction where he

went, toward the stables and guard house, having the vaguest idea of what to do next and how to proceed.

She somehow sensed he intended to depart permanently. Probably. This was terrible. Probably the worst possible thing imaginable. But Toya would tell no one. Not even herself. Wouldn't tell the aunts. Wouldn't tell the Mistress, though that is violation—you must tell the Mistress everything. She knew this very well, having grown up with mother and sister who served Messengers. And wouldn't tell Ahey's priest, though as everyone knows, they can be trusted completely with anything.

She passed the guard house windows, keeping to the wall, trailing her claws along the stone...

...Uruz mounted his horse, surveying his company.

"Ready?"

"Khagal departed already?"

"Yeah."

"Our thug at least knows where he's going?"

"He knows."

They regarded each other, all mounted; Tai's horse fretted and resisted—he stroked its neck soothingly.

"As arranged," chief Uruz declared. "If things go badly—you engage," he indicated Tai. "You too. And myself. Strike with spear only—wounds must appear spear-inflicted alone."

Tai nodded, repositioning the bastard spear resting across his saddle.

"Like a wild boar. Fuck," Manaru spat earthward, perilously gripping his spear near the head with the shaft planted in dirt. The very first lesson about spear-handling while mounted (let alone on firran) teaches against this, but Manaru apparently enjoys risk.

Somehow they lingered, hesitating, still not departing though it seemed time.

"Our duty is defending the Mistress," Uruz dissolved their doubts. "That's what we're doing. He'll cause disgrace and trouble. Can't avoid bloodying yourself when truly protecting."

"And shitting yourself," Tai added with a smirk.

"Why shitting?" Manaru asked. "You're the one in shit."

"Hey, what's with you, got up on the wrong paw?" Tai wondered.

"That's it, knock it off. Let's go."

...Toya didn't follow Arzis's trail long—or rather, head in his general direction. She realized this was senseless. Why? How could she—wasn't she embarrassed? She needed to reach the chicken coop, do her work—morning was well underway. She went.

She reached for her belt. The knife!

Barely dawn and already being foolish!

Nothing for it—she had to return to the residence for it. Probably lying right there on the floor. Though... the stable seemed to have other knives, there was a large storeroom full of odds and ends. The chicken coop was close by.

Forget it. Someone had surely picked up the knife from the floor by now—no point retrieving it.

And she went to the storeroom, but not through the usual entrance, because she could hear some commotion there and the groom's voice, and Toya feared and disliked him; she went from the other side, where they throw out the manure. She muddied her paws, well never mind, they'd wash later.

There—the storeroom. She entered through the street door. Merciful Ahey, where were knives kept? Everything in mess, nothing in its usual place. An old grinding wheel here, now... She climbed through hay rather than walk around, then heard hoofbeats—someone leading a horse by the reins. Arzis! She could see everything through gaps in the loose, weathered wall planks. He'd stopped right there by the wall. Great Ahey, he yawned. Toya went silent, motionless, burrowing into hay. She wished someone would press her into the hay. Something sharp jabbed inopportunistly below her belly while a grass blade tickled her nose. She wanted him to find her here, catch her in the act—all his doing, all accidental—or through some tremendous, supra-leonine intuition realize she'd come searching for a knife, right here.

Ahey, such shame. She has to sneeze. Must. Virtuous, devout, modest lionesses—don't do such things! Yes they do! Has to sneeze, loud as possible. Her nose itched terribly.

Toya began to pray. Either to ward off sin, or so she'd be forgiven and could sneeze louder. *Ahey, merciful, forgive me, sinner. Guide me to...*

But she stopped. Three more lions rode up to Arzis, and briskly.

"Ready?" This was sir-master Uruz.

"Sure. Where're we going?" That was Arzis.

"You'll see," sir-master Uruz answered.

"Come on, tell me," Arzis insisted.

Sir-master Manaru spoke lazily:

"Ruined buildings to the south. Bash people call the place Weirds."

"Why's that?" Arzis wondered.

"Damned if I know," sir-master Manaru replied wearily.

"Haven't changed your mind?" sir-master Uruz suddenly asked, almost confrontationally.

"What's to change my mind about," *Arziss* answered calmly.

"Listen," sir-master Uruz began seriously, "take this horse and go out into the world. The Empire's big, you're whole, Khagal's whole, everyone's happy."

I knew it! He's leaving!

"Fuck, you really piss me off," Arzis swore, and Toya closed her eyes in shame; but not her ears.

I knew it... He won't leave...

"Well, you might as well say you gave a Sworn-Bond and that's it, you'll tear your ass for it," sir-master Tai said mockingly.

"Well, not my ass."

Sir-master Tai laughed. Then added:

"You're decent mane, Arzis, I like you. Go on. Ride to freedom. Simpler for all. Fuck, what you need this for?" sir-master Tai spoke unusually seriously (for him).

"What's Khagal want with this crap?" Arzis scoffed. "What do any of you need it for? You, Tai?"

He seemed genuinely puzzled by the question, responding distantly:

"Dunno myself sometimes..."

"This is a duel, Arzis. Anything happens," Uruz said.

Toya froze and shrank. It seemed to her that sir-master Uruz was looking right at her. Some terrible word—'duel.' A wrong word. Were they going to fight? And... and who? And how? With fists? With claws? Or wrestling, like male Suungs wrestle in that sandy circle of theirs, trying to throw each other to the ground? Arzis and all of them? Or Arzis and sir-master Khagal? Or... or they would do it for real, to kill-kill?

"As the mistress likes to say—'don't talk,'" Arzis said so cheerfully, it's hard to believe.

"Fine," sir-master Uruz concluded. "Let's go, good Suungs. Go!"

Toya slid down from the hay. Sat like that for a bit. Then quickly left the storeroom, then walked even faster toward the residence. No, walking wouldn't do, better to run. The aunts called to her, they were also going to the chicken coop, but Toya didn't obey. All-gracious Ahey, forgive me for this.

"Watch it, wench!" nasty sir-master Vannaren snapped when she crashed into him at the kitchen entrance. Why was he even going through the kitchen?

She ran into the house, went up to the first floor, though she wasn't allowed to appear there without need, only when serving and working, and in proper clothing. She had to tell everything, had to tell everything, but to whom? The Mistress was who she needed. She was the main one. Dhaars weren't allowed to approach her. But she had to tell her specifically. The Mistress understands. The Mistress is Ashai-Keetrah. Toya knew this meant—'sister of understanding.' Sisters of understanding.

She ran to the second floor (she wasn't allowed), right up the main staircase (she wasn't allowed), to somehow... find where the Mistress sleeps (she absolutely wasn't allowed!).

Atrissa started down the stairs, and she nearly got a nosebleed from surprise (that's the expression in Suungkomnaasa—everything's blood this and blood that to them).

"Tsanna, stop! Toyka, have you lost your mind?" she caught her by the sleeve.

"Lady-mistress Atrissa, something happened there..."

"Hold on, hold on. I know about your debaucheries already, uptailer. I..."

"Lady Atrissa, must-must tell Mistress, very must..."

"Tell what?"

"Arzis, sir-master Arzis, and sir-master Uruz, they rode away to fight, sir-master Khagal will be there too, and also... and also..."

"Fight? Who, where? Arzis and Uruz?"
 "I don't know, sir-master Arzis with someone."
 "And Khagal?"
 "Yes, he'll be there, maybe with him, maybe with someone."
 "A duel with him? Sir Arzis and sir Khagal, yes? They have a duel, yes?"
 Atrissa quickly figured it out, even too quickly.
 "Yes, yes. Yes. Duel. Yes!"
 "Where did they go?"
 "South, to Weirds, there are ruined houses there."
 "Who told you this? How did you..."
 "Happened heard at the stables."
 "Eavesdropped?"
 "Yes, eh, ezdropped."
 "Run downstairs. I'll tell the Mistress everything myself."
 "Really? Thank you, mistress Atrissa."
 "Disappear! Out! You can't be here!"
 "Lady Atrissa will tell-tell?"
 "Yes, will tell-tell," the servant mocked the dhaar speech. "Shoo already!"

Toya dutifully fled downstairs while Atrissa paused briefly, then rushed toward the Mistress's bedchamber. She reached the door, lifting away the white cord (signifying 'Mistress sleeps'—black would mean 'Mistress is Messaging'). Bodyguards at the bedroom entrance observed her closely.

"Urgent?" they asked, though what was there to ask—no one would dare wake a Messenger just like that, even behind a white door, let alone a black one. Messengers simply can't be awakened just like that.

"What do you think?" she hissed, and quietly closed the door behind her...

...Arzis and Khagal stood opposite each other, a respectful distance apart. Around them—four lions: Uruz and Manaru in armor, Tai and Tavu equipped light. All had spears. To the side, tied to Tavu's and Khagal's horse saddles, were round northern shields.

"You need a second, Arzis," Uruz observed cynically. "Where's your second?"

"Wanted to find one in Bash yesterday, but didn't have time. Felt sleepy... Let's not complicate—one of you will do. Tai, how about you, you like me."

"Whatever you say, buddy."

"So, as we agreed—to the death, or until surrender. Spears, bastard spears. Identical. No armor, nothing. Tunics allowed. Shields."

"Hey, no shields," Arzis objected capriciously. "There was no talk about them."

"Khagal?"

"They'll drag it out—skip them," Arzis objected again.

"What's the difference. Take it," Khagal nodded at his spear, speaking in either a genuinely hoarse voice or a deliberately low half-growl.

Arzis shrugged and reached for Tai's spear, but he didn't give him his own, and instead took another one leaning against the house wall. After examining it critically, Arzis struck the ground with the shaft and swung it around himself; the spearhead flashed dangerously near Manaru and Uruz, and they recoiled. Then Arzis carefully looked at everyone in a circle; he lingered his gaze on each, but especially on Tai.

Suddenly he grinned crookedly:

"Son of a bitch, here I went bald. I see you've made your decision about me."

"Since you think so, there's still a chance: just take and leave here," Tai pointed toward freedom. "Any direction. Except north."

"He doesn't have such a chance! You came to a duel!" Khagal wouldn't calm down.

"Don't get heated, Khagal. Let's decide everything cool. You leave. We stay. No surprises from us," Tai proposed.

"If I don't leave, then either way—I'm cold, right?"

Tai spread his hands, meaning, well yes.

"Aight, fuck it, let's roll."

"Uruz!" Vannaren growled accusingly from the distance.

Everyone turned their heads.

"The Mistress approaches. Cease everything immediately!"

"How could she..." Uruz looked bewildered.

"Atrissa," Vannaren instantly dismounted. "She knew everything: where, who, why."

"Atrissa?! You fucker!" Khagal slammed his shaft earthward. "Fight me!"

"Khagal, this is madness!" Vannaren hurried toward him.

Khagal lunged at Arzis. Arzis was prepared. He delivered a counter-thrust, striking near the heart before withdrawing instantly. Arzis's spearpoint gleamed with blood. Khagal's left arm went useless, his spear tumbled groundward—he couldn't grip it with his right alone. Seeing his opponent wounded, Arzis thrust again—aiming for the belly to cause pain and finish it—but Vannaren intercepted with hand, armor, and body, sending Arzis's spear into earth and grass.

"Stop! The Mistress approaches!" He protected Khagal, who struggled futilely to grip his weapon while stanching the shoulder wound beneath his arm (fortunate: not chest-deep but sideways, a grazing strike).

"The most ridiculous duel of my life," Arzis concluded, pulling his spear from under Vannaren's control and planting its shaft on the ground.

The Mistress rode up, with a retinue of confused bodyguards, swift and dark; she dismounted very easily and was presented with the following: wounded Khagal, holding a spear and trying to cover his wound with his palm simultaneously; Arzis, well of course, eternally insolent muzzle, damn him; serious Uruz; angry Vannaren; surprised Tai; and the rest.

"What is happening here?" she asked, unusually calm for the situation.

"A duel," Arzis answered simply. "Was."

Mauna spoke restrainedly, clearly, stroking her (already beloved) mare, shifting her gaze to each:

"I am extremely disappointed. The reason for the duel?"

No one answered anything, despite the Mistress's direct question; only Arzis shrugged, spread his hands, and his spear glinted in the sun.

Trash

"Trash. Trash. Stay put. Trash."

Atrissa boldly caught Toya in the basement and pressed her into the farthest corner, shaking her by her clothes. She, frightened to death, stood meekly.

"Yes, lady-mistress Atrissa..." she answered hopelessly.

"Stand there. And listen. Do you understand what you've done? Nod if you understand. See?"

She nodded. What choice did she have?

"Tsanna, your tail-swishing led to this! Sir Arzis could have killed sir Khagal, or the reverse. What a brawl, and—the Mistress, the Mistress got involved! All because of you! Showed your tail, wiggled it?" Atrissa beat her about the ears.

"I have sinned, lady Atrissa," Toya confessed.

"We'll throw you out! And you're not to approach sir Arzis! Or sir Khagal! Or any of the lions here in the Family! You, you, Toya, have you forgotten how we were called together to serve radiant Vaalu-Mauna? Such a Mistress... I'll write to your mother if I so much as hear you're whoring around further. And to your sister. They'll learn all about little Toya; they serve Messengers as befits them, but you!"

She threatened with a clawed finger.

"Look at me. Don't approach them, don't wiggle," she slapped her near the tail, just like a male would, "don't give yourself. Then they think who knows what, and scandal. Yes?"

"Yes..."

A Chapter Containing Meditations on the Transience of Everything

The little table where Mauna reclines is unusually small. You could probably seat four heads at it, but they'd have to become closely acquainted and not fear each other's touches. The table is also for some reason in a dark corner; and in this very corner the Messenger has concealed herself under a canopy, like a feral firsasa.

He came, they found themselves alone together, and that was all.

"Hello, Arzis," she said to him quietly, taking something from the table for herself.

"Hello, mistress," Arzis sat down, rubbing his palms, hungry as a dog.

She had changed. Not dramatically, but: her movements were slow, even lazy; around her was silence, and she herself had darkened, not in the shade of her fur, no, but somehow entirely, in appearance, in outward feeling; her eyes had become oppressive, giving no peace; knowing this, she throws glances briefly, looking down or aside-downward. She is aesthetic. She eats cold game from the table neatly, eating by hand and in very small pieces.

On the same day, the day of the morning duel (which ended less bloodily than many would have liked), Arzis was moved from the basement to the first floor, into one of the guest rooms. This was too much, Arzis had been perfectly fine in his basement den, but such was the Mistress's instruction, and the servants conscientiously relocated him despite his weak protest. And by sunset he was invited to what Mauna called a 'pre-dinner'; he appeared without delay.

To his surprise, he found they were alone together in half-light.

"When males gather in a household, wars begin," Mauna observed as he seated himself and attacked the food without ceremony.

"Yes," he helped himself to meat. "This war turned out stupider than others."

The pre-dinner proved very timely for Arzis.

"One could stuff oneself. Very tasty."

"Don't mind it. They're a good Family. They care for me, and can overdo their care."

"I think so too. When you try too hard—nothing works out."

Being Andarian, she served his cup. He acknowledged this with a nod. She observed his eating.

"Well, to..." not managing to chew, he hurried for his cup.

"To the fact," Mauna intercepted, "that you helped me greatly. With that lion everything went superbly. By Vaal's will, you handled it excellently."

"By Vaal's will," unimpressed Arzis threw back his head to drink it all. "How else could it be."

Mauna sipped a little.

"Poor bastard had rotten luck. Here's to him."

"All of us are sacrifice's offspring. Therefore you must sacrifice well. Then become worthy sacrifice yourself. Each creature springs from sacrifice. Every action is sacrifice. We all become sacrificial offerings, eventually."

"This pig too went to sacrifice," he said, chewing pork.

"You arranged everything quickly," she set aside the little mirror she held in her hand. "It was chaotic and reckless. Not as I know, or heard, how it is with others. But to full glory. You did everything right," she praised again. She paused: "Why didn't you report to me?"

Arzis shrugged and stabbed another chunk of meat with his fork.

"About the duel? Come on. That would be ridiculous. Here's what interests me: how will it be with him?"

"Lion Manu, the Sacrifice?"

"Yeah, is that what they call them, these f... these ones? Yes, with him."

"I told you: he will die. Then you'll visit his family, relatives, and give them money. It's not consolation, of course, but it won't hurt. Find out about them. He'll probably take to bed at home, then begin slipping into sleep from which one doesn't wake. Has already begun," Vaalu-Mauna decreed, waving her hand.

"No problem," Arzis calmly accepted everything, dipping meat in nut sauce.

Mauna watched him, covering her mouth with her palm.

"I think I'll never need a Sacrifice again. Great achievement."

This was probably some serious, intimate confession; but Arzis cheerfully asked, pouring for her and himself:

"So my service is over then?"

"There are other Messengers besides me."

"Ah. Right. No problem. So what, I'll soon be serving another Messenger?"

"No, me. Only me."

"But the Sworn-Bond, it's kinda for everyone."

"When I'm dead, consider it then. Speaking of my sisters—my sister in Messaging, Vaalu-Shiala, visits us shortly. She's our nearest neighbor, quite close."

Mauna glanced away.

"Hedonist to her ear-tips. Adores anything and anyone providing amusement and indulgence. Born, raised, served in Kafna. Personal slaves, you understand. You'll see what I mean."

"She's coming with slaves? Wow."

"No, without, she left them in Kafna. And she's acquired a lover. Very entertaining personality, I'll show him to you."

"No, Mistress, I'm more into lionesses. Curious why the Mistress is telling me about sisters' lovers?"

"Hardly to Taar," Vaalu-Mauna laughed.

Arzis laughed as well, actually pausing his meal.

They knew something together. There was an unspoken conspiracy between them, floating in the air.

"To understanding," he extended his cup toward her.

"To understanding," Vaalu-Mauna agreed, completely.

No, she had definitely changed.

"Arzis, I want you to... I want you—at the right moment—to be nearby. You must stay close, not leave the residence when she's here."

"What needs doing?"

"I don't know yet. I need, ummm, so I need, I need you to... to enter into... with this individual..."

Arzis thoughtfully gnawed a bone, looking straight into her eyes. Her gaze was strong, interesting, could bend someone into a ram's horn. Such a lioness would be good to have in a gang, Arzis thought. She'd throw the lions (and lionesses, of course) you needed into confusion with her gaze, right in the middle of the market, and you'd rob them in the meantime, or whatever. So Arzis thought. So many possibilities! Mauna, scoundrel, that would be impressive, wow.

"...for you to interact with him."

Only the entire aesthetic of the Messenger-Andarian, and only their mutual positioning in space, time and situation prevented Arzis from making a crude joke.

"Clear," Arzis answered. Though everything was completely unclear.

Mauna smiled.

All this was so strange. A Messenger, and him.

"So really, what was this thing with the duel, what was that?" she inquired.

"The Mistress said it herself: where there are males—there is war."

"Will you tell me about the course of battle?"

"Taar came to me with the manes. Accused me of raping a dhaar from our Family, wanted to flog me. I didn't do that, it's stupid to do that here," he gestured around at the residence. "And then Khagal attacked me. I challenged him to a duel, we went to fight, I stabbed him in the chest, but he dodged, and didn't die."

He spread his hands, but Mauna indicated this wasn't enough.

"Then he approached me. We agreed to drink some beer. And that's it, now we're best friends, inseparable. Also, also he very much asked for this: that I not touch Atrissa. Not even with a claw. I don't understand at all why he told me this."

"I think I'll have to throw Khagal out of the Family."

"No, no, mistress, don't. The matter's settled, everything will go smooth as a knife through butter. That is, smooth as butter."

"You promise?"

"Of course. Everything will be great."

"You feel this?"

"I feel it too."

"You know how to communicate with Ashai-Keetrah."

"I'm a child of Ashai-Keetrah. From cubhood I grew up among this..." Arzis thought. "This very thing. Everything."

He thought.

"Besides, if we're expelling him, Khagal would have to be given Atrissa as compensation, or he'll cause more trouble."

"That's true. He'll cause trouble. They'll cause trouble... No, I won't give up Atrissa, I have few servants as it is. And all good ones."

"Light a candle?"

"Unnecessary. Light's been bothering me these past days. Will pass."

"As the mistress says."

"And my sister-friend will also most likely be interested in your services. Be prepared for that too."

"Sister-friend..." Arzis repeated with slight contempt, but so, very-very little, very-very lightly. "Is it her first time too?"

"A Sacrifice? No."

"Second? Third? Tenth?"

"I don't know. Definitely not tenth. You can't do so many."

"Why not?"

"It will tear you apart, and you'll cease being yourself," Mauna said, not noticing that Arzis laughed at the word 'tear.' "There can be too little power, or too much. A great lesson every Messenger learns, Arzis: the world itself is infinite, but we are finite. Therefore each of us lives in our own, finite world, Arzis. Our possibilities are finite."

"Right. I can see that I can't eat everything. Finite."

Nothing Happened

After several days Arzis began to feel sorry for the Mistress.

No, not like that.

Several days later, Arzis felt awkward that Vaalu-Mauna lived this way, while other Messengers...

...while other Messengers lived with a grandeur worthy of a lioness who Messages for the glory of the Suung Empire.

The grandeur proved glorious indeed. Previously Arzis had marveled—the residence so large, everything enormous, these servant houses, this countless number of rooms and chambers, you couldn't walk through it all (and this, as he'd heard, was still a 'small' residence!). It felt as if they were uninvited guests there, or cubs who'd wandered in to play in an abandoned but very beautiful house.

When Vaalu-Shiala arrived, everything fell into place. About ten coaches with wagons came. A separate carriage for Vaalu-Shiala's pet—a cat named Kafi—was particularly surprising. Bodyguards—thirty-six heads, a trifle, only one and a half times more than Vaalu-Mauna's, in gleaming armor such as Arzis had never seen. Servants of various kinds? Pfff, what eight (and Arzis had heard that five of them came to Mauna through 'tragic inheritance,' though he never understood what that meant)? Fifteen. Five of them mute. Of course, a personal cook with male and female assistants. Separately—a Graph master with Medium, four Graph-scribes. An imposing steward. No dhaars at all! Two firrans with masters. A master of oils and various fragrant things. And a lover.

Bear in mind—this represented her traveling party. At Vaalu-Shiala's actual residence, far more personnel and resources remained behind. Against such magnificence, Vaalu-Mauna seemed genuinely ascetic.

The sister in such a Craft so necessary to the Empire turned out to be older—Arzis accurately determined (he'd had to constantly in his pimping days) her age at thirty to thirty-three. True, she'd accumulated wealth, and in fairness, one must give Vaalu-Mauna time too, since only a year and a half had passed—as a full Messenger, as sister of Ashai-Keetrah, as one who sees Vaal.

Indeed, the Mistress looked rather poor compared to this visiting, overwhelming splendor, this wave of Suung Empire Messenger grandeur. And, moreover—no lovers.

Well, this wasn't his business. His business was reclining on a couch in the warm season atrium. Such service, such work. No, this wasn't a joke: the Mistress herself had ordered him to lie here, drink-eat whatever he wanted, 'think about nothing' (exactly what she said) and await orders, whether from her personally or through servants. Arzis even pondered whether this whole work-service with a Messenger was some big setup,

either from someone or from fate itself; they'd fatten him up like a duck and slaughter him. Prey doesn't jump into your mouth by itself, a whole thousand for doing nothing all day long—sounded too good. Though... Sometimes you get lucky. Why not. Bull had told him more than once:

"Everything's crap, Arzis. Lucky fuckers get the party."

Vaalu-Shiala's visit entered its second day. The mistress and guest with her lover had stationed themselves garden-ward, bright afternoon. The mistress's servants struggled visibly: stumbling about, tangled tails, silent and anxious. Arzis had glimpsed the lover twice: tall, northern-bright, smooth, polite and charming, expensively attired; like all north-erners, he dressed lightly—even Northern Listigia felt warm to them

Gazing up at the tiny glass panel overhead, Arzis was dozing when heavy pawsteps approached. This was sir Vannaren. In his hand, tossing it, he carried a spear. He approached Arzis, measured his reclining with a glance (Arzis didn't get up, didn't rise—an order is an order, if you're to lounge then lounge), and silently extended the weapon, holding it parallel to the ground. This surprised him, Arzis hesitated, and sir Vannaren shook his hand and rattled his armor, meaning, take it.

"Why?" Arzis asked.

"Take it. Mistress's order—to give it to you."

"And then what?"

"Don't know."

Arzis sat up, took the spear, immediately noticed it had oddities. Sir Vannaren silently left, but Arzis paid no attention to this, instead began examining the spear. First, it was his, personal; he already had two of his own, and he kept one in the weapon rack on the second floor; the second—in the armory. Everyone knew this, there was order everywhere, no way to mix them up. This one was from the armory. Second, the oddity was that it had small ribbons near the spearhead: one blue, one red. On the blue—an unclear symbol, then the letter 'M' (high alphabet), then the imperial sun symbol, then for some reason 'A' (also high), then another unclear symbol. On the red—golden symbols of the high alphabet, meaning 'By Vaal's Might' or 'By Vaal's Power'—depending on preference and education.

Drawing in air and grunting, Arzis took more wine jelly (he'd only learned such a good thing existed in service to a Messenger) and lay back down, now together with the spear on top, like with a beloved lioness. Hard hitting stuff, actually, seems like nothing but gorge yourself—you can't get up (Arzis had tried). So Arzis ate it carefully.

Third, cuddling the spear uncovered another peculiarity. It bore fragrance—not random scents but costly aromatics. Arzis swiftly identified the ribbons as sources. They evoked the Mistress's own fragrances, though certainty eluded him—he couldn't confirm this.

Arzis stripped off his tunic, remaining bare-chested—growing warm despite the atrium's coolness and verdant life. He draped fabric over his eyes, continuing eternal lion activity—drowsing. Ribbons brushing his mane, fragrance, distant sounds... What matter? He was mercenary, al-

ways had been. Even cubhood, if you reflect on it properly, he'd lived as mercenary. Mercenaries possess distinct consciousness—their own, anarch awareness. Ideas don't affect him, only concrete things. Flags hold utility, not meaning. Simply: he remained Suung because Suung identity proved profitable. Served Messengers because profitable. Dhaar females, once married, instantly became accepted Suungs. Why? Greater profit that way.

You work, they pay you; fine, you serve, since the employer wants you to precisely 'serve,' not work; your work includes calling the work 'service.' For Vaal's sake, and for all barbaric gods, whether service or lying around. If the job is lying on a patrician, low couch in a luxurious warm-season atrium, then no problem. It's harmful to health to ask many questions, and especially—to ask them of someone (or something).

Amazing how precisely you can recognize someone by their walk. Arzis twitched his ears—this was servant Atrissa walking, her steps approaching.

"Arzis, stop lying around," her voice cut through the silence, dispelled all uncertainty (reproachful and playful at once), "the Mistress says to come to her."

"Ah, just started working."

"Doing what?"

"Sleeping here, those were the orders."

"Get up, I'm serious. Here's what I'm told to convey exactly: you must approach the Mistress with your weapon, stand three paces from them and say nothing until addressed." She said this, then added in a whisper: "They're in the garden, three of them."

"And who will address me?"

"Don't know. The Mistress, probably."

"Alright."

Arzis stood, stretched; Atrissa watched this, and he walked past her.

The scene unfolded: brilliant, warm midday during this pleasant Season of Fire. Beneath a gorgeous, well-tended apple tree's shade, positioned on grass rather than using the gazebo, three figures gathered: Vaalu-Mauna, Vaalu-Shiala, and the nameless lover. The gazebo likely seemed too spacious and impersonal for intimate conversation. A low table held refreshments while they reclined on scattered cushions. Vaalu-Shiala had propped her legs on a pawrest—rather tactlessly near the table. Vaalu-Mauna had no tasteless trifles, nor tasteless things in general, nor trifles. She clutched a large, vivid red cushion, wearing an unusual light-orange plasis with elegant folds, beautifully pastoral. The lover lounged carelessly in costly garments, thoroughly at ease.

Arzis approached this lovely tableau and drove his spear into earth (violating rules Krres had constantly drilled into him). Such treatment rusted spear points, but why care when serving a Messenger with unlimited resources? He suddenly recalled the amusing detail that he'd forgotten his tunic entirely, arriving half-naked.

His appearance aroused considerable interest from the guests, but Mistress Mauna paid no attention to him at all; therefore for several moments Arzis both was and wasn't there:

"Munisha, my amber one, you still have much to understand," the guest laughed.

Interesting details about the guest: broad nose bridge, southern appearance, but only halfway, which is never quite right: you're either a completely southern lioness or some other kind, otherwise you get such strange things like a broad nose bridge with southern features; bitten claws, but she could boast what they call a good curves. She wasn't wearing a plasis, she had something domestic, very casual and informal, a white frivolous little dress, but a very worthy amount of gold in various places: in her ears, on her neck, on her wrists, on her left paw, something visible on her tail, and seemingly on her belt. On her forehead—a tentush pattern, Ashai paint, now you rarely see such things, only perhaps on Messengers and those sisters who serve in the East. Once Arzis had seen such a thing: careless, fierce blackness, frightening and enchanting simultaneously. Very memorable, sometimes she appears in his dreams.

The Mistress smiled with extreme restraint. The lover-guest dined with apparent indifference, occasionally glancing at Arzis while picking his teeth.

"Helsia, my amber Mauni, is like Kafna, only without the heat. There you can do everything, not like here in the Empire. Do what you want! And what you don't want."

"I should visit home once more. And then—anywhere," Mauna mused melancholically.

"Stop it, the Empire is your homeland. This..." Shiala pointed at Arzis. "This is what, entertainment? An acrobat? He looks like an acrobat."

"This is Arzis, he's that master. The one I told you about."

"Oh, you... Oh you! Why didn't you call your Ar... how did you say?"

"Arzis," Mauna prompted.

"Your Arzis to us sooner? The main matter goes to him. Well, Munisha, well Maun, that's not fair."

The Mistress shrugged and smiled.

"Ah! So. Arzis! Hey, you, Arzis! Come here! Sit, sit right next to the Mistress, don't hesitate, come on."

"Oh Shiali, stop it," Mauna protested languidly.

"Shy thing. Ha-ha. Deceiver! You told me this and that. I see you don't go without love after all!"

"Don't be ridiculous. Nothing like that exists between us," Mauna protested petulantly.

"Ahaha. You were always so serious, Maun. So funny," Shiala found hesitant Arzis, who simply stood there, amusing. "Look, he's probably jealous of you. Let him sit."

"No-no. He serves me," Mauna looked at Arzis, tilting her head, from under her brows. Arzis noticed this look of hers.

"Mwaaah..." Vaalu-Shiala groaned in Kafna style. "Eh, pity, Kari, that you can't do such things. You can do everything—but not this."

"What exactly, beloved?"

"Well it's a big-big secret, you know that."

"Ah, that very big-big secret."

"That very one, yes-yes-yes."

"So what, that's it, you don't love me anymore?" he touched Shiala's nose.

"Me? Me? You're the one who should love me, you! You do love me, right? Ugh, all you do is talk."

They kissed.

"Naughty."

Vaalu-Shiala regarded Arzis:

"So you're that very master?"

"Master, obviously," Arzis confirmed.

"Interesting," Vaalu-Shiala said intriguingly. "Why come then? Too shy to sit with the Mistress? Your expertise isn't needed here and now. Jealous of me? Are you?"

"Very," the lover answered listlessly.

"What will you show us? Don't be boring," Shiala demanded entertainment from Arzis. Got distracted: "Ay, Kari..."

Mauna sought Arzis's gaze, ignoring the fussing to her right. He responded to her—quite unexpectedly for himself—with a slight wink.

"Boredom will disperse," Mauna said instantly after this, still looking at Arzis. "Something will happen now. Arzis is a talented reader, especially of books, and a laconic storyteller. His talent will be useful for reading... this."

The Mistress offered him a large sheet of fine paper, producing it seemingly from thin air—or directly beneath herself (had she been sitting on it?). Arzis didn't hesitate, accepting it with four decisive steps forward, then retreating those same four paces without turning his back, as though facing enemies rather than two Messengers and a hedonist.

"Arzis, read it," Mauna commanded. Adding: "Please."

Shaking the sheet and squinting from the bright whiteness, Arzis began in an official tone:

"My priceless Mauna, treasure and faithful sister of Ma... Mastr-Fein meg... men..." Arzis stumbled over an unfamiliar word and sniffled, "...mengir, acolyte of such excellent sisters as Vana... ram... saya, Myanfar and Nel..."

Of course, the Mistress had mixed everything up, or lied, or decided to joke (this was unlikely—Mauna doesn't joke). He made a mockingly indifferent reader. He should be reading death sentences or dirty stories.

"I foresee, Flame-bright one, that Shiala will come visit You, such a dear... uh... graceful, worthy sister of our excellent mengir. I know that You are well acquainted with her from the time of training under mentor Myanfar... uh... mentor Myanfar. Certainly, invite her, observing all forms... uh... formalities. Certainly, all our sisters will only... eh... rejoice

that you both will receive another opportunity to connect as deeply as possible, and..." here Arzis paused, "...and as strongly as possible."

He looked at his audience. The female guest had a tense, wary expression. The male guest had a very thoughtful one. The Mistress, who was Mauna—stroked the folds of her plasis and looked down.

"Regrettably, I worry about Shiala and fear for her, among other concerns. You must know she has fallen into a snare no Ashai-Keetrah should enter, especially not a Messenger. She exists in scandalous dependence upon a male called Karris, son of Suungkomnaasa of humble origins..."

Insolent intonations appeared.

"He, as you well know, serves entirely the Emperor's Secret Service, may Vaal guide Him. That is all you need to know. I ask you: serve the Suungs and help Shiala dispel excessive illusions and by any means restore the balance of the Eternal Concord. Also use this occasion to send a just reproach to the Secret Service. Remember, though you know this not by hearsay: granting us the Gift of Messaging, Vaal sometimes takes from us clarity of mind and sharp feeling with empathy, so common to other Ashai-Keetrah."

Arzis looked at them. Stunned Vaalu-Shiala devoured Vaalu-Mauna with her gaze, who continued stroking the folds of her plasis. He had read something catastrophically dangerous and forbidden to the uninitiated; especially to such random manes like him. Deadly dangerous. Arzis understood this.

"Your elder friend and mistress of your mengir—Vaalumalla," Arzis finished. He didn't read the very last part: "May Vaal and the Mother's patronage inspire decisive action."

"Mauna? Mauna? Mauna?" Shiala's tone climbed higher with each appeal. "How is this... we need to talk. Let's go."

"We'll talk later, of course, sister," Mauna confirmed everything.

"You've lost your mind, you... How could you?! He!" Shiala pointed at Arzis.

"We must determine how to restore the violated balance of the Concord."

"He couldn't have read this! Ah... Nightmare! But he couldn't read it!"

"I'll punish him appropriately, but first—let's restore the balance. Does the sire work for Secret Service, may I inquire?"

Karris listened to everything with a relaxed, even bored appearance. The initial tension had fallen away from him, either he'd thrown it off—with trained, strong will. Arzis smirked. Something... amusing was brewing. Folding the letter in half, he simply tucked it behind his pants and grasped the spear with his right hand.

"Indeed. I served certainly, but was discharged six months past. Initially I withheld this from my kitten, but eventually it arose naturally. The sister-Messengers surely warned her. Observe, Luminous Vaalu-Mauna—love arrives everywhere and always, as we both know intimately. Nothing can remedy this..."

He set his cup on the table, wiped himself. His gestures radiate confidence, even hidden threat.

"And what can the Brilliant one do about it? No one can do anything about it. Just as neither the Brilliant one nor I could do anything two years ago," it's unclear who 'the Brilliant one' is in this case: Mauna or Shiala. "But time moves forward. Shiala and I—we're together, and together we're happy. It's impossible to say 'no' to love; I cannot and will not."

Mauna listened to everything, then exhaled with closed eyes. Karris rubbed his nose, whiskers, squinting an eye, as if trying to find accessible words for a simple-minded lioness.

"Suungs are united. You serve the Empire. We serve the Empire," he said smoothly, clearly. "Many have been interested in this, so much gossip, accusations, but... Nothing can be done about it. What will Brilliant Vaalu-Mauna propose? Convince her?" he pointed at Shiala. "No. Convince me, a lion of honor?" he smiled, pointing at himself. "Impossible. I'm tired of fighting feelings."

He spoke, but all this grew muffled, foggy. Mauna turned away from him and looked at Arzis the way one tail-swisher had once looked at him. He knew such a lioness's gaze. Then that sexpot wanted more than anything in the world for him to fuck her right there and then. Vaal, this was straya or empathy or something like that, she wasn't hiding it, she even wanted him to know it was straya, she so wanted to pass her will through him, but!—amazingly, she was asking his permission for this, no, she was simply begging him for it, clinging to him with claws and trusting like the only force in the world, like Vaal himself. A look from under her brows, and the corners of her moist, gleaming eyes became as daring as that painted lioness. She was inviting him to something desperate, mischievous and wicked; or maybe asking for this joyful and evil thing, knowing perfectly well that only he was capable of it...

"Kill him!" her voice swept triumphantly through his consciousness like fire.

Arzis didn't deliberate needlessly, his vision became narrow, the world shrouded in dark fog and sharpened simultaneously. What was forbidden—became permitted. Such a thing, it works, you get... accustomed to this. Much is forbidden, but something is allowed if once a year Heroes' Day arrives (and Heroes' Night). Almost everything is allowed if you end up in the East. Probably everything is allowed if you serve a Messenger, and your will changes to her will; your morality, if such exists—to hers, if such exists. His body knew by itself how to quickly ready the spear, and how instantly, powerfully to pierce his belly (exactly there, since with the chest there can be unpleasant surprises and stuck spearheads in ribs). From the sudden opponent: first amazement, then—disbelief, then—fear. A good strike, almost through. Like everyone, he futilely grabbed with his hands at the foreign thing that had invaded his body. His roar made ears press back even more. But the matter couldn't be left like this, the thing wasn't finished yet, and Arzis conscientiously braced

against his opponent with his paw, kicked the table away, pulled out the now completely red spear from him, and finished him with a new strike to the throat, precisely calculating how to hit a target falling down and to the right (directly toward Shiala). This time the spear went completely through and pinned the opponent to the apple tree.

The murder proved as messy as they can only be on a battlefield. But not beside a Messenger's residence, among lionesses, when one of the lions is unarmed and caught by surprise.

Arzis, task completed, stepped back twice while extracting his spear. The inevitable followed: Vaalu-Shiala's roar-shriek of despair and terror. Vaalu-Mauna, the Mistress, stood. Horror marked her features alongside suppressed ecstasy—complex combination. Arzis realized she witnessed lionkind murder for the first time. A small golden mirror materialized in her hand while the other gripped her belt. Blood droplets splattered her plasis. She positioned herself sideways to Arzis. She was confused by the sight of another's death, but external confusion didn't prevent her from continuing to will, and it quickly died.

"Shiala! Sister!" Mauna said unexpectedly confidently.

Arzis saw that the guest had grabbed his belly, smearing herself in bright red blood. She futilely pressed her hand to his neck, her palm visibly trembling strongly. He was dying, had already lost consciousness, and nothing in this or other worlds could change that.

"Monster! Vaal, bitch!" Shiala suddenly lost her voice and hissed this, though the effort testified to a scream. This was heard by her, Mauna and him. No one else.

"Shiala, remember us," Mauna ignored, completely. "Remember the faith. Remember the Brightest Star."

Bloodied palms half-embracing him, Shiala suddenly regarded Mauna, then Arzis. Mauna had spoken something, reminded her of something.

Their bodyguards were already rushing to them in panic—both Mauna's (five) and Shiala's (two, one of them the chief). Mauna gestured to them, showed them with palms down-down, and the gesture proved so convincing that they even stopped running, only walking quickly.

Arzis closed his eyes, rubbed his nose. Then opened them and met gazes with Messenger Vaalu-Shiala. She instantly became thinner and aged ten years; it seemed white hairs appeared on her ears; she looked at him attentively, not removing her palms from her lion's body. She had neither mute question nor accusation in her eyes. She was communicating something directly to his consciousness, Messaging, if you will. Arzis couldn't understand what, but it couldn't be good. Then she raised her left palm, bloody, and showed it to him.

He shrugged, even slightly spread his hands, and these gestures were seen by no one except her.

Turning sharply as if bitten, Shiala saw her bodyguard chief:

"Kill him!" she pointed with her bloodied hand at Arzis.

This was such a pitiful, hysterical simulacrum, all in tears and powerlessness, that all the supposed killer managed was to put his hand on his

sword hilt and purely symbolically draw it half a claw, looking at Arzis with either disgust or even fright.

"Precisely right, sister." Vaalu-Mauna deliberately, swiftly, and unmistakably positioned herself between the foreign guard chief and Arzis. "You echoed the sisterhood's verdict regarding him"—she indicated Karis, whose death throes continued.

Vaalu-Shiala hid her muzzle in her palms, forgetting about the blood on them. Vaalu-Mauna showed her bodyguards to immediately clear away the disorder. The disorder was cleared very quickly, with the help of two spears and cloth between them, the old Legate method of carrying those who can no longer walk. The bodyguards didn't seem too surprised to Arzis; among them was sir Vannaren, who first looked at Arzis, then at the killed lion, nodded to himself silently—everything's clear—and left with the rest.

Now Mauna's gaze clearly pressed on Shiala's bodyguards, who had become five more numerous here, and the chief hesitated beside his Mistress, releasing his sword. They all also didn't seem excessively surprised to Arzis, only followed the stretcher with their Mistress's already dead lover with their eyes; moreover, one of them showed Arzis a fist, meaning keep it up.

"Mistress? New orders?" they voiced.

"Go away. Leave," Shiala groaned without removing her palms from her eyes and cheeks.

"Perimeter," the chief of her guard ordered with relief, and they left quite cheerfully.

Silence fell.

"You knew what he was doing," Mauna said affirmatively.

Arzis—such an inappropriate moment—suddenly began to admire her. He didn't even understand why. These hands on her belt, with the sirna dagger. These half-pressed ears. This plasis dress. Weight on one paw, the other forward. Her determination. Her devotion to some still unclear cause. Her will.

Drops fell from Shiala's wet nose.

"And I will hide from the sisters that you knew about this. As a sign of my understanding and boundless sisterly love."

Mauna spoke all this directly here, before him—Arzis. He didn't know what to do with himself. He looked himself over—not a drop of blood on him, nothing.

"Thank you," such an unexpected words from Shiala.

Mauna sat beside her, took her palm.

"You were in danger. The sisterhood was grieved," she spoke firmly, despite the gentleness with which she took her palm. "I helped you get rid of it, I freed you."

"You... you... you."

Shiala painfully, extremely painfully selected words.

"You could have done this differently," she said completely not what she thought.

Even Arzis understood this.

"Hardly," Mauna answered; yes, the same tone heard in her distinctive: 'Don't talk.' Calm. Slightly haughty. A bit accusing. Very clear.

That's it, Shiala surrendered.

"Forgive me. May the sisters forgive me. Will they forgive me? What will happen now? What happened?" her words rolled into greater hopelessness and detachment with each word.

Vaalu-Mauna embraced Vaalu-Shiala, her sister-Messenger. They sat together, at the edge of the couch. Nearby was blood on flat cushions and the table Arzis had kicked over lay upside down.

"Nothing happened. Everything's behind us, sister... Arzis," the Mistress nodded to him, and he turned and left, leaving everything as it was.

Beast

The next day Arzis received from sir Stan, who avoided looking him in the eyes, avoided words (except the most necessary ones), twenty thousand imperials in gold, not in ingots (that would have been two bricks), but in convenient coins (two hundred pleasant chunks). He didn't even know for what purposes Arzis was being given such a sum from the young Mistress's treasury, and this depressed him even more.

But Arzis knew perfectly: he'd give half to this Manu's relatives, or whatever his name was, any money would suit them, they weren't expecting anything anyway; and the rest—he'd take for himself. Reasonable and enterprising, risk—tiny, profit—almost annual.

All that remained was to leave the residence for Bash and find out where, how and with whom Manu had lived.

He exited through the main entrance, looked at the familiar, graceful two poplars at the entrance, stretched upward. He adjusted his tunic, stamped his knemids. He thought: he should hide the tight beautiful purse from his belt somehow, or they'd steal it.

At the ceremonial entrance to a Messenger's residence you could hardly find many dirty sacks, and Arzis headed to the basement. And again at the back entrance he collided—powerfully, suddenly and noisily—with Toya, who was carrying before her, blind to the path, a large basket, full to the brim with goose down (with fabric on top).

Down scattered spectacularly, beautifully, like snow in the north, through the corridor, some eagerly flew out the door; the basket hit the wall; Toya fell onto Arzis.

"Fus!" she.

"Fuck!" he.

He hadn't seen her for some time. Hadn't talked—for a long while already. It seemed since the day of the duel. There had been a brief conversation a couple days ago at the back entrance after the usual "Hello, Toya—Strong day, sir Arzis" (Toya was addressing him as 'sir' again, and that was that; though without 'master' now), but it was instantly interrupted because servants, dhaars, cooks—who could tell—hurried somewhere and rushed Toya along with them.

The collision naturally left Arzis unharmed. Toya buried her muzzle in his chest, even grasping his belt to prevent falling—though unnecessary since he'd caught her light body by the shoulder. Once she steadied herself, her amulet bearing Ahey's symbol (and Arzis's ring) had snagged its cord on his tunic's fibula.

"What's going on there?" they asked with displeasure from the nearby washroom.

"Excuses for me," Toya made a careful jerk with an endlessly guilty smile and such guilty ears. It didn't work—everything got even more tangled.

"Nose alright?" Arzis inquired, smoothing the shoulder he'd caught her by.

"No. I mean, yes," with a lioness's deft fingers she tried to free her neck symbol from Arzis's fibula captivity. It wasn't working, she had to quickly remove it from her neck and free it this way, looking tragically at the down scattered all around. "Sir-master Arzis will excuse me," freed, she hid the symbol with ring behind her collar and stepped back a pace.

She heavily emphasized 'sir-master,' but no wonder: two servants emerged from the washroom and were already curiously watching the performance. Probably a beating awaited later for the much lost down.

"Strongday, sir Arzis," they said to him.

"So, is hamanu Renaya here?" he instantly assumed a threatening, busy appearance.

They wilted, even their ears pressed back slightly:

"No, not here."

Toya fell silent, slightly aside, toward the wall.

"Toya will come with me on important business. The mistress determined this business. Tell Renaya, the dhaars, and everyone else," Arzis said threateningly. Now for Toya: "Take the basket, shake it out, shake everything out. Right here, on the floor. Like that. Here, put this," he gave her the purse, "cover it with that cloth. That one, the white one. Let's go."

He nodded to her, and she, bewildered, obediently slipped through the door into the daylight, together with the basket in which the money in the purse nestled.

Arzis shut the door firmly, nodded again, and they departed.

"Where we going, sir Arzis?" she from behind and to the left.

"What, did you forget about the 'sir'?"

"No-no. But I can't speak that around other Family members..." she said quietly.

"You can."

"Ummm, that would be bad," Toya complained, and convincingly too; she could generally speak convincingly and believably, Arzis had noticed this. "Difficult. They'll think something wrong. They already..." she didn't finish.

"We're going to Bash, we'll settle the matter. And anyway, as I said before: let's go out to the town, together, there's nothing to do sitting here in the basement."

He wanted to add "let the good Suungs look at you," but didn't.

"Arzis, wait, please," she stopped. "But..."

"What? Let's go, we have business."

"Can't go like this, I'm in work clothes," she pointed to herself, tugged at her apron. "They're dirty. Need to change for going out, it's bad. And then there's still work..."

"Work will wait. No time, you'll go as you are."

Toya seemed to think a little; looked at the residence, somewhat martyred, somewhat with resolve, then took off her head covering wrapped around her belt and put it on. Ears with iron rings stood through the slits. They walked toward the black exit, black gates (eastern). At the exit Arzis smirked at the gate guards, one of them—Tai—raised his hand in greeting.

"Why do you need a dhaar?" he asked amusedly, leaning against the cold stone of the guard tower. He watched them go, tossing a coin, one imperial.

"Need her."

Again, Arzis wanted to joke but didn't. He only thought that Tai was the most dangerous type among all the Messenger's guards. The most... cutthroat. You could do business with such a one. Ideally: him, Tai and Mauna. Would be a good core for a business circle; of course, females in business always complicate things very-very much, but if you do everything right, the complications are surmountable; and their talents are sometimes irreplaceable. Arzis daydreamed, added Khagal to his gang too. It didn't matter that he was a fool, especially regarding females. Fool and desperate, such types are also useful. Over drinks he'd explain to Khagal in two fingers what to do with ones like Atrissa. And what not to do.

He was, of course, an enemy and should have been killed, the lucky one; but today's enemies are tomorrow's friends.

They walked the road from the residence to Bash. That's half-lyen (five hundred very wide steps), then right along the street. Toya carried the not-small basket, embracing it with both arms, not complaining. She was silent and walked to the left and behind. Arzis walked ahead; in the manner of warriors who'd been to the East, he had carelessly stuck a long knife behind his belt instead of a short sword. Two guards passed coming toward them, and Arzis was quite surprised by this (the road here was completely empty!), then realized that Bash Magistrate really did look after the Messenger's residence, well naturally, he should. Of course, Arzis seemed suspicious to them, and they were already heading toward both of them, but Arzis casually pulled out from behind his belt a bronze tablet with the Mistress's name and a completely empty space for a personal motto. Everyone in the Family had such; they don't wear them around the residence, but if going somewhere—they take them. Especially useful for Arzis to take his. The guards instantly lost interest, Arzis blew his nose to the side (right, because Toya was on the left) and also spat.

Suddenly he stopped, examined Toya from her paw claws (not very well hidden by the hem of her dress at mid-calf) to the tips of her ears (three iron rings in each). Wet nose, shining eyes, barely visible whiteness of teeth.

"Wait, you don't have knemids?"

"No, I was just going around the house and near."

"That's why I hear your steps, eh, clicking, and this..." Arzis thoughtfully didn't finish.

"Dhaars are allowed in lionkind places without knemids, I can even go barepaw," Toya said readily.

"But your paws might get tired, hurt," Arzis looked at the residence, squinting. They'd walked about three hundred steps away. Beautiful poplars hid the lion-height fence.

"Noooo. It'll be worksome, si... Arzis."

"How will it be?" the dialectal word amused him.

"It'll be good, customly," Toya hurried to correct herself.

"Alright. Going back—not the thing," Arzis sniffled, thinking about the servant-cook-dhaar females who might wrap up and detain Toya who'd escaped with him, "bad omen. We'll figure something out. The basket's not good for you," he assessed her again. "Leave it on the roadside. Just not the purse, yeah, but the basket. Wrap it in the cloth. There, don't lose it. Let's go."

Toya did everything just like that, embracing the purse like a cub, and they walked further. No one was around. A couple times he looked at her, turning left and slightly back. Each time she looked at Arzis, then straight ahead, understanding that he was looking just like that, well or not just like that, but without intention: to talk, scold, stop, punish, examine, embrace..

"Suungs are also allowed," he began deliberately, "without knemids in lionkind places. Even without pants. Some—even without heads."

"Suungs can do anything," she replied simply.

"Well said, Toi. Everything. Your tongue drips honey."

He'd heard such a turn of phrase a couple times from an old whore nicknamed 'Cabbage'. Not even worth asking how she got such a nickname. And yes, even with his back and tail, mane and scruff, he felt that Toya was a little uncomfortable. Dripping. Honey. Basement. She, all in wine, in dark red streams, wet. Thoughts can scatter in all directions, it will be hard to drive them back later.

But they were going on business, not making jokes.

"With milk," he added.

"I like milk," she suddenly said, after a moment's thought. "And you, Arzis?"

It was obvious that this quick "And you, Arzis?" didn't come easily to her, not without effort, not without deliberation. A return question, effort, conversation support. You. Arzis. Question. That was a lot of everything.

"In Naheim I'll do nothing but drink myself on milk. And you, Toi, what will you do in Naheim?"

"Nothing. I won't be there."

"Why won't you be. You'll marry a Suung, you'll be a Suung, and you'll get there," he pointed at her while walking, she to the left and slightly behind.

"For Naheim you need to be-be righteous, probably," Toya answered after thinking, stroking her covering.

"How could you be more righteous... Turn right."

"No, sometimes I do bad things. And think bad things."

"Tell me everything".

She smiled hesitantly, ears shifting, shoulder moving oddly.

"Well usually, like everyone. I being lazy sometimes. I might... despair. Or... such things. You can't talk about sins. About bad things."

Thinking about bad things, Arzis decided not to think about them now.

"Anyway, don't worry: become a Suung, and you'll be able to think and tell whatever you want, everything will be allowed. Now everything's forbidden, damn."

"Well yes-yes, dhaars have many forbiddions. I remember all the main Rules of Cohabitation with Suungs."

There is such an Imperial law: 'Orders for Dhaars, or Cohabitation with Suungs.' Old-old, like the eternally supplemented and changed Codex of Ashai-Keetrah; like the Codex, this law suffers whimsical adventures.

"What kind of rules are there?"

They began entering Bash. Here was a well with an ox walking in circles, pumping water. It was wet here, swampy, Arzis got his paws dirty (with excellent legate knemids), and even more so—Toya (without knemids).

"Mrrraaam..." Toya seriously pondered.

Arzis asked just to chat. He was familiar with many of these rules, well how could you not know them if you live in the Empire. If you add local customs about dhaars, even Vaal would break a paw.

Toya quickly began, walking around a puddle:

"Ears visible in lionkind places, unless it's cold-cold. Don't write in big alphabet..."

High, Arzis corrected in his mind.

"...stand in separate lines for everything. In public don't speak loudly, don't growl or shout, don't sing in your language unless permitted. Announce your name, breed and where you live, and who is your master. Can't speak your language around Suungs unless allowed. Can't celebrate Suunger holidays..."

Suung, Arzis corrected in his mind.

"...but you can serve them, without being happy," Toya spoke rapidly, getting out of breath. "Follow customs of Suungs, masters of the Empire..."

She looked at him because her voice was being interrupted by street noise:

"...everything for hunting! Beast!..."

"Don't remove rings from ears," catching a moment of quiet, she added and fell silent.

"...bows, arrows, points!..." a certain street lioness truly roared.

"Except when sleeping, maybe. But I sleep with rings..."

Speaking became difficult due to all this noise, so he drew Toya closer to him by the elbow, very close, on the left.

"You sleep with rings on?" Arzis inquired, choosing a path through the crowd.

"I, I... Arzis, what-what-what, I didn't hear?" Toya became very worried somehow, even pressed against him, and he briefly embraced her, protecting from collision with a hand cart.

"Do you sleep with rings, I'm saying?" he said to her, closer.

"Yes, that's usually for me," Toya also reached toward his pointed ear. "I'm always used to it."

They walked a couple steps, passed a tavern, she suddenly added, reaching toward his ear again:

"I sleep good."

"Bows, arrows, points! Send-offs to good places! Everything for the road! Everything for hunting! Beast!" roared the nearby lioness, sitting on a stool like an idol among eastern barbarians, clanging a bell after each exclamation.

Arzis halted beside the lioness. A shop entrance beckoned—obviously ancient, wooden, with faded lettering overhead.

"Any knemids?" he asked the lioness.

She didn't respond, merely gestured with her bell—enter and discover everything—then resumed:

"Bows, arrows..."

Arzis did just that and entered the darkness first; hit his head on a ceiling beam. The shop was definitely old—chaos and abundance reigned in it, typical only of old, packed trading places. Behind a table sat a hamanu of middle age, obviously the sister of the shouter at the entrance, weaving a net.

"Good day, good... Suung," she waved at them, noticing that there was only one Suung, and in addition—just a dhaar.

This custom in Listigia, especially here in its north, never ceased to amaze Arzis. Suung-Listigians waved at everyone indiscriminately, for any reason. When he handled business at the brothel, he constantly saw his tail-swishers beckoning lions by waving and jingling bracelets with loud chimes.

An open, commercial pride. Rather Hustrian-like in this regard.

"Good day to mistress-hamanu," Toya bowed slightly, as was proper.

"Beautiful," Arzis approached, looked around, tucked his palms behind his belt. "Noisy here with you."

"Oh, flatterer. Beautiful. What, do I look so good today?" the trader laughed and smoothed her ears, holding a net hook in her palm.

"I already suspect the beauty of the lioness's daughters."

Pleased with such a largely cunning compliment, the lioness dropped the hook with net and stood:

"And what are you looking for, diamond?" she came out. "You are Naysagrian, aren't you?" she asked suddenly, pointedly.

Toya stands behind and to the left of Arzis, hands folded before her and looking down: she knows dhaar manners well—after all, in service to a Messenger.

"Better. Yaamrian," Arzis straightened with a smirk and tugged his brown-red mane.

Toya raised her gaze to him for a moment, then lowered it again.

"Ah, strength of the Empire, passion of the Empire. Listen, I don't have legate knemids," she looked critically at his legs in short pants that reached the beginning of his shins.

Arzis pointed at Toya with his finger, shook his palm:

"Not for me. For her."

The trader was surprised, and Toya was surprised too. No, she was even frightened and confused simultaneously.

"Hmm. Well this needs to be done for her, measured."

"No ready-made ones?"

"There are a couple ready-made female ones, but they'll be much more expensive," immediate warning.

"Let's see."

She simply, without sentiment lifted Toya's hem to examine her legs.

"What a bigpaw your dhaar is. She needs larger ones. And she looks kind of skinny. But her paws are in mud, I won't let you measure."

"Need to wash, where can paws be washed?"

"Well, there, further... But why measure, too much fuss. Here, buy these, she'll adjust herself and go."

The trader was offering a cheap option, mediocre stuff, with such you could only walk around the house, and that's all.

"No, not these," Arzis said slowly, frowning, menacing. "Nothing better?"

Toya looked at him again in a brief moment. Probably this is how they ask something threateningly when they've intercepted you on the road. Nothing better? Come on, turn out your pockets, show everything, show it all, undress.

"Better?" the trader was surprised. And with challenge: "There is."

She brought them out. Straps of soft ox leather. Base studded with iron nails, completely covering claws. Really for the road, traveling ones.

"Go wash your paws," Arzis said to Toya.

The trader, sighing and stroking her chest, said:

"Over there, around the corner—a trough for rinsing, go do it."

"Yes, mistress-hamanu," she nodded and went directly like that, with the bundle of twenty thousand imperials. Halfway there she stopped, returned and offered the purse in its cloth wrapping to Arzis.

"Please, sir-master Arzis will take-take."

"Toya, we talked about sirs and masters. I'll punish you for this."

"Yes," she immediately agreed and went.

The trader chuckled, laughing at this back-and-forth and chatter. Arzis thought about how his young, stolen dhaar lioness had still sensed that there were coins there, and wisely decided not to be left alone with them even for a moment. Smart.

"You decided to buy her these knemids?" the trader asked mockingly.

"Yeah. Let her try them on."

"Why such knemids for a dhaar? Buy her a collar instead, she walks without a collar," the hamanu measured him with a cunning look, leaning on the table. "The way it ought to be."

"No. Nah," Arzis slowly disagreed with something, examining an interesting hunting bag; he didn't finish his sluggish disagreement because Toya returned then.

She sat down on a stump that served as a chair, which the hamanu had pushed over (with her paw). She quickly put on the knemids, and Arzis, looking at her paws, was surprised by Toya's everyday practicality.

"...everything for hunting! Beast!" was heard again from the street.

"Toya, do you need a beast?" Arzis asked with a smirk, stopping touching hedgehog pelts.

Dealing with the last strap, she looked at him from under her brows, bent toward her paw. So serious, a look from under her covering, paw stretched forward, watching. Her ears swiveled—she doesn't rush with an answer; she thinks, selects words.

She selected them, and:

"Arzis..."

"Don't sit, get up," the trader-hamanu interrupted all nuances, gesturing to Toya: stand on your paws.

"Well, how is it, do they fit?" Arzis stretched upward and yawned. With the bundle containing the purse he accidentally hit the ceiling beam again, coins pleasantly clinked.

"Very good," Toya replied instantly.

"Walk around," the trader advised.

Toya walked, clasping her palms under her chest. She became slightly taller. Her covering reaches almost to the start of her tail from behind, Arzis noted. Long, dark brown. For all weather and occasions.

"Good, good ones," she reported to Arzis after a circle. "For a lioness like me, they'll suit. With a paw like this," she raised her paw before herself, turned it, showing him. "Like this."

"Excellent. We'll take them."

"Nine hundred," the trader said insinuatingly, just like in revenge; confident that such a stunning price would make this menacingly-handsome lion (he'd suit one of her daughters, but she must know who he is and what he does) think whether a dhaar needs such knemids.

"No problem," Arzis extracted nine gold coins from the purse and set them on the table.

The trader took the money suspiciously, bit them.

"By the way, does the lioness know where sir Manu lived here? Big fellow, he liked to go to the Circle."

"Yeah, heard he took ill and died recently. Go to Newhold, he's from there."

"He didn't live in Bash?" Arzis bared his teeth slightly. This implied extra efforts, travel and difficulties.

"That's part of Bash, to the north. I don't know exactly, ask about him there. They know there. He left a wife and three sons. And his sick moth-

er," the hamanu counted on her fingers, frowning. "His father disappeared hunting, long ago... What else do you need, good sir?" she smiled at him with all her teeth (broken fang), returning to business.

"Good enough. Let's go, Toi," he touched his ward and stolen dhaar lioness on the shoulder.

"Come back if you need anything!" they hurried to say to Arzis's back and tail.

They went further, to northern Bash. The bundle with the purse was again passed to Toya, and she again carried it carefully.

A firran passed grandly, muzzled, with a young rider dispersing crowds along the narrow street. They pressed against walls—nothing else to do. Toya, unaccustomed to firrans (big leonine creatures, roughly horse-sized), was clearly frightened. Backing toward the wall, she forgot about her knemids, stumbled, but Arzis caught her while she grasped him. She regarded him apologetically.

He called to the firran, making a clicking with his tongue—that's how they're called, especially to pet or for feeding. The firran responded and stopped near Arzis, sniffing, but the rider made it go further, and added:

"Moron."

"Hey now!" Arzis warned him, but the rider didn't react. Arzis followed this pair with his gaze, then he and Toya went further.

"Arzis?"

"Yes?"

"Should I take them off?" Toya pointed to the knemids. "Have we already... finished? Done everything?"

"What?" Arzis understood nothing. "Why take them off? Are they bad?"

"They're good."

Arzis said irritably:

"Wear them, if they're good. You can't walk through Bash shit barepaw."

"So they're for me-me?" Toya was surprised.

"Who else?"

"I thought," she spoke quickly, going around a puddle, which separated them briefly, "that we went to buy knemids for a lioness who has paws like mine. That kind of work—selecting knemids, that's why you need me."

"Which lioness, for example?" Arzis was curious about this amusing thought of Toya's.

"I don't know. Some lioness of yours, or... I don't know... someone," she gestured with natural confusion.

"No. They're for you. And pay attention: we're continuing our work journey. And there you need to look good."

"Where are we going? Oh, I look very-very bad," Toya had something like well-suppressed panic.

"What, want us to buy more rags?"

"No-no-no," Toya was horrified. "Merciful Ahey, what should I do now?"

"Follow me, what else," he said to her with a stern shade, not turning around (she was behind).

"I know. But... what-what should I do now?" she said truly mournfully. "It's... not proper."

Arzis gestured dismissively—let's go, cut the nonsense. Toya fell quiet; they walked in complete silence until halting at crossroads where something occurred—Arzis felt gentle claws tracing his forearm: tenderly, carefully, extensively. A perfect moment seized: sudden, during stillness rather than motion, precisely timed—he shuddered as prickly sensation coursed through him.

She had hunted for the moment, had watched for it.

"Arzis," Toya positioned herself sort of to the side, but sort of in front of him. "I don't know what to do. I'm entirely grateful for what you gave me. Thank you," she crouched down, even bowed her head, and she was very worried about everything. "Don't know what to do."

He squinted with a smile. Definitely, so many of these 'don't know what to do's were proclaimed not without reason, and he understood why, experienced in lionesses' roundabout paths. A pack of cubs ran past and bumped into Toya, she even staggered; one of them called "Sorry, maassi" the second told him "Fool, that's a dhaar."

"What, Toyusha, afraid of being in my debt?" Arzis spoke, looking into her eyes, while Toya rubbed her palm against her dress and squeezed the bundle. "Don't know for what and why?"

She confessed quite honestly:

"Yes, well yes. Don't know what I owe in return."

"You're right to be afraid. Be afraid! Grrr. Made myself a debtor," he growled at her. Then, thoughtfully: "Who knows where all this will lead. A rash decision—to try on those knemids."

Toya also thought about prospects and traps, bit her lip with a fang. He touched her nose, she blinked from surprise, and then he couldn't resist and moved to a favorite thing already done with her once—covering lionesses' nuzzles: you take your palm and simply cover their mouth, even move it around; two hamanu passed by and discussed what was happening: "Look, this one tells the dhaar to shut up."

"Don't bite," he falsely accused her, and turned her, with mouth covered, toward himself by her tail, embracing her shoulder and pointing with a claw somewhere north, and so they looked together there, somewhere north. "To complete the task we were assigned, you need knemids to walk properly and look better. That's it. Now you must walk in them behind me—such is your duty."

Toya, when he released her, first looked around. Completely confused by all the movements and things done to her, she continued biting her lip with a fang and began smoothing her covering, ears. She thought: this was all for 'sir-master.' He did say he'd punish her.

"Arzis, what now, how should I do?"

She meant the task they were assigned. But Arzis probably understood something else:

"Don't be capricious, Toi. Are you teasing me, not obeying?"

"No. I don't obey, I tease. Fus! I don't tease, I obey. Oh... Ahey, what am I..."

"You're more cunning than I thought. So, listen here," he took her shoulder again. "Give me our cargo. Like this," he received the purse from Toya. "Walk around the street and ask where dead Manu lived here. If they ask why—it's needed for the mistress. More precisely, master. Master. There, go ahead."

"Manu who died. Okay," Toya nodded, smoothed her covering, checked whether Ahey's symbol was hidden (around Suungs it's sort of allowed, but not approved to wear openly), turned and looked at herself, passed her palm behind her dress, examined the knemids, and went.

Every scoundrel knows that a lioness in your company adds trust, especially a young one. A lion who wanders around the vicinity and asks about who lives where is suspicious. Especially one like him. You can pretend to be many things, but it would be very difficult to pretend to be harmless. But a lion who walks with a lioness and asks who lives where—that's much more peaceful. And even better—a young lioness without any lions with murderers' muzzles. Of course, difficulties or misunderstandings are possible due to the lioness being dhaar, a servant in the Suung world, but these are minutiae. Or this might even work in her favor in her search.

Of course, at first he took Toya simply because he felt like it—lionesses add color, and they see much more of them. Instead of the tedium of a solo assignment, something strangely cheerful awaited, with unexpected turns and constant, secret tension between the sexes. But now Toya could really help a little. Probably she's also capable of getting much in the way, as always happens with females.

Arzis thought about all this, leaning against a post with crossed arms. The knife pressed unpleasantly into his back, the base of his tail.

She returned quite quickly, one could say—unexpectedly quickly. And she walked fast, but at the last moment waited for a lioness with a string of cubs to pass before her, very many, no fewer than ten; they held onto each other (younglions by hands, in pairs, lionessies by a pole they carried together). Toya followed them with her gaze, and Arzis watched this.

She approached, adjusting her covering against sudden wind:

"Manu who died lives on the street that way. Need to go straight there," Toya gestured, showing, "don't take the first left turn, the second left—go-go. Fourth-fifth house on the left is his. At his house there's a not done stone fence."

"Excellent, Toya. You're clever," he really liked it. "Let's go."

She smiled, sighed:

"There was a kind old lion there, he's so kind," her ears half-pressed.

Again they walked, and she kept glancing at him somehow, drawing level with him on the left, as if seeking his gaze. Arzis noticed this but didn't let on.

"What's that thing you have?" she pointed to his left cheek.

"Where?"

"Who hit you?" Toya asked more specifically, cautiously.

"That was recent. I was walking through town, bothering no one, and suddenly collided with some lioness. She was young. Seemed wealthy. Seemed beautiful. Some poor fellow was pestering her, trying to wheedle her lioness secrets and laughing at her, and I drove him off with a stick. Like this, poked him in the belly. The lioness thanked me and said I'd helped her. I asked where her guards were, since she was young, beautiful and rich. She said she had poor protection. She pulled out a letter from her belt and began fanning herself with it. I decided to bid her farewell, and in parting said 'May Vaal embrace you, lioness.' And she struck me with her claws because she wanted me to kiss her hand. And speak to her respectfully, not 'you.' And apologize. And only dare to obey. And in response... words can't convey what I did to her in return. But you already know," Arzis expressively rubbed his nose, hinting at muzzle-tormenting.

The reality was somewhat different. After the lion's murder in the garden and Shiala's departure the next day, the Mistress summoned him. Praised and thanked him. Didn't explain herself or explain anything. He was slightly drunk. Everything proper. Upon parting, Arzis wondered whether he'd often need to skewer honored guests, and if there'd be extra money for such work. Got no answer. Then Arzis asked whether she'd decorated the spear with ribbons and perfumed it. Mauna said yes. Personally? Personally. Arzis suggested the perfume was fine, let it remain, but the ribbons, since it was such a party, should be more cheerful—perhaps having songs written on them; she became interested and demanded he announce his options, which he provided; one ended: '...a regal bird ascends the thick, an eagle perched on a dick.' Mauna raked his muzzle with claws and threw him out of her chambers.

Thinking, Toya contemplated this extremely curious story. She thought both when he prudently saved her from collision with four insolent young lions (and here Arzis considered a colorful conflict unprofitable, instantly determining they were the muscle of local business lions), and turned the corner past a roughly cobbled sign on which someone had burned: 'Asha—whore.'

"Bad lioness," Toya suddenly snorted.

"I agree. Should have spanked her right there. With a mirror."

"Spanked... with a mirror?" Toya asked cautiously.

"Yes," Arzis nodded, looking around. "Disobedient little lionesses get spanked with mirrors, handheld ones, you know."

"Ahhh... I didn't know," Toya shrugged, looking at him. "Such a custom," she found an explanation, understood. "Probably for the rich. Handheld mirrors are expensive, that's a good thing-thing. Better a thin strap. Or a branch. My mother beat me with those."

"I like how you think, Toyusha. So, come here," he suddenly led her to a lonely, crooked bench that stood so conveniently on this thick, green, chaotic, peripheral street among bushes, with no one near it.

They stood by the bushes.

"So, Toi. Time for something."

She looked at him seriously, from below upward.

"They walk here," she noted this circumstance for some reason.

"We'll be quick. Give me the purse. And give me the apron, what's in its pocket?"

Toya eagerly rummaged in it, as if she'd been waiting for just this.

"Thread, a little knife in cloth. You pricked your finger with it, remember?" she showed.

"Yeah, doesn't matter. Need to divide our stuff. One, two, three, four... ah, whatever," he took a handful of coins from the purse by eye and put them in the bundle. Then another one. Then the bundle quickly went into Toya's apron, and the purse thinned by about half.

Arzis couldn't tie the purse string, something wasn't working for him, and Toya came to help, and everything worked out instantly.

"So many, and like gold," Toya simply noted, pointing to the purse. "When I carried it, I understood there were coins inside. Didn't think they were such ones."

"Nineteen thousand one hundred imperials," he winked at her.

This was a stupid act—out of mischief and swagger to tell her the sum. Even dividing the sum in front of her was a stupid act.

"Nineteen and one hundred. Oh, and thousand. That's probably very much-much."

"Probably. These that you have," he touched her apron, "we'll carry back home. And these," he shook the purse, "we'll give to Manu's relatives, whose house you searched for. Such business. Understood?"

"Yes. But why hide in the apron?" she looked down at herself. "Not good, won't work. Might tear. I'll carry in my hands," she suggested the obvious.

"Need to hide it, Toya," he insisted for some reason: with tone of voice, gesture, touch to her shoulder.

There was no necessity for this. The bundle looked completely ordinary: just something in grayish white cloth, not anything special. But he insisted.

A stupid act—taking her with him today at all, into this whole business of transferring money for a dead lion whose life force was consumed by the brilliant young Messenger of the greatest Suung Empire. Money loves silence, fewer eyes, less fuss and movement. Toya understood nothing of what they were doing; but, taught by service to a Messenger, she asked no questions. Arzis also didn't understand why he was performing all these strange, unnecessary exercises, why he was drawing her in, inventing weak rational pretexts for them ('Let the dhaar go with the money, no one will think she has the sum and won't steal it,' 'Let the dhaar search for the house, less suspicious,' 'Let the lioness walk with me—I

look more peaceful,' 'Let Toya be with me when I hand over the money, so that... so that what?'). He simply wanted this. Simply wanted her to follow him on this wonderful day of late Season of Rising and do everything he said. So far Toya was handling this flawlessly. He wanted her to make him a pair, well more precisely, company, company; for something to bind them, well at least this unconditionally dishonest deed, this greedy money scheme; he wanted to get dirty in the mud, drag Toya there too, and wallow with her together. Predatorily, cheerfully. They should have more in common. That's how he wants it. There's a notable (in some way) incident in the dish warehouse that should have been their shared secret, bond, but too many curious noses got involved, made noise, even hammered out a duel from it, they somewhat spoiled this connection (or the opposite?).

Whatever.

"Is it need-need? Let me hide it here," and Toya showed that everything could be tucked in her bosom, not in the apron, which had become strangely bulky.

"Brilliant. Go ahead."

But. Toya's dress was closed-necked, wouldn't unfasten, at the neck—drapery, folds that could cover the neck in case of bad weather. Practical, everyday, working, ordinary dress of Suungs from moderate lands. Nothing would pass near the neck, you couldn't open the collar. The task seemed unsolvable, and seemed so apparently to everyone, for Toya helplessly looked around, even stood on her claws for some reason, as if wanting to see whether anyone was coming there, behind the bushes or along the road. She looked at him, so expressively, anxiously and pleadingly:

"What?" he scratched his mane.

"Arzis. Usually I don't do such things. Forgive me. Please, unbelt me."

He likes undressing lionesses, so everything was done as requested, without any questions. The goal, simple and pragmatic, became clear—if something won't go under clothes from above, you can stuff it from below, right? Wrapping some of Toya's belt around his fist, Arzis examined it—belt turned out interesting; narrow, it had a really beautiful bronze clasp, and on it was embossed a triangle with rays from each side. Three vertices—three rays.

While he examined the belt, Toya took the bundle under her hem, tensely looking up, then behind Arzis's back, watching whether anyone was coming. She clamped it high between her thighs, adjusted something, and moved it all the way under her chest; as a result she held it through the fabric of her dress, and looked questioningly at Arzis.

"Interesting belt. What does this mean?" he pointed to the triangle.

"Every Mramri lioness wears such. Usually it can't be removed, especially on the street. And around lions," Toya answered, telling nothing about the meaning.

"It's fine, today it's allowed."

"I didn't remove it, you removed," she declared convincingly, even with reproach. This was important, an important clarification.

Conviction's firmness merged with flexibility when necessary. Arzis appreciated this.

"Ah. So lions can remove them."

"Not all," another important clarification after a moment's thought.

She stamped impatiently, clearly expecting something.

"That goes without saying," Arzis nodded, stretching the belt to its full length and hanging it around his neck.

So they stood. Someone clearly passed behind and clearly paid attention to them, but Arzis didn't turn around, only looked at Toya, smiling and squinting from the sun.

"Please, secure me. Put on the belt," she clarified.

"Got it."

He did this carefully, even respectfully. Went down on one knee to fasten better and not pinch; and he remembered how they used to fasten each other's armor in the Legate. Toya held the bundle at her chest and under her dress with one hand, and waited while he positioned the clasp with its unknown symbol exactly in the middle. He squinted and made small adjustments several times with completely unnecessary precision.

"Thank you," she said as soon as he rose.

He saw that the bundle was no longer in front, and understood the little trick—it was already behind, at her back, under clothing. Well, Toya had hidden it completely. He touched (embraced) her waist from behind to make sure. It was there.

"Let's go."

They didn't have to walk long, two hundred steps at most.

"This house?"

"Should be this-this one, yes."

Arzis knocked and they began waiting. He saw neighbors across the street peek out and begin openly examining them.

"Seems like someone's there," Arzis determined. "We're going in."

"And I'm also going to enter-enter?" Toya asked worriedly.

Previous planning and basic logic dictated no—she should naturally wait outside, having no business indoors. Furthermore, some Suungs refuse dhaars in their homes.

"You'll always enter-enter, Toya."

This frightened her. She spoke quietly:

"Arzis, you should have probably taken not me. But taken the Mistress's servants, not me. They would probably better be accompanying... you... for... this... We're entering... someone's house... And I'm all-all very... I'm poorly dressed, Arzis, it's great shame..."

"Suffer," Arzis said in his usual voice. "Poorly dressed, but you have beautiful knemids on beautiful paws. You have tasty paws. I bought them knemids so as not to bite them. You know, we'll go in now and talk awaits us, but instead of talking I'd start devouring your paws. That would be..."

The doors opened.

"...great shame," Arzis finished.

"Yes?" A lioness appeared in the doorway. She wore mourning. She had definitely grown thin. Light-colored, blood from further north; scarred ear, probably Menai or Tallalu by pride. She immediately evoked pity.

"Good day, hamanu. Did sir Manu live here?"

"Here," the lioness looked down, then—without any unnecessary explanations, introductions or anything else—simply nodded them inside.

They entered, and she closed behind them.

"How can I help?" Arzis heard her gentle tone and felt uncomfortable. "I'm his wife."

"And I'm his partner's partner."

"Ahhh," the lioness interrupted. "More debts. Come in, wash your paws, tell me," she said, and gave Toya a water basin.

Toya washed her paws very thoroughly and took a moment to examine them; Arzis didn't wait and went where the widow-hostess went, ending up simply in the kitchen, which served here as both kitchen and dining room. He sat in the place indicated to him, the hostess sat opposite. Toya came, and to Arzis's surprise and Toya's amazement, she was offered a chair at the third side of the table, where she carefully, modestly sat, finding herself in the middle between them.

"I'm alone now. Sons are working, will be back in the evening. There are three of them. Sixteen, sixteen and fourteen. There was also a daughter, but she died of fever when small. Long ago. The eldest son took over father's business. If the lion wants, he can speak with him, but must wait. But it's possible with me too."

"What happened to him?" Arzis asked.

The lioness shrugged, spread her hands:

"Don't know."

Suddenly she wept. This deeply troubled Toya, who looked to Arzis as though he might help. She even gestured toward the lioness, but he couldn't grasp her meaning. Toya abandoned her seat, moving to comfort the lioness, who immediately buried her muzzle in Toya's shoulder as soon she touched her. Toya embraced her while gazing at Arzis with expressive, tear-bright eyes, then at the ceiling, then at golden sunbeams streaming through windows.

Arzis sighed, scratched behind his ear and touched a ceramic rooster on the table.

"He was healthy. Then he took to bed. He was very sleepy. Constantly slept... He had a business starting—lumber. Borrowed money... One came before you," the lioness said, wiping herself with Toya's covering, "Manu was leaving him the house as collateral, it turns out. Serious lion, I know him."

"We came to return money, we're not here for debts," Arzis said soothingly, showing his palms. "We'll leave it and go," he placed the purse on the table.

"Oh... Oh. Glory to Vaal. That will help, thank you. And who are you from?"

"He has one... partner, Arzis. He knew."

"Arzis. Alright," the lioness spread her hands, pressing her ears back. "Well, listen, this lion came. He needs to get back nineteen thousand one hundred imperials. Exactly that! Not even twenty thousand," the lioness laughed hoarsely. "Where would you get such money? He'll take the house, or what... I don't know."

Not that he believed in signs and coincidences, but Arzis still gave them due attention. He didn't seek them, but sometimes they found him.

"Nineteen thousand and a hundred?" Arzis asked again.

"Yes. A lot," they confirmed to him.

This was exactly how much they had altogether. They were given twenty thousand. Minus Toya's knemids. Um... of all the sums in the world—precisely this one. How so?

Toya placed her palms on the table edge, becoming very animated:

"What is the hamanu's name, may I dare ask?" she addressed very respectfully.

"Asadzi."

"Mistress-hamanu Asadzi, I count very badly-badly," Toya sighed, rubbing her palms. "But I remembered," she pressed her hands to her chest and looked at Arzis, "that there are nineteen. Thousands. One hundred. Imperials. Money. There," she pointed to the purse. "This will help, won't it, Arzis?" her ears even rose, she looked at him again, seeking approval.

There was no doubt what had happened: Toya not only sympathized; she wanted to prove her usefulness, her ability to participate in conversation; since they'd brought her inside the house, seated her at the table, and here she sat, practically equal with everyone and beside him. She was accompanying him, after all (even if in work clothes, well what could be done, he hadn't let her change!), he hadn't taken her along for nothing, he'd considered her good company, he'd even gifted her knemids (she remembered, she'd definitely repay him at the first opportunity), so everyone should see, especially someone in particular, that she could understand things, converse, and even name large numbers. Never mind that she couldn't count so much—but she could remember. Never mind that she was taking risks, after all she was interfering in money matters, and his business in general...

...Arzis looked at Toya—she appeared almost happy; he sighed, rubbed his muzzle. Everything somehow came together. Never in his life had anything come together like this for him (there was always something missing). But here—with Toya, with money, with everything—it came together. Again lionesses had ruined everything—this money was leaving him. Instead, he'd probably get something else.

"No, Toya. There's less there."

He noticed how her ears pressed back. She understood everything. A blunder. Possibly fatal and unforgivable. No wonder something was hidden in her bosom...

"Oh, even this helps, glory to Vaal, however much there is," the hostess raised her hands to the ceiling.

"There's half," Arzis pointed to the lone purse on the table. "The second half is missing. And the second half..." he slowly pointed his claw at Toya. "Hamanu Asadzi, is there a bucket?"

"My attention?" she didn't understand.

"A big bucket. Without it there'll be golden chaos."

"What?... I'll bring it now," surprised Asadzi went away.

And indeed—what appeared to the world was not a bucket, but a considerable wooden basin with a worn rim. Arzis approached it, gestured for Asadzi to sit back down, and then beckoned—again with a gesture—to Toya. She went to him immediately, guilty, and—as often happened this day—confused.

"Stand in the basin. Paws wider. Wider still," he ordered her.

Still it didn't work out wide—each time Toya only stood a little bit wider; always insufficient. Okay, it would do, the lioness stood in the basin. Arzis positioned himself beside her like a fair magician, presenting, radiating such confidence that the lionesses froze as if spellbound.

"Hamanu Asadzi, I have such a lioness. There won't be half. There will be as needed. She will make everything complete."

He pulled out a knife from behind his back.

"Vaal, forbid it!..." the hostess exclaimed in fear.

"Quiet," Arzis threatened.

Amazingly, Toya didn't stir and said nothing, only glanced sideways at Arzis; her palms folded on her stomach in an intricate weaving. He turned to her, met her gaze (so much there), and almost felt sorry. He went behind her, and if he could have seen her muzzle after this, he would have seen—she closed her eyes, sighed and became peaceful.

"Ancient toast: 'May females prove abundant!'"

And he pierced her dress from behind with the knife, there where the bundle with money was. He did this carefully, much more carefully than it appeared from the side.

"What are you doing to her?!" the hostess was horrified.

The first golden imperials poured into the basin.

"Look. See, money pours from her," he shook Toya's belt, hem, tail through the fabric. Toya, opening her eyes, bit her claws, accepted everything and did nothing.

"Why you treat her so poorly?" the hamanu rose. Nevertheless, she observed with fascination as genuine gold cascaded into the basin.

"But it's good! Look: this lioness is truly abundant," Arzis said even with pride, because the clinking of coins hadn't stopped yet.

"Hah," a nervous chuckle from Asadzi. She sat back down and calmed herself. The performance turned out incredibly strange in the end, but not bloody, not bad, and—it seemed—quite profitable.

"This is good," Toya said suddenly, seemingly for hamanu Asadzi, but if you thought about it—unclear for whom. "Must be so. This is for my guilt."

Arzis shook more money from her, to the last coin. Then the golden coins with profiles of different Emperors migrated from the basin in handfuls to the table, forming a little pile.

"There we go. Tsa. Let's count," he clapped his hands.

Coins poured from the purse, and counting began, which not only Arzis joined but also the hostess, despite all the strange adventures and obvious extraordinariness (to put it mildly) of these guests; Toya returned to her place and only observed. She took one coin to look at, from curiosity, but carefully returned it back.

It came out to exactly nineteen thousand one hundred.

"If this is some kind of joke or... I don't even know what to think about this," Asadzi pondered. "Now they won't take the house. As the sir said, from Arzis? Ar-zi-s?"

"Yes," Arzis nodded.

"Does he know sir Smon?" she tried to understand such a huge coincidence. It was precisely to Smon that she owed money.

"Maybe," Arzis didn't deny anything, leaving all possibilities open ("A good room has many exits," as Bull liked to say).

"Let sir Arzis receive utmost gratitude, whoever he might be."

"Certainly," Arzis replied with indifference.

"Eat? Drink?"

"We'll drink, why not."

He received wonderfully cold beer. The hostess and Toya sat down to mesmerine tea. Not without adventures:

"Mistress-hamanu should know that I am a dhaar lioness, Mramri breed," Toya hesitated, seeing tea being poured into her cup.

"Pleased to meet you."

That definitely wasn't what she expected to hear. Toya's claws started fidgeting on the uncovered table, causing a scratching sound. Arzis looked at her palms, then at Toya (in profile), then at her palms again.

"Mesmerine isn't quite allowed for me. This is for Suung lionesses, they don't sell it to dhaars."

"Never heard such a thing," the hostess flicked an ear and filled Toya's cup to the brim. "Besides, I'm not selling to the lioness, but serving. By the way, what's the good sir's name?" Asadzi remembered to ask.

"Thank you, mistress-hamanu Asadzi, thank you," Toya hurried with gratitude.

"Mine?" Arzis waved his mug. "Well, I'm, uh, Khagal."

They fell silent for a bit, and then:

"His name is Arzis, mistress-hamanu," Toya said convincingly, firmly, holding her cup near her mouth. "That's his name. Not Khagal, that's the wrong name for him."

"Well, Toya, what the..." Arzis set his mug on the table, frowning. Unthinkable: both disobedience and denial of his words. "I'll show you!"

Today he was being betrayed left and right. The traitor, looking at Arzis, sipped tea, inhaling its aroma; her gaze gleamed; she was drinking it for the first time in her life. Her eyes even closed. It's known that li-

onesses like mesmerine tea. Very much. Lions don't drink it, never, nowhere. In cubhood Arzis, like everyone, firmly knew—if you sip this female drink, your mane will never grow, and what exists will fall out; and many other humiliating changes will happen and you'll become weak.

"So that's how it is," Asadzi drawled, looking at Arzis with the first smile of the day. "No need to be modest."

Toya looked at him with hidden bliss, as if tipsy. Well, they love it. Strange that mesmerine tea isn't allowed for dhaars—Arzis didn't know this either. Such nonsense, they'd only be more obedient and work better. He winked slightly at Toya and raised his mug, meaning let's drink; Toya even made a movement—to clink her cup with his—but instantly realized that in a house where there's mourning, this would be so inappropriate. Her ears pressed back, she continued gleaming with her little eyes from behind her cup. And continued looking at Arzis—peeking to see what he'd say, and whether he'd continue scolding. He probably would. How else.

Glory to Vaal, the hostess didn't notice all this. She was thinking about something, looking out the window and also sipping tea.

"Let the sir not be angry with Toya. She's a good young lioness," she said just like that, continuing to look out the window.

"Toi, we'll have a serious talk," he wagged his finger.

"Let the sir think well," Asadzi added.

Arzis scratched his mane at his chest, not understanding what he should think about.

"What business did the sir conduct with my husband?" Asadzi inquired.

"Dirty," Arzis said reluctantly.

Toya, listening to him extremely attentively, sweetly wiped herself with her little palm.

"And why was there a performance with the basin?" Asadzi drank her tea in one gulp, quite hot; Toya glanced at her sideways, hmm, how so. And suddenly took away her empty cup, at which the hostess looked at her with surprise. Instantly sensing the blunder, Toya pressed her ears back and returned the little cup to its place:

"Hamanu will greatly forgive. Habit... Guilty..."

Arzis, watching all this, thought.

"Always wanted to be an actor and perform miracles," he invented. And stood up, slapping his knees (Toya flinched slightly): "Thank you, hamanu Asadzi. We sympathize with your loss. May Manu not beat me too hard when he meets me in Naheim. And hamanu shouldn't forget to pay for the house," he pointed to the money on the table, which no one had thought to put away more safely.

Lionesses! They don't think about safety, about money either.

They quickly said goodbye, the widow kept thanking Arzis, which he waved off; Asadzi said a few words to Toya, but Arzis didn't hear what exactly.

"We very-very sympathize with the loss. Arzis, and I beside him," Toya finally said.

She donned her covering (ears through slits), skillfully taking on new knemids (her practical agility in mundane tasks surprised him), he caught glimpse of her tail beneath her dress (second daily sighting, first occurring in the shop). They passed the threshold, walking ten paces. Then fifty, then one hundred.

Toya quite obviously tried several times to speak. This was audible, her inhales. But each time she changed her mind, stopped short.

"Arzis, you took pity on that widow, may Ahey help her in everything..." she began carefully, and added something in her own, Mramri language.

He rubbed his nose, winced, and clicked disapprovingly. Roughly ten thousand imperials. A whole brick. Ahhh...

"You gave her everything. Both her part and yours," she added gently.

He stretched upward, looked malevolently at two lions standing by a cart who were looking malevolently at them, directed her left, they turned onto a busy street.

"I didn't pity her. You did. Well, and blabbed the whole sum," he said quietly when no tails were nearby. "And there was only half in the purse. And no one knew this. Except. Us. Two."

From the left (no longer behind, but nearby—Toya slowly-slowly, but had shortened the distance throughout today) there was long no answer. Arzis looked there with a smirk: steady, absent gaze forward; pressed ears; palm at throat.

"I'm guilty. Should stayed silent," she said truly sadly. "I... You lost very-very many money, yes?"

He wanted to say something, there, of course a lot, now you'll have to give everything back, and such, in the same spirit, you'll pay it well, and with markup too; but Arzis suddenly laughed, even spitting, and waved his hand:

"Eh, the money's gone crying, Toya. But I didn't lose it. All the money was for her," and again he stretched upward, yawning. "All of it."

And again he saved inattentive (from all these money tragedies) Toya from collision with a young lion, some official there or book lion; somehow Toya was forgetting that she needed to give way to Suungs, and here in Bash there were many principled tails on the dhaar question, as Arzis noticed. After the rescue he embraced her for a time, as one usually embraces charges or younger sisters—half-turned, with one arm, not completely; now pressing her to himself, now releasing.

"Oh. Fus. Oh, Arzis," she said, tormented by his uneven embraces. "And why did you hide the second half in me?" she put her hand on his shoulder, briefly, to hold on (probably). "Everything fit in the purse. Such a beautiful one. I can still embroider it with patterns," she offered very earnestly. "If you want..."

"You're curious one," they walked along the commercial street, and Arzis looked for a better path, and kept looking around and back, from

ineradicable habit. "Why, and why, and why. Consider that I joked like that."

That's it. Toya began thinking. She has this. He says something—she's off, contemplating. Weighing words.

"No, you didn't joke. I know when you joke," she determined, and he paid attention to this 'I know.' "You simply decided... to give everything, she needed it more. And it coincided like that, the same money. You knew everything, how many she needed. You always know everything. You're good, Arzis!" she said the last somehow even fiercely.

He chuckled, then laughed again. She didn't laugh, didn't even smile. Toya generally smiled very little, a serious lioness in her way, even very much so. Similar to Mauna in this—Arzis thought about that in passing.

"Good..." he rubbed his eye, played with his jaw, chewing something invisible. "You, Toyusha, are also no slouch at joking."

If she caught all the ironies and sarcasms, she completely let them pass between her ears, or swept them away with her tail.

"We've stirred up tail-troubles today, worth all the money," he summarized.

Crickets were chirping loudly, somewhat early. There were plenty of tails around, somehow lively in Bash today. They were already walking along the road, squeezed on both sides by stone walls half a lion's height. Arzis seemed to remember-determine that this way would be shorter to that very road, bordered by poplars (about ten lions high), to their Messenger's residence (and Mistress's, how could it be otherwise).

Ahead was a stone arched bridge over a small, swampy stream.

"Oh, Arzis, I can't go there."

"Where can't you go?" Arzis understood nothing.

"Cannot go there, I'm forbidden."

Toya pointed to a leaning post on which a wooden plank worn smooth preserved a single symbol—straight line, diagonal, straight line again. How had she even seen it?

"I don't know, I've never-never seen a *prohibition* on a bridge. In shops—yes. Taverns—yes. Imperial offices—yes. In houses. But not on a bridge. Haven't seen it, no-no."

"Ah, that thing," he remembered too. "No, look, there's a house on the right, further. It's for that. Let's go."

"No-no, this is for the bridge," Toya answered convincingly, unmistakably.

"The dhaar is right," noted a lion holding a bag with a bunch of rabbit pelts. "That's a bridge prohibition. Dhaars can cross on the log to the left there."

A second lion beside him smoked. Both were of mature age and for some reason stood by the bridge.

"There's fuck-well another bridge upstream, that one. Everyone walks there," Arzis pointed east.

They had gone that way earlier in the day.

"But here you can't. Either go there."

"Who came up with this shit?" Arzis was surprised rather than outraged.

"Smon lives there," lion indicated with his pipe toward a respectable distant house, "owns this land patch. Including the bridge—old Bash tradition. Where do you hail from?"

"Right from there," Arzis pointed back mockingly and dragged Toya by the hand because he was already tired of it. "Fine, let's go, Toi."

"Arzis, I can't, let me go left, I see a path there," Toya even braced with both paws, knemids scraping on the cobblestones. "You can't. Allow me. They'll punish me."

To the left was a swamp. It seemed dhaars really did walk there.

"With me they won't punish you."

He lifted her onto his shoulder, and this was the first lioness in his life who from such treatment—always sudden, as usual—didn't scratch, laugh, growl, bite and get indignant, but simply sighed (he felt the tension of her thigh and how she somehow exceptionally carefully touched his back with her palms).

In the middle of the bridge, at the top, he set her back on her paws (easily, without clumsiness, as if they'd practiced and it wasn't their first time). Great—rather than carry her completely—he set her right in the middle.

"How's that?"

"Ahey, Arzis. Scary. What will happen?" Toya looked around, and her paws in knemids impatiently trampled the forbidden bridge.

"Nothing will happen."

They walked further. Toya noticed how those two lions looked at her. Probably condemning. Several more lions and lionesses walked toward them. They glanced sideways, no one said anything. If she had walked here alone... Oh, there would have been trouble. Maybe they would have even hit her. They hit mother once because she didn't notice a prohibition on a house door; yes, there was also when they hit her at the entrance to the baths. But with Arzis they won't hit her. He would probably... hit anyone himself. Toya had heard everything-everything about how he almost killed sir Khagal. Aunt Sele and aunt Basti are terrified of him. The servants are wary. The Mistress herself moved him to the second floor, and somehow treats him strangely. The bodyguards somehow avoid him. And he took her to Bash. Counted huge money with her. He even carries her on his shoulder. Ahey, he's already given two gifts, and I—fool—still nothing, stupid fool.

Toya bit her hand with her fangs.

And then there was that warehouse story, oh Ahey. So much happened because of it. What a nightmare. And then, when he went to the duel that morning, he didn't say a word. Just joked about lionesses in hay... He could have died! Or killed his enemy... Better he killed. Merciful Ahey, what a sin. Yes, she understands it probably wasn't all because of her, there was something else. Who cares about dhaars who in the dish warehouse were a little... a little bit... or a lot, a lot, yes... tormented, and

all sorts of things were done... terrible and wrong... such... all sorts... But it's fine, terrible, but she knows how to forgive, and anyway. She forgave him, completely-completely. If not for aunt Sele and aunt Basti, there wouldn't have been any fuss. She would have gone to the warehouse on chores again the next day. And again. And again. Yes. About the outrageous, absolutely most depraved act—the attempt to enter his room and sliding down the wall in indecision—there's absolutely no need to remember. It must be forgotten.

Oh, Ahey, what to do with everything, how do I...

"How was your day, did we do everything? Let's count. Knemids—yes. Money—no. What else?" he bent her fingers.

"Good day, Arzis, I like it."

Arzis left her little palm alone.

"I'm not talking about 'like it.' I'm talking about 'count' and 'business.' Did we do everything?"

They came out onto the road to the residence. Toya—always remembering everything well—was already looking for the basket they'd left somewhere here long ago, so long ago.

"Probably. Do you want something more?" she looked at him.

"'Want something more' is my best motto. We'll have to finish something else, Toyusha."

She didn't ask what exactly they still had to finish. Instead she took a key from the inner pocket of her dress (clever thing, this dress of hers, preserved so much today, though he'd made a hole in it with his knife, which she hid with a fold and belt). Here he'd given her knemids, given his ring, this and that. Ha, and here she'd give him the key. Just a key. She wouldn't say why, she wouldn't say what it was for. More precisely, he'd take it himself—that's how it should work out.

"I have your ring."

"Let it be. It's cozy with you."

"Good," Toya agreed with everything.

Here if he does something, if he presses her again, or takes her palm in his hand, then she'll... somehow... anyway, the key will go to his hand. Or fall to the ground. Something will happen with it. Very scary, the risk is great, the sin is monstrous, the dignity of a Mramri lioness is at stake, but everything comes together so. And such signs! Must decide.

"Basket, Arzis. Need to take it," Toya spotted it accurately from afar.

"Go on," he agreed readily.

Arzis stood at the edge while she went to retrieve it from the roadside (just a couple steps through grass). Arms crossed, Arzis watched her as if in a dream. Everything was so slow, sunny, spots of light and gold played in the air, like in childhood. He knew such things, there had been so much of this light in his childhood, in Southern Yaamri; his mother, being Hustrian herself, always complained that she was cold everywhere, but Arzis remembered how warm and bright it was in Yaamri land, you could touch light with your hands. Here, in Northern Listigia, it's different,

there's no such thing here. But that's unimportant, what's important is that Toya now crouched to retrieve the basket.

Arzis knows you can determine character by muzzles. This is a well-known thing. You can also by much else: by manner of speech; by gait (he knows one Ashai-Keetrah who's quite good at this); by eyes; by empathy in general ("You can go crazy with this empathy," once overheard from mother); alright, the well-known blood divination; on cards, mother could do that; Yunian huntresses divine by arrow hits; those same Truth-Seers^{78,79,80}, who probably don't need anything at all—they look at the soul itself, without mediation. Arzis is sure that a lioness's nature can be determined by how she'll act to pick up something from the ground. Not even the method matters, but all movements entirely, necessary and unnecessary. For example, all whores do it the same way. Arzis knows this for certain, he checked, even threw coins on the floor with a fellow nicknamed Drag and told them to pick them up. Except, of course, those Ashai-Keetrah who are also whores; they'll do it like Ashai. This is because almost all Ashai-Keetrah who are whores (they call them much more decent words, but never mind) are from disciplariums. And there they teach everything, including how to crouch and how to take things from the floor (and how to be a whore—too). And free Ashai practically never become whores (curious, by the way, why)^{81,82}.

Toya crouched, putting her knee on the grass, and took hold of the basket.

"Toya, sit. I like how you sit," he showed her with his hand.

She froze, crouching, with a clutched key in her left palm (holding her hem), and her right palm on the basket. Arzis wanted someone to paint a perfect picture of her, and give it to him. Look, Toya isn't the most beautiful lioness of all he'd seen. Beautiful is like banal, really; always with the words 'beautiful lioness' you imagine someone... not her; in this it's easy to see something capricious. First, she's almost perfectly gray. These Mramri lionesses preserve a completely gray coloring, without any transitions, bright halftones; the world's creator didn't try very hard when he made Mramri females, he simply dipped these lionesses in their own gray, northern sea. Second, she has beautiful teeth. This is hardly from Mramri lionesses, but simply her particular merit. Well fed in childhood, given bones to gnaw. Third, anyone who's been to the East remembers

⁷⁸ *Somehow we omitted elaborating on Truth-Seers. Well, they see the truth. —S.*

⁷⁹ Permit me to provide proper context. Within the Ashai-Keetrah order, three distinct types exist beyond the common sisterhood: Messengers, who carry sacred communications (extremely rare); Truth-Seers, who perceive what lies beneath surface and deception (very rare); and Mistresses of Life, who command the vital forces themselves (quite common). —Z.

⁸⁰ *Mistresses of Life are Ashai midwives, but with a little... extra. Pretty damn thick little extra. —S.*

⁸¹ *What a jerk. Ugh. I already hate him. So much that I would claw him, and claw him, and again and again. And then we will fight, and then... —S.*

⁸² Permit me to interrupt this heated—in every sense of the word—digression with the observation that Ashai courtesans represent an art form unto themselves, a tradition of refined cultivation that totally transcends mere carnality. —Z.

that in moonlit nights fields have the property of strangely gleaming, like waters. Same thing with her gray eyes—they calmly glisten. She has a proper, dark gray nose, barely visible whiskers, with which she clearly does nothing and doesn't plan to, as is customary for almost all Suung lionesses. Probably, Arzis thought, everything about her everywhere is just like this—completely natural. Oh, how fortunate, here's found—a lioness-naturalness. She doesn't have sunken cheeks, too thin a chin. He could already obtain many proofs by touch that she's lean, but not at all frail (why would a dhaar who spent her whole life with those serving a Messenger be emaciated and weak). She has soft fur, not a short tail. Arzis, of course, then colorfully exaggerated its length, lying that it was long as the road to Marna. Normal tail. Just a tail. Tip without strange defects, like some have. Toya certainly has a scent. It can't be conveyed. Enough to say that it's entirely good. Yes, he also noted then, earlier, that Toya is constrained, but flexible. Strange combination.

Her covering had shifted slightly on her forehead, drapery shadowing her gaze protectively. She went nowhere, asked nothing, moved not at all—only watched him while crouched by the basket. Though considerable time had elapsed, more than usual conversational pauses could bear, when questions would typically emerge: 'What's wrong?' or 'What does this mean?'

Arzis had drawn breath to speak:

"Toya..."

And then so inopportunistically Shiala was remembered, her heavy gaze, as if she sat opposite Toya, shadowing all of her; as if this wasn't enough, he also heard from behind:

"Hey!" with a roar at the end.

And at the same time the sound of running in knemids.

Arzis sighed, spat and swore completely, brutally, not even under his breath. Then turned around.

"You two, they're searching for you everywhere! We need to travel! Pack!" This was Manaru.

Vaal, of all heads from the bodyguard—precisely this tail: the perfect weapon for destroying everything solar-lunar-golden-silver-dark-bright.

"Travel where now?" Arzis scowled, vigorously scratching his mane while clawing his neck.

"To Helsia—packing!"

"When?"

"Now!"

"But night approaches."

"Precisely, dammit, move! Pack tonight, depart morning!"

Arzis turned to Toya, but she had already risen.

May Vaal Embrace Us

Everything turned out to be true—the residence was indeed preparing to depart at this twilight time. Arzis and Toya were instantly separated, with only a quick nod (from her) and a kissed fist with a smile (from him).

First Arzis observed all this, even with amusement, and in a few moments gathered his belongings. Then he helped move some things from the armory. He got into it. He hauled some more stuff with the manes, meanwhile spectacularly dropped one of the chests together with sir Vannaren—who, because of this misfortune, stood up bewildered and lit up, and they talked about Listgian weather and Helsia (which Arzis had never been to).

"Any Helsian female looks like a slut," Vannaren shared his impressions irritably. "They don't hide their tails!"

Toward morning everyone slept a little. In the morning guards arrived from Bash and someone from the local Legion of the Legate, not entirely clear from where. The local Legion turned out to be 'dog-snouted,' as they called those consisting predominantly of dhaars and Helsians (who through many years of service in the Imperial Legate achieved the dignity of being called accepted Suungs), and Arzis made fun of them. She Herself appeared, and the Mistress seemed to Arzis either troubled or something, if one can even say that anxiety could be reflected on Vaalu-Mauna's composure.

Incredibly, they breakfasted right by the wagons and coaches, and Arzis liked this. He stood with Tai, quietly pouring still cold beer straight from a small barrel, laughed, talked about the murder of the spy in the garden (Tai found this story to his taste, he very much regretted having a day off that day), weather and the increasingly worthless quality of armor iron. Right before departure Arzis tossed bags into the wagon for old dhaar females who were clumsily bustling about; Toya, having freed herself, also appeared and wished good morning, and before Arzis could open his mouth, it was heard over the cavalcade:

"Arzis! To the Mistress!" Uruz shouted somewhere.

"Yeah, hello, Toya. Come here," and he extended his hand.

She smiled apologetically, pressing her palm high against her chest while indicating aunt Sele and aunt Basti nearby. Whether by seniority, dhaar etiquette, or other reasons—they were meant to board first. No matter—Arzis easily hauled both by hand into the wagon quite forcefully, then lifted light, nimble Toya who practically flew aboard. The dhaar lionesses quickly settled on bags, watching him. He jumped down, telling them:

"Right..."

"Arzis! To the Mis-tress!"

What to do, he immediately went, for some reason slapping the side of the wagon with bags and dhaar females.

"Where are we going?" he quietly asked Uruz by Mauna's coach.

"You'll see, sheh-sheh," a brief answer, and a brief command with a clawed finger (little finger) toward the coach. "Please."

Arzis unceremoniously opened the door and climbed inside, not even looking around. Inside turned out to be Mauna and Melim; accidentally stepping on his paw, Arzis sprawled opposite, throwing pillows around himself everywhere (he'd already noticed that where there's a Messenger—there are many pillows).

"Sorry," this for Melim. "Beautiful morning, Mistress."

Mauna gestured through the window to the head of the bodyguard, meaning 'let's go', and then looked at Arzis:

"Good morning, Arzis."

Melim and Mauna talked about the Graph, a lot. They both were very worried about this very Graph, something didn't add up for them. But at the very first stop, at the first opportunity, Melim left them alone.

"Did you take the money to the widow?" Mauna asked.

"Yes. She found it useful. Will there be new orders, mistress?"

"Please," she gave him some of that delightful orange tea.

"Thank you. This is what a good mistress means. What else does one need in life but a good mistress."

"How you speak."

"Everyone speaks thus. The entire Family."

"Talking is very easy. Not for nothing you have the ring 'Trust not words.'"

This was something. Arzis had never shown Mauna this ring, and seemingly hadn't told her about it.

"By the way, where is it?"

"On a neck," he burned himself with tea.

"Will you show it?"

"Not on mine."

"Hmm. Curious: on whose?"

Arzis understood perfectly that with a lioness, especially Ashai, especially a Messenger—this game was unwinnable. Impossible. Word by word she'd unravel him, draw him out, narrow the circle until capture. Only one method existed: silence.

After a long silence Mauna smirked:

"I sense I trust you more than you trust me."

"Why does the mistress trust me?" he instantly grabbed the chance to get away from the topic. "I wouldn't."

She narrowed her eyes, looked at the slowly moving landscape outside the window (yellow field). The silence game can be played by two—she didn't answer; instead she fell into aumlan, right in front of him. And it was like this for a long time.

The coach stopped.

"Tomorrow we'll reach the border fort Shatt," she emerged. "Keep your ears sharp there."

So they traveled toward this border fort, where one needed to stay sharp. Sometimes Mauna rode horseback, but places and times were chosen for this. At stops she ordered bow and arrows to be given and shot at nearby trees. Arzis had the opportunity to watch her closely during these moments; she shot well, clearly from cubhood.

Atrissa tried to attract attention. She spun around, managed to be everywhere, shot glances, hit him with a tray, fell into awkward giggling. Arzis took advantage of this and seized the opportunity to drag her at night to a dark corner in the residence of the mistress's friend-Messenger with the amazing name 'Hidden in Leaves' (the residence's name, not the Messenger's; hers was Vaalu-Masmari), but there she began showing some completely northern tricks and playing, and there Arzis got a bunch of nonsense: very serious reproach that he supposedly considered her frivolous, and how terrible his treatment was, and that he needed to change. It didn't help her—he fucked her. She scratched him a little, but northern females always scratch, always in general; this must be taken into account if you want to deal with them. After this he left Atrissa alone and went to sleep, and in the morning decided he'd go look at firrans, because the residence had a firrary.

They arrived at this fort (having left early in the morning, they arrived at it deep into the night, exhausted). The fort was large and solid, with an unusually deep moat—Arzis was told it was four lions' height deep. Vaalu-Mauna's arrival caused considerable commotion here; Messengers don't travel to Helsia by this route, as Arzis learned from various conversations, and the nearest one was a hundred lyens from here, in a big town; this was that very Messenger at whose place they'd spent the previous night, Vaalu-Masmari.

They took a day's rest. For pre-dinner (Arzis studied the matter: Messengers usually don't dine, but pre-dine—dinner is an evening affair, and when evening comes, a Messenger has more important business) the fort commander invited Vaalu-Mauna, and she brought with her: sir Taar, sir Uruz, sir Melim and Arzis.

Vaalu-Mauna sat opposite the fort commander at an unusually small table. No surprises were expected in seating: she indicated Taar to sit immediately to her right, then Uruz, then Melim, then Arzis (farthest from her). Obviously, the number of heads was agreed upon in advance: the commander was accompanied by two legate lions, apparently deputies-assistants-trusted-best of the fort commander, one of them without an eye, with a patch, and with a twisted mouth (Arzis sat opposite him), the second groomed and tall, undoubtedly a patrician. He looked at Mauna with wild, impossible-to-hide interest. Surely he would have preferred to sit closest to her on the left side, but the place was occupied by a lioness. The lioness turned out to be old, and the lioness turned out to be Ashai-Keetrah. From everything Arzis understood that the lioness was already too old—had undergone the Elevation Ceremony; the sisterhood, after

her sixty-six, no longer considered her suitable; anyone after sixty-six was considered too old. But this was only his guess, only hints pointed to this. He, son of Ashai-Keetrah, knew what fear many elder sisters have of being considered Elevated before their time. But let's not talk about this.

Fort commander Sigas proved quite the jester.

"Flawless Vaalu-Mauna, there's much I love, and this includes a Messenger's company."

"Flattered and quieted, mane of Sigas," Mauna replied very Andarian-style.

"What a day! Not only a Messenger, but Andari pride. Eh... Eight years ago. Me and Vaalu-Sariya. We caused quite a stir. Without her the Third Legion would've been lost."

"Lionmane will be interested to learn she's now in Mistphaln. The sea!" Mauna even perked up suddenly.

Arzis thought about how he'd never seen the sea.

"Near Mistphaln, twenty lyens west," Melim suddenly interjected into the conversation, so loving precision in everything and informed about the exact position of every Messenger; and this was so awkward that even Arzis scratched his nose and reached for his knife to cut from the piglet.

"Ah. Right. How she's faring there? Still indulging?" Sigas winked.

"No," Mauna lied.

Arzis stayed quiet, ate and drank. The same thing the big lion with the damaged muzzle opposite did. Mauna whispered something intensely with the old Ashai; etiquette and the Codex allowed them this—to whisper in each other's ears in front of others, Ashai-Keetrah can do such things.

Apparently the fort's host didn't know this:

"If there's three, speak free!"

To which the old Ashai answered him, extremely directly:

"Secrets."

"Oh. Secrets. In my fort no less. Heh-heh," Sigas said and looked at Arzis. "But we have no secrets. Right, young one?"

"Yes, Suung-ortus Sigas."

"Look at you, addressing by rank, know everything, this... You see, I'd take you into the Legate," the fort's commander said. "I need such ones who know things."

"Why take again."

"Look at you. Again. And what about the first time?"

"Wore out my paws, Suung-ortus Sigas."

"Deserter! Ha!"

Mauna looked at Arzis, then at Sigas. She twitched an ear.

"Reverend, whoever serves a Messenger serves the Suungs. No questions," Sigas raised his hands, surrendering.

The patrician tried to speak with Taar and Uruz, but somehow the conversation got stuck in the Messenger lions' taciturnity.

"Foresight is when you jump into a haystack to find a needle, and find the neighbor's daughter," Sigas continued entertaining everyone.

"That's my favorite tale about a lioness and hay, Suung-ortus."

"Listen, you seem like our guy. Would you ask the Excellent one to send one Message to the capital? My daughter's there! It'll be splendid, she'll be so delighted."

"No problem, we'll Message everything, Suung-ortus," Arzis easily arranged. "Tip-top treatment."

"Word and deed!" Sigas squeezed his fist contentedly.

Melim turned his head and looked at Arzis, mouth open, like at a madman. Mauna sat stroking her cup by the stem and inaudibly tapping the table with her claw.

"Well, come on, deserter, so that in the East..." the fort commander rejoiced.

"...it enters smoothly."

"Ahhh," Sigas banged his cup on the table. "Definitely our fella!"

"Mane Sigas, what does the toast 'So that in the East it enters smoothly' signify?" Vaalu-Mauna inquired suddenly while continuing to stroke the table.

"Errr..." Sigas grunted. "Well. So that Suung weapons, that is, would go into enemies," and raised his fist.

"Sire Sigas is telling me untruths," Mauna said with a smirk, tapping her claw on the cup. "Uruz, perhaps you know?"

"Yes, Mistress," he said calmly, neatly consuming the treats.

"And?" she raised her brow and ear simultaneously, and Arzis watched this (clearly practiced) expression with interest.

"It's indecent, Mistress. I dare not among good Suungs, Mistress."

"Say it, I want to hear."

"It's about violence against lionesses. Usually, if the Legate defeats some barbarian settlement, then violence against their females is a common thing. In the East it's generally a common thing. Hence they say: 'So it goes in well.'"

"Arzis, did you rape lionesses, in your Legate times?" Mauna asked.

"It's a complicated story, mistress."

"About as complicated as with my dhaar in my residence?"

"Precisely so."

"And about as complicated as with one of my servants?"

Well now, thought Arzis. *Hey, Atrissa.*

"Well there everything's simpler."

"I see."

"Deserter! Ha!" Sigas amused himself.

It was unclear why she brought everything to the surface. Unclear how she knew.

A moment came when Sigas decided:

"So, let's take a look," and looked at everyone with that expression.

The patrician and old Ashai immediately rose and said their farewells. Vaalu-Mauna nodded to Melim—he departed too. Sir Uruz and the scarred lion remained, looking questioningly at Arzis.

"Him?" Sigas asked Mauna, nodding at Arzis.

Mauna—and Arzis saw this, even felt it—clearly hesitated. Moreover, the doubt concerned something serious, not trivial.

"He remains. Beyond doubt."

Beyond doubt, right, Arzis thought sarcastically.

"Mistress, no," Uruz suddenly protested, even rising.

"What? Don't talk," Mauna measured him with her gaze, annihilatingly. "Let's take a look," she looked at Sigas.

And they all approached the table opposite the window, on which a map was pinned down with weights in the shape of boars. Arzis approached last.

"From here we need to reach the Thirteenth. The Thirteenth is positioned here, here, here. The Radiant one needs to get here. If quickly, there are two routes: through Shadowrock, and this way, by the less traveled road. These two roads are separated by the Krati river right here. In both cases—sixty lyens, with elevation changes, fifty of them through Helsia, if by the second road. If through Shadowrock—then forty. You need to travel it in one day. Route is proposed and planned through the second road, not through Shadowrock."

"Why?" Mauna asked.

"Shadowrock proves more complex—heavily commercial route. Requires passage through the town itself and customs border. Terrible chaos there, inconvenient for the Excellent one. No need to go there."

"And how is the second route, is there no border there?"

"There is, of course. But there only the Legate passes through the outpost, or anyone with Legate permission."

"I hope we'll have permission?" the head of bodyguards asked an ironically stupid question.

"Uruz," Mauna reproached.

"We need reinforcement," Uruz said, becoming serious. "Substantial. Vanguard, rearguard. Fifty leagues through Helsia."

"You'll have everything," Suung-ortus Sigas said confidently. "Those above turned out to be extremely informed and interested in the fastest and safest arrival of the Radiant one to the Thirteenth. How could it be otherwise. The route is unusual, but this too is accounted for."

"And what, the Thirteenth sent a cohort? Or will reinforcement be... from the fort garrison?" Uruz frowned rather distrustfully.

"No. It will be the Chamber Guard.⁸³"

"I see. When will they be here?"

"They're already here. One hundred twenty heads. Arrived yesterday from Norramark, very quickly. Capable. They know their business tight, I haven't seen such Chamber Guard before. Well... You don't need Legate guys, you need those who perform precisely such tasks."

⁸³ The Chamber of Ashai-Keetrah Affairs and Defence of the Faith employs a dedicated Guard, selected specifically for the protection of the sisterhood. These are the most appropriate guardians for Ashai, especially for Messengers, whose station requires defenders cognizant of the sacred trust they bear.—Z.

"Good news," Uruz sighed with relief.

"Who else has thoughts?" Sigas looked at everyone in turn.

Arzis paid attention to this. This is a good commander. He knows what he's doing. Asks for opinions.

"Elevation changes," Mauna said thoughtfully, and this wasn't even a question, but something unclear. A thought aloud.

A thought, probably, not connected to anything here at all.

"Those aren't mountains, but steep hills. Pawhills," Sigas reassured.

"Quiet here?" Uruz poked the map, along the road.

"Nothing. Yes, quiet. All the ruffraff hangs around Shadowrock on the Helsia side, they're only interested in trade caravans, not armed-to-the-tail Messenger guard. But, in general... There's still a third option. Go the usual way, around. Three more days."

"No time," Mauna cut off instantly. "Impossible."

"One could unexpectedly fall ill," Sigas suddenly said to Mauna.

"But Suung Sigas said it was quiet there," Uruz tapped the map accusingly.

"I said. I'm saying. But we haven't transported Messengers there yet. Everything, if not hurrying, goes through the South Helsian Imperial Road. I like when everything's by the beaten path. And through Shadowrock we transported a couple times... Complete... Complete chaos."

He scratched himself.

"On the other hand, I can't imagine what could threaten there with such guard," Sigas moved a weight. "Front, rear—everything as needed. Here, consider, our rear areas, you can't hide any serious forces in them."

All fell quiet.

"Deserter, your thoughts?" Sigas winked at him.

"The Chamber commander would eat with us now, or something," Arzis shrugged. "Everything's so tasty."

"Indeed," said Mauna. "Where is he?"

"Busy. Went to feel out the route."

"Mmmm. Good," Mauna drawled. "May Vaal embrace us."

Arzis twitched an ear. Well now. What coincidences there are.

Everything's Complicated

Several questions troubled Toya.

"Hamanu-mistress Renaya, what does it mean when a lioness is told: 'May Vaal embrace you'?" Toya asked, having conscientiously managed to carry all the Mistress's expensive nightgowns to the fort, up unbearably steep steps.

Squinting heavily and futilely moving away from the scroll in which she wrote and crossed out, Renaya answered monotonously:

"Haven't heard such a thing. Who said that?"

"Sir-master Arzis," Toya said honestly, and immediately bit herself with a fang, in her usual manner. The desire to please with a quick answer, it's like that, it's treacherous...

"To whom?" Renaya looked at her. "Though, you know, it doesn't matter," she unexpectedly lost interest and waved her stylus as a sign of how indifferent she was to everything.

Renaya, like all Yunian females, became very farsighted with age.

The second question: actually, why her paws were tasty and why Arzis threatened to devour them. There was no full-length mirror and none was expected, so Toya examined them this way and that, simply looking down. She also found herself examining her paws, lying on the bed with her tail to the wall and stretching them along it. The activity seemed provocative to her, and this was sinful; in the end aunt Sele caught her off guard, and Toya was able to excuse herself that suddenly everything went numb-ached and she had to save herself in such an amazing way. Aunt Sele wrapped her paws for the night with cloth and honey and lamented something about moondays, lionesses who hadn't given birth, and youth.

The next question: where and how they would arrive, and whether she would have her own corner, and in general where they would be placed, and whether Arzis would go somewhere; in short, whether he would be nearby, and... and what to do with all this. Where and how they would arrive was a mystery: about this the dhaars, naturally, knew absolutely nothing. The Mistress travels—they travel. The Mistress is in the residence—they are in it. But what, where, how, when—they cannot know. She only heard in passing that to some Helsia. But this Helsia is probably as large as Mramri, not to mention the Empire.

The fourth question, the most important: what did he want to say?

So, what did he want to tell her, then, when she crouched by the basket?

Toya pondered this extensively. She even prayed to Ahey for understanding. She recalled every phrase from that day. She remembers expressions and words. He simply enjoyed how she crouched, wanting her

to remain still, unmoving? That's all? No. No-no. But why such prolonged silence then? He's the last lion in the world who'd show timidity before... anything whatsoever. Perhaps-perhaps he truly wanted her sitting—something pleased him about this; yes, she'd obeyed completely, remaining motionless.

One could imagine what he might have said. This is what Toya did, going to sleep.

She tried to be visible, and somehow linger in places where they might cross paths, but—honestly—hopes were futile, circumstances spiteful. They now moved in too different worlds; the Mistress's journey had separated them to very different floors and distances. And then there was the fort commandant's deputy, who clearly determined where they could walk and where they couldn't. He did this respectfully (after all, they weren't just anyone, but a Messenger's dhaars), but allowed no ambiguities.

Naturally, they asked her about the knemids, right there in the wagon, as soon as they departed—of course, aunt Sele and aunt Basti.

"Sir-master Arzis gave them," Toya told them. And then she exceptionally added: *"Arzis."*

This was, consider it, bold—to call him simply by name. Aunt Sele and aunt Basti exchanged glances, then instantly surrounded her from both sides.

"Gives gifts."

"Trying to win favor."

"Wants again. No, Toya, this is all no good. Dealing with such is scary."

"Very scary."

"And uncertain."

Toya thought, and said:

"I'm scared with him. But not scared. And also confident. Very-very."

"Oh, Toya, you see: since he took you, now you're all for him."

"Yes, took-took, took everything. Well, you know—we won't tell anyone."

Toya thought. Understood what it was all about.

"I'm honest. I'm untouched. He didn't reach me. He couldn't, because he was drunk and tired. We had nothing," she said convincingly, believing.

"What occurred then?" came the extremely reasonable question.

"Touched, everywhere. Made me drink wine. And we talked. He licked me. And I..."

In the Mramri language 'lick' and 'kiss' are the same thing. Toya almost blurted out "And I—him too."

"Very good," Sele nodded. *"Ahey protects us weak ones."*

"So it doesn't count," aunt Basti cut off. *"One less problem!"*

So the clarification pleased them. But joy faded quickly. Very quickly:

"Toya, no one will think much here. There was something, they'll think, so you're already touched."

"Yes, they won't think much."

"So never tell anyone anything ever."

"Never. Honor is fragile, you can lose it instantly, but you can't get it back."

"Deny everything. Or stay silent. This shouldn't ruin your hopes."

'Hopes' for dhaar lionesses are only one thing—to marry a Suung. That's all. Simple life plan, no torments of choice.

Toya thought, and answered nothing. They moved to pressing, not past problems:

"Toya, lions don't just give gifts, don't give attention for nothing. They need the known thing, nothing can be done about it. But an honest Mramri lioness must choose whom to marry, nothing else suits her. For the sake of family, for the sake of children," Sele.

"He's unlikely to be interested in such," Basti.

"But if he continues coming at you, then let him know: choosing a Mramri lioness, he chooses perfect loyalty. And loyalty you can't just take, you must promise it. Yes, loyalty isn't so much, but as it is," Sele spread her hands.

"But not so little either," Basti touched her dhaar rings.

"Therefore you must be sure of him."

"Yes, sure. Certainty requires time, observation."

"If he honestly wants to take you—let him honestly declare his intention. Just tell him that."

"What should I tell him?" Toya became frightened.

"Don't say anything!" Sele was horrified.

"Don't speak directly."

Just tell him that. Don't say anything. Oh my.

"Don't say you want to marry. A smart one will figure it out. We don't need stupid ones."

"A smart one will figure. We don't need stupid ones."

"If he's trying to win favor to press you to bed, you don't need that. You know yourself. A Mramri lioness sells herself clean in marriage. That's her price."

"But to marry such a one... If suddenly he decided seriously... Oh, no. Dealing with such is scary."

"Very scary."

"Aunt Selestina, aunt Bastiana," Toya addressed them by their full names, which she did very rarely, only in the most serious cases. "Arzis is good-good. I walked with him, I understood."

"Toya, he's not good."

"He's dangerous."

"And he's unlikely to be interested in... familial... with Mramri lioness... he's more to the taste of... not such quiet, eternal things."

"They say he killed that lion," Sele whispered, pressing her ears back.

"What lion?" Toya was surprised (outwardly), horrified (outwardly) and interested (there, inside).

"That one-one who came to the Mistress together with the other Messenger. You didn't know this?"

"Didn't we tell her?"

"Recently, remember, a sister came to visit the Mistress on their sacred Suung service. May Ahey forgive them... And there was a lion with her. You remember him, you saw him from afar, I know for sure."

"Yes. And then he disappeared somewhere," Toya confirmed.

"He was killed-killed in the day, in the residence garden."

"They say Arzis killed him," aunt Sele said in a barely audible whisper.

"Him-him. The Mistress was there, and her friend."

Completely honestly—Toya felt no surprise whatsoever. Though she feigned surprise, disbelief. She knew this herself—he's capable.

"How can this be, forgive Ahey... But then, he was told to do it. Otherwise the Mistress would have been very angry," she reasonably observed.

"That's not the point, Toya. But what the Mistress keeps him for."

"I know exactly what for," Toya said convincingly.

Aunt Sele and aunt Basti froze, ears pricked like strings.

"He protects her. He protected her, probably. That lion probably offended the Mistress."

Obviously.

"I also think he offended. The mistress is kind, but highborn, doesn't tolerate foolishness," aunt Basti agreed. *"But he's a killer, Toya,"* she concluded seriously.

"Arzis, he's a protector," Toya disagreed. *"That's his role, he had to. He'll strike anyone, if necessary,"* she even said with pride. And then she pulled out an irrefutable, secret, proud, deadly trump card from the deck: *"He led me-me across the bridge with prohibition on it."*

"You're lost, Toya, oh my," Sele waved both hands and turned away.

"Fus, lost-lost. Got attached."

"But we won't let you be lost! Pray. And be careful. We'll watch over you, but... look well."

"Careful!"

After this they suddenly took and told her about very practical sides of relations between sexes. Aunt Sele and aunt Basti without particular sentiments dispelled the usual scary stories for young lionesses (so they wouldn't risk themselves), so carefully previously driven into consciousness by them. They told about all sorts of details, very detailed details indeed. Even advice followed. Toya was very ashamed, her tail thrashed, her ears didn't know where to go, she had never talked about such things with aunt Sele and aunt Basti; but!—many things she already knew from Arzis, ha. The latter plunged into dark thickets, aunt Sele sought to restrain her, but aunt Basti told everything she knew (having experienced it herself, apparently). Despite all the shame and sinful weight of what she heard, Toya remembered everything.

But. Afterwards, Toya was very upset by this entire conversation. Of course, at night she prayed. Murder is a sin, and... Yes, she must be more careful. Yes. And it's bad that Arzis killed that unfortunate lion. What to

do! He's with the Mistress for protection and killing, how else can he... Poor thing. Poor Arzis. He suffered with conscience after this—after all, he killed, nothing else.

Falling asleep on her side (this night brought a rarity—sleep came poorly), she remembered how it felt with him. Oh, sometimes so scary, fus. But protected. Toya fears a lot of things and other lions, and many lionesses too—grew up in fear and caution. And here suddenly you walk—and in complete safety. Walk tall, muzzle up. She knows he could take and grab her muzzle, like then, or—yes, could do anything with her, this is clear from warehouse adventures. Ah well. So be it. But! If someone bothers her, it's easy to imagine while falling asleep: they're walking across that very bridge, some terrible, filthy lion bothers her, and she walks, moreover beautifully dressed (oh, here are many variants of what and how, for example in a patterned skirt with wavy hems in several layers, such she saw recently; and let's not recall the experience with Radiant Vaalu-Amaya's dress, Ahey, *Ruhe ihre Seele*, it happened, it happened), and she simply tells this dirty lion: "See, I am with a male. I am his... wife" (claws dug into the bed). He probably would leave immediately, but if he dared, then Arzis would... growl. And that's all. And that's all...

The next morning, having slept with all this and seen a dream not worth talking about, Toya thought again, but with a new mood. Still, the enchantment of the moment had passed, she needed to look at things truthfully. He's unlikely to want to take any serious steps with her, a dhaar, whatever she might imagine. But not everything is so simple. After all: his ring on her chest; he's kind with her, and not only kind, he's even sometimes stern with her, and generally does everything in such a way that you simply don't know what to think; he embraced her, and not once; he fought a duel because of her (yes! because of her!) and then didn't blame her for anything and didn't say anything; the whole Bash adventure, every moment of it; and then, in those shared moments on the cotton sacks for the Mistress. He didn't know this, but there was a great sign there, there was a sacred arrow that she saw, a sign from Ahey; Ahey very clearly indicated to her there (and to Arzis, he just doesn't know it) what was what; and she agreed with everything, for no one opposes Ahey's will.

Eh, well, all this might turn out to be just a monstrous coincidence. Life is merciless, sufferings are great. In the end, leaving these ruminations (it will be as it will be), she decided to give Arzis a gift in return—this needed to be done in any case.

Gifting lions proves complex—lionesses can be pleased by much (plates, fabric, ribbons), but what pleases lions? Unclear. Well, more precisely, it's known what—mother once said lions love 'eating and sleeping'; provide one, provide the other, and you'll have it. But such things cannot be gifted just so, simply. Probably. Especially such things aunt Sele and Basti dared discuss yesterday—who'd have thought they knew such matters. Generally, again unclear. For Toya it's even more complex: she possesses nothing beyond herself and simple belongings. Also exactly one

hundred forty-six imperials, which for dhaars constitutes respectable capital. She keeps money in a box, once mother's gift. It's actually was a long time ago a mother's box. Complicated...

In the end, she planned to buy a small fang-knife (must be good!), and make a lanyard for the knife from braided threads, and the braiding pattern would carry great meaning; it also needs a sheath. The lanyard would be large, could be worn around the neck—that's how they do it in Mram-ri.

But all this demanded time. Complicated. Complicated...

Family, Family, Family

"Get in the coach."

In the Mistress's coach? This is very strange. Incredibly strange, Toya had never even cleaned it, only the Mistress's servants did, and here... Toya hesitated.

"Such rearrangement today. Come on, come on," Renaya demanded once more.

"Good-good."

Good-good everything was with Toya, but actually the morning began horribly. No, everything even began from the night. Vaalu-Mauna's body-guard fell ill: out of twenty-three, sixteen heads became weak in the stomach—complete disorder. And not only them, but also five legate manes from the fort. They all ate the same thing together in the evening.

Fort commander Sigas fell into fury and began looking for the guilty. An ugly spectacle. Local dhaar lionesses and random Helsian females worked in the kitchens, they were flogged immediately, without investigation; one died from the flogging for some reason.

This news naturally proved bad and inherently opposed any Mistress movement from the protected fort. Sir Uruz stated directly:

"Mistress. We don't depart."

To which he received an enigmatic answer from the Mistress:

"No, Uruz, on the contrary. We're going, and as quickly as possible."

To his silent question she added:

"The sisters messaged me something today."

"May I know what exactly?"

"No. But everything proves urgent."

"Mistress. We're not going. We'll only be seven, including me."

"And another hundred twenty swords of Chamber Guard. Uruz, come on, don't argue, I'm tired... We must go. We must be in the Thirteenth Legion tonight. Not tomorrow, the day after, but today. I must."

The commander of the Chamber Guard unit came to Mauna—well, an absolutely amazing lion, swoon-worthy for lionesses, though already in his late age of strength; but with one feature—he was *sealed*. Many Ashai can seal, but Truth-Seers do it best. Mauna had long given up playing with empathy—no time, all strength goes to the Craft (true, after the Sacrifice golden water in blood became more each day, strongest thing, all truth; and these foolish dreams! And the feeling of gray cloud overhead, hard to get pleasure, nothing brings joy). She decided to probe him. But there was nothing to probe—tightly closed. It's obvious they seal serious Chamber guards; well, not strange when you think about it.

They chatted a little, he handed her something, a very important-looking paper, Mauna ran through it. Verbosity concealed simple state-

ment: 'We'll deliver you, everything will be great.' Looking at him, she smiled slightly:

"Well, will you get me there? I'm worried. I have only a third of bodyguards left due to negligence in the kitchens..." she said quietly to him.

"I'll do everything to carry out the order. Just a little more, Flawless one, just a day."

"Good. I trust the mane," Mauna said, looking into his eyes. And extended her hand with the sisterhood ring. He immediately fell to one knee, kissed her palm.

But Arzis saw none of this: neither that Toya found herself in the Mistress's coach (?); nor that the Mistress herself found herself in the dhaar wagon (!?); he simply sat on the wagon with all the stuff, closer to the end of the convoy, and fell asleep on it, burying himself in his cloak. Sometimes he woke from bumps, looked around; probably the views were beautiful in this Fire Season, but Arzis paid no attention.

Once again he woke because they had stopped. Looked around—standing on a small, stone arched bridge, at its very beginning. The horses found it uncomfortable to hold on the incline, they were backing up. He looked back—Tai, who was driving the last wagon, had half-risen, but not to full height. Something was happening ahead. About ten heads of Guard rushed past them.

"Uruz! Uruz!" Tai called to the head, not in his usual voice, but half-growling: it sounded like 'Ugug, ugug.' At the same time he was urging his pair of horses to back up, which is always difficult—horses don't like this. Arzis pulled on his maneguard, threw his spear with its carry strap over his back and ran up to lead the horses back; he remembered how he once struggled in the East, stuck with some guys in a road bog, and how it all ended (ended badly).

"What's up, Tai?"

Tai didn't answer; he chewed his tobacco some more, then spat. Now he was looking right, at the slope of a steep hill or gentle mountain, whatever you like.

"Where'd they go?"

"...what-what did they say?"

This is what Arzis heard from the head of the convoy.

Tai stood up again, this time to full height. He understood something, unlike many including Arzis, and described the situation to Arzis in detail, fully and clearly:

"Fuck."

Arzis also grabbed onto the wagon, next to Tai. He decisively led the horses left, which was odd: there was a rather steep descent down, under the bridge, to a stream with stone banks. Gray pebbles. And then he really hit them with the whip, again, and again. The horses didn't want to, one reared up, frightening the second even more.

"Stab the nag!" Tai growled at him.

Which, removing his spear, Arzis did—he pricked the nearest one in the rear. It worked, the horses fell into fear and rushed forward; someone

ran out from under the bridge (what? who?), either three, or five, or eight, and how unlucky for them—the wagon right at them, down the slope. Someone scattered in all directions, someone was run over with a thud. Arzis almost fell, as did Tai. The horses injured their legs on the pebbles with sand. It became hard for them to pull, and in the end they went into the water and got stuck in it, refusing everything. They didn't overturn, and thanks for that.

"Grab there!..." Tai growled something incomprehensible while jumping down.

Flee, thought Arzis. In any unclear situation, flee. Don't think, don't survey, don't calculate, don't hope for better, don't try understanding; distance equals safety, farther means safer. He glimpsed the bridge—something very bad occurring there, near the Mistress's coach and remaining convoy.

But first—to take someone away from here.

Throwing back the wagon's curtain, here's what he saw: Mauna (what?), big eyes, sitting right on the few things and sacks, in them—tragedy and fear; dressed—surprisingly—in svira, Ashai traveling clothes, which even sat on her inappropriately, loosely, not at all Ashai-like, not sisterly, as if she'd borrowed it from an older friend-sister; opposite her—Atrissa, with a long, disgustingly thin dagger. Atrissa held the dagger at the Mistress's heart and, naturally, was crying.

He hadn't expected witnessing this—here they were, precisely these two, both together. Completely unexpected—this wasn't their proper place to be. He'd loaded entirely different lionesses into this wagon days prior. They weren't in their place. Here should be...

"What the fuck are you doing here?!" Arzis roared in despair, incomprehension, surprise.

"Arzis, I, I can't, I can't!" Atrissa found time to complain hysterically, understanding she was saved, at least from the decision—to stab or not stab the Mistress, the Excellent one, in the very heart.

"I must be killed," Mauna said very uncertainly, and it was unclear even to whom. She wasn't even looking at either Arzis or her young servant, clutching something in her fist with all her strength (obviously poison).

Instead of answering, Arzis, snarling, with spear under his arm, grabbed Atrissa and dragged her out of the wagon like an thing (by the hand). The same fate befell Vaalu-Mauna (first by the hand, then by the waist). From Arzis's strength the servant couldn't hold on and fell into the water and stones with sand, almost stabbing herself with the long, deadly dagger. From Arzis's strength Mauna scratched her leg on the wagon's edge, got a splinter driven in, and the little bottle of poison flew far-far from her palm (strophant with sleeping drug, classic), but she didn't fall to the ground, because Arzis held her.

What is Tai doing? Tai is busy with work: he shot someone with a heavy and expensive crossbow.

"Wasted!" it seems Tai hit, and threw away the now useless crossbow: no one will give him time to wind it a second time.

There turned out to be four opponents. No, three—one already got hit. Two turned out smarter and more cautious. And the first (lone one)—in cheap armor, in a more expensive legate mane protector (once bargained for), and with halberd and shield on his back (obviously high on something quite stupid and merry), and the first thing that came to his head—to kick with his iron-studded knemid Atrissa, who was trying to get up. Of all the many possibilities in life—precisely this. The idiotic decision found instant retribution: Arzis pierced his leg above the knee, he took a step, his paw twisted under him, he fell (also classic); he managed to make an awkward and poor thrust with his halberd, but what use, if Arzis pierced him from the side with his spear, under the ribs (painful, probably), and then stabbed him a couple times, without ceremony, in the snout with that very disgustingly thin dagger that had so conveniently fallen from Atrissa's palm onto the earth's dirt. Then he threw it aside, or you might stab yourself with it. Inconvenient. Nowhere to drive it, no sheath. Useless. But he took the opponent's halberd (rather heavy, bitch), and immediately threw it away. Short and also useless. He pulled the spear from the opponent, strongly hoping the point was still good—it's unclear whether he hit his armor or what.

Arzis straightened very quickly, looked around very quickly, determining his disposition, the position of allies, the position of enemies, further possibilities, everything. Mauna—nearby, simply standing, folding her clenched fists under her neck, and looking at him (what else could she do). Atrissa—on the ground, turned on her back, whole muzzle in blood, closed eyes, wheeze, growl and moan simultaneously, and Arzis instantly determined that they had to say goodbye to her (won't drag her, won't save her, no, nothing). Unclear whether Chamber Guard is here or not. Nothing is clear at all.

Tai also held spear, very long—extracted from wagon.

"Arzis, let's fuck them up!" he stood a step near Atrissa.

Arzis made the only decision—grabbed Mauna by the hand and ran downstream. There was no enemy there (yet). There will be now. They'll be everywhere now. Run, run and run, no standing in place, no heroic battles and last stands; no, Tai, sorry, manage here somehow yourself. On the left—a steep bank, a lion's height tall; nothing to do—first the spear, then climbed out himself, dragged Mauna up without any ceremony; she was silent, completely (it seems she was just saying something either quietly or whispering under her breath—unclear), even her female sighs were quiet (it's known, if you drag with force, press, jerk and do such other things with females—they can't help but sigh). He noted—Mauna in riding knemids, glory to Vaal, glory to anyone, without them her paws would be done for. They ran along the steep bank, bushes, then climbed down again, had to get into water, splashing with mud, weaving, and falling on slippery stones, desperately trying to determine whether to cross

the stream by ford or even swimming. The steep bank is torn, must keep weaving. Mauna squealed and roared, slipping badly, really quite badly.

"Shut up! Quiet!" Arzis hissed at her.

He pressed her and himself against the bank wall. Pebbles came down. He covered her mouth so she wouldn't dare, perked up and began listening. Someone's terrible, distant roar of death and pain. Arzis sniffled, listened further. Some strange muffled sound, then crackling. Horses neighed. Roar-shouts in an unfamiliar language. Distant Suung cursing. Yes, everything seemed far, relatively far.

He led her and himself further along the bank.

"Arzis, where are we..."

"Shut up," he hissed at her again. And for certainty put his palm to her muzzle, so she'd understand. "Don't make noise."

They went further; thinking, Arzis decided to scramble up the washed-out, rocky slope, very carefully. Good, seemed quiet. Again he put the spear up top, climbed out himself, again pulled Mauna up (all awkwardly). His plan is simple—get out and hide in the depths of the forest. And there, whatever happens.

But the plan was under serious threat, immediately. It seems all plans had come to an end. Ten steps away stood a young, even quite youthful lion, of strangely foreign, even yellow coloring, relieving himself right into the bushes behind which Arzis had originally climbed out. So they met eyes and froze. He had a legate maneguard, but below was an eclectic assembly of various leather armor, with gambeson. And only a left glove; ah yes, with his right he held the obvious thing.

Arzis momentarily jerked backward—not bodily, merely through tension, intention—and immediately, instinctively understood such stupidity (no time explaining why). He rushed the vulnerable opponent. The young lion committed the impermissible—panicked, stepped backward several paces, struck the tree behind. Then reached for his halberd leaning against that tree—it fell into grass. Throughout he strangely mooded—precisely mooded like cattle, neither roaring nor crying for help.

Arzis risked it and drove his spear right into his muzzle, not hoping the point would handle the gambeson, which could easily have a plate sewn in, as they often do. Lucky—the opponent turned out completely poor, and didn't even think to dodge. The spear went through completely, and came out there, behind, below the ears. Like many, he tried to grab the spear shaft, but here death proved too quick, and he didn't even manage to do that. He fell like a stone down, disfigured, and Arzis didn't even have to pull out the spear much, it came out quite easily from the jerk. Also, seeing a knife on his belt, Arzis stuck it in his neck, to be sure, five-ten times; since he was tired and breathing hard, everything slowly, even calmly from the side.

"Like a pig," he quietly noted, rising, all splattered in blood and wiping his hands. He perked his ears, looked around.

Meanwhile Mauna grasped onto the only understandable, familiar thing—took a poor-looking bow, leaning against a tree, and even took an arrow from the quiver (also leaning against the tree).

"Family. Family. Family..." she repeated, holding the bow in her hand. She looked there, north, from where they had fled.

Arzis kept listening, then, bent over, rummaged around. Some goods were scattered around this lion; unclear who he was, what he was doing here, and why alone. Found another knife on him, and only now noticed he'd left his own belt with sword far back there, in the wagon—had removed it because it hindered sleep. Took this one's belt, but there was no sword anywhere on him or lying around.

He observed Mauna. Rubbed her ears to rouse her. Painful for her—earrings present. *Golden*, he thought. *Sellable*.

"Here, hold this," he stuck the quiver on her. Then tore the bow from her hand, also put it on her. "Speak quietly. Sit down."

She sat. He went to rummage further. Took the maneguard from the young one, narrow, would work. Leather flask, with some sour shit in it, perfect. Found flint in the belt pouch, something else there too, didn't bother investigating. A bag with some rags, piece of lard, arrowheads. Gave bag to Mauna, she took it and even began rummaging in it herself, unhurried. Took his poor bracers, put them on himself (had left his own in the wagon too). Good thing Arzis at least didn't take his head off with the gambeson to sleep better. Pulled off his pants, not without some curses. They'd be small for him, but would fit Mauna, should try. Anything else? No? Maybe yes, but need to keep running.

"Food," Mauna correctly identified, holding the lard like an artifact with both hands. Crouched nearby, she examined what appeared still faintly living young one.

"Here," he stuffed the pants and flask into the bag. "Here. Put it on. Wrap yourself, press your ears down, wrap your head," having said this, he himself tied a long, gray, woolen cloth on her head, wrapped her neck, "Yeah! That's it, let's roll out."

How to Cease Being a Messenger

"Oh, Arzis."

This was Mauna leaning ungracefully and heavily against a tree.

He had forbidden her to say the words 'terrible' and 'hard,' and she hadn't said them once.

"Let's push on," he said again. "Not enough."

"And then we'll find lodging," she immediately continued, sliding down the trunk. "Sleep. Get up in the morning and walk south along the river again."

"You got it," Arzis praised her for remembering everything.

"Family... Think they killed everyone?" she asked, head tilted back.

She looked, of course, peculiar. In lion pants, oversized, tightened with an Ashai belt pulled tight (glory to Vaal that even the most spoiled Messenger wears belts proper to all Ashai), under them—high knemids, then Ashai svira (rather bad, gives her away), on top—a covering, tied on her head with a strap from the bag.

"Dunno, maybe," Arzis shrugged, setting aside his spear, which he'd been using as a walking stick. "Alright, let's sit a bit."

"My Vaal... Maybe the Guard killed the attackers? Maybe they're looking for us?" Mauna looked with hopelessness.

"Sure, let's go check. Our Chamber fellas fled, mistress."

"That's impossible," she said even more hopelessly.

Actually, Arzis didn't really want to complain about her. In their wandering Mauna didn't whine, there were no big stupidities from her, just minor impracticalities.

"Ain't no way they dipped," he laughed a little.

"My Vaal, Arzis, what does all this mean?"

Both fell into thought: Arzis—about the stupidity of the question; Mauna—in general.

"These are probably Khalsid rebels, they hate all Ashai-Keetrah. They consider us representatives of evil in the world, it's connected to their faith," Mauna began examining what they had there, in the bag.

"Not Helsians? We're already in Helsia it seems. Fucking Helsia, just entered and already full carnival."

"Khalsids are Helsians, just radical ones. Khalsidism is a faith. Blood-thirsty, stupid."

"We're stupider and more bloodthirsty, tsa, let them not think much," he spat. "Another question: why did the Chamber Guard flee?" he spread his hands. "I thought they'd be useful."

"That's a good question," she slowly nodded, pulling out their lard.

"And third: what were you doing in the dhaar wagon?" he pointed at her with a claw.

She sighed, hesitated.

"I had a premonition, suggested it to Uruz, he agreed. I've never done such a thing, but... I felt very uneasy. I didn't know where to go. I wanted to hide, really didn't want to travel, but had to. I don't know. How did you know I was there?"

No way he could know. It was an accident. Arzis didn't know Mauna was there. A somewhat different lioness was expected there.

"I saw," he lied.

"But how? We concealed it so carefully, only I, Uruz, Tai knew. And someone else..."

"Someone else. You're something. I have eyes," he showed with two fingers. "And where did Bastiana, Toya, Selestina go?"

"The dhaars, you mean?"

"Yes, the dhaars, I mean!" he suddenly got angry.

"Don't yell at me. You can't yell at me. They rode in my coach."

Arzis thought. It seems Mauna saw for the first time that he thought seriously and for a long time.

"Listen here. The enemy didn't achieve their goals. The enemy didn't complete the task, the task was you, this isn't a raid, things aren't done like this. Now we need to keep going. And everything will be fine if you're obedient. And if you're not—I'll abandon you alone. But first I'll spank you well. Right here. With a mirror."

She looked at him, removed her covering, moved her ears. He remembered his mother—she could sometimes look like that; the gaze lingers, clings to you.

"As you say. But sorry, there's no mirror."

"Sweet. And what do you have?"

"Nothing except the ring," she showed the silver sisterhood ring on her finger.

"Take it off."

"I can't. It won't come off," she tugged at it.

"Fine, we'll wrap it for now. And where's the sirna?"

"Also left in the coach. Left everything there."

"Well I'll be," he said. Thought, and: "Fine. That's good."

"That's bad. Ashai-Keetrah don't do that. They must always have everything with them."

"So what happened this time?" Arzis asked ironically.

"Insight."

"What?"

"Silent knowledge. Didn't want to take them, that's all. Hung everything in the coach, myself, on the wall. Sirna, stamp, amulet. Even sat there, adjusting them. Now here, you have a Mistress without decorum."

"But with a head," Arzis reassured.

"With a head. My Family... Amaya... My Family... Amaya... Why did I never spoke to you sweetly, why am I such a fool?" Mauna drifted off somewhere, then began crying; eh, held on for so long, but still, how could it be otherwise.

"What Amaya?" he took the lard from her while she rubbed everything over her muzzle; she's ashamed to cry, not used to it, just shameful.

"It's a long story, Arzis."

"Screw it. Here, eat," he cut a piece, not without effort.

"Don't want to."

"You want-want, chow down."

"Chow down," for some reason she smiled. "Chow down, you say..."

And she began, reluctantly.

"So. We're going to Shadowrock," Arzis spoke with his mouth full, "from there—to Empire. We'll be there tomorrow. So, you remember this river leads to Shadowrock?"

"Should lead," she recalled the map, waving her hand before herself intricately—Arzis observed this. "If this was the first bridge. If second, then I don't know. But seems this was first."

"Fine," he waved it off. "We'll be there tomorrow. Not far. Main thing is we can walk along the river."

But Arzis was sure they could walk along the river, there were trails here; the main thing was not to run into anyone else on the trails. He stretched out, chewing. The lard turned out tasty.

"Chill out. We made it out clean."

"My Family..." and then waaaah, tears, nose running.

"Oh come on, enough of that. Not all of them. A whole bunch remained at the fort. Well they really knew when to get mud butt, just brilliant. We should have too, now we'd be shitting and playing cards. Well, and you'd be doing solitaire. Do you know how?"

"Arzis, don't swear so much. I've heard cursing before, you know, and everything... everything ended... so wrong."

Oh, these nuances and undercurrents with Ashai-Keetrah. Everything ended. So wrong.

"The main thing—you're alive, everything's fine," he reassured her, lionsesses need this, to have their ears tickled with nonsense.

"That's not the main thing, everything's not fine—everything's terrible."

"I told you, mistress: no 'terrible.' These Khalsids couldn't hit shit: they hunted for you, and what did they get?" and he showed her a colorful gesture.

Mauna looked through tears at his confident and carefree gesture. She wanted him to do it again. Good that he killed Karris. Good that he killed some Khalsid freak. And then some stupid teenager. Good that he exists...

"Listen, can you message that we have problems?" an idea came to him, he even stopped chewing.

She had already thought about this; but this is a very difficult task, with many uncertainties.

"I'll try, but I need the night," Mauna answered honestly.

"There, now we're talking," he simplified everything. "All good."

He took a small drink of the sour wine from the flask; unlike the lard, it turned out terrible. Would need to pour it out and fill with river water.

"Everything will be fine, mistress," he said, remembered Toya, his mood immediately dropped. "Not for everyone, of course. Fuck me... Yeah, indeed, Family," he thought about how she might have been killed: quickly, slowly, with mockery, without?

It was quick, he decided.

"If not for Tai, we'd be done," he noted, and raised the flask in his honor. "The most solid guy."

Toya didn't even understand anything, he decided. Bolt to the head. 'What-what's happening?'—climbed out of the coach, frightened. And that's all.

"Although no: I think they pictured ransom for you, mistress. I'd take ransom, why throw away a cart of gold. I heard there's a tale going around: for some Messenger in the East they gave a cart of gold. Is that true?"

"True, but the gold wasn't in a cart, but a chest, and not for just any, but for Vaalu-Siryara. But here it's not ransom—they wanted to kill me."

"Bitches," Arzis threatened, finally pouring out the sour wine. "Impossible to drink this, we'll get water."

She liked the threat. Almost all threats she'd heard turned out to be nothing, or pitiful imitation. Arzis's—simple and real. He's capable of taking and ending life if he decides—what an incredible Gift. Wrong to tell him not to swear. Few can pull it off, but he can. It would be nice if he called her a bitch too. She'd be indignant.

"Listen, how's this possible? I always thought," he looked around, and even spoke quieter, "that Messengers are so guarded—you can't stick a finger in," Arzis heeded Mauna's requests and delicately substituted the word. "But the Guard—hop!—and made paws. Listen, mistress, this is bad business, it's all a setup."

He reflected.

"Probably because we killed the Service fellow," an obvious reason.

He considered more options.

"Or your sisters decided to take you down," another one.

"You've lost your mind. That's impossible," Mauna answered with Messenger disdain.

"See how everything worked out," he gestured around with the empty flask.

"No. You know nothing about this. Sisters don't kill their own... just like that. Especially not in such an idiotic way. These are Khalsids, Arzis!"

Ah, all this is just futile.

"Listen, Mauna. Here's what: to Shadowrock, then to the Empire, and then we'll repaint ourselves, that's all."

"What does 'repaint ourselves' mean?" she didn't like the words.

"Dissolve. You need to disappear, or it's completely unclear what's going on. I don't like this stuff, it's all rotten."

"Where will I disappear, Arzis, I am a Messenger."

"Well, stop being one for a while, or it's unclear who sharpened their fang for you. Someone serious."

"That's impossible," *nyah-gastau* gesture from her.

"Listen, the shifts of our guys—one," he bent a finger. "Guard—two. And you hurried here, the fort commander himself told you: they haven't traveled here yet. No, serious tails took you on, mistress, they greased the Guard with snouts," by 'snout' Arzis means imperial—it has the Emperor's profile on it, may Vaal guide his decisions. "Need to make tracks and go underground."

He spoke such preposterous things that Mauna actually squinted.

"Arzis, you simply can't imagine what you're talking about," she didn't even know where to begin.

'Sisters decided to kill'? My Vaal, forgive. 'Bribing the Guard'? This isn't some petty official in a port customs office. 'Murdering Karris'? Mauna knew what she was doing; and not only she knew what she was doing. Messenger vows: to Vaal, sisters, Empire, Suungs.

Arzis nodded—well okay-okay, suppose so.

"Alright, what do you think yourself? What is all this, in your opinion?"

Mauna was at a loss, stroking herself where the insignia was, now hidden by cloth.

"Fine, we'll live and see," he waved it off.

He wanted to spin his ring, reached for it—but it wasn't there. Spinning the ring is not possible—it's on a neck, not his.

The Chapter in Which Mauna Fell into Even Greater Rage

Shadowrock indeed turned out to be close, they saw it from a height, and walking to it proved easy, down-down along the river by paths and bank. They climbed into hay at the outskirts, in a meadow, burying themselves completely. Mauna messaged nothing, it was out of the question—they slept together, wrapped in everything they had; it's impossible to message with a lion nearby, for any Messenger, a male's presence destroys any Messaging. Sleeping with Mauna proved hot for Arzis—like all lionesses, she pressed against him constantly, annoying, simply impossible.

"You'll pass for half-mad," Arzis decided in the morning, examining her outfit. The pants had to be pulled off and something like a skirt was made from woolen cloth, tied very high to hide the belt; and the svira patterns rubbed with dirt. The golden earrings were removed and hidden; they carefully wrapped her neck so that—Vaal forbid—the insignia wouldn't show. He took her bow and arrows from her (Mauna noted the bow was poor, rather weak draw, and the arrows were just terrible); on a second thought, he threw it away. Arzis didn't like her knemids—they looked expensive; should wrap them with rags, but they had none left. Everything could be alright, but Mauna walked, looked, stood, moved in general not as an ordinary lioness does. He himself looked fine, would do—some unclear scoundrel and rogue, just right for Shadowrock.

Morning is wiser than evening, and Mauna coldly decided in the morning:

"Secret Service. It's all them. Only this way."

"Yeah, I keep saying—shouldn't have killed that one, came out too thick," Arzis agreed.

"Arzis, here's what we need: reach my sisters at any cost."

Four lionesses were washing stuff by the river, Arzis got the idea to steal whatever from them, but it didn't work out. Otherwise, everything went like clockwork, they entered Shadowrock, and everyone seemed not to care about them. Arzis immediately liked Shadowrock—in such border settlements it's easy to dissolve, you can see here just everyone.

Somehow this tavern—or eatery, or whatever—had some name, but it was unclear: the sign was in Helsian; if Arzis already knew two words by ear in Mramri, then in Helsian—nah, neither by ear nor to read.

"Let's slide in here," he told Mauna.

"Let's sit outside."

"No. No point showing ourselves."

"It's stuffy there, Arzis," Mauna suddenly threw a tantrum, just like that.

"It's alright. Come here. Come on, go in," he led her.

Good, they entered.

"Good day to you. Are you Suung or Helsai?" came an accent from the lioness.

"We're Suungs, so what?" Arzis examined where they'd entered.

"First time? Very welcome. For Suungs it's always possible and proper: lions—war tincture, lionesses—mesmerine," the servant of this establishment had an incredibly sly tone, as if each word simply jumped with impatience to deceive you.

Mauna tried to dive into her with empathy, but it didn't work; she spun around, wouldn't give her gaze, oh well.

"Yes, that'll all be just right," Arzis immediately got comfortable and sat down.

"May look papers, trade license, imperial distinction?"

"What? No, didn't take them with us."

"How do you pass the cordon?"

"The border, you mean? We passed. Anyway, what's there to eat?"

After waiting a bit, the lioness answered, winking at Arzis, which angered Mauna:

"Everything here."

If only she had a whip—she'd flog the audacious creature.

"Excellent, the lioness gives everything."

Everything was brought.

"See, everything's great. Happy it's all over?" Arzis devoured everything, instantly cheering up.

"It's not over yet. I must know what happened there."

"We'll find out. This, we had such a Drag in the Circle, he was once a drengir in the Legate, and he liked..." Arzis chewed slower, and Mauna saw how he became completely alert, gathered himself, sensed danger. "...to say..." Arzis stopped chewing and strongly scratched his nose.

At the same time they could hear a good-sized crowd entering from behind, with laughter and Helsian speech. Mauna couldn't see them, but Arzis could.

"Ho-hey, old friend, come in, come in."

"Greetings, Maestu, greetings..."

Arzis continued chewing. Naturally, Mauna wanted to turn around, but Arzis anticipated everything: he kicked her under the table, so painfully that she quietly growled. He shook his head. Don't turn around. Seizing the moment, he leaned closer, she perked her ears.

"We need to..." he said. And that's all.

He froze thus, eyes closed. Then opened them. Regarded her while mouth-breathing, then observed the window rightward (his left).

"What?" Mauna asked despairingly, very quietly; at the same time she ate from the spoon, not even understanding the taste, in order to pretend she was just eating.

Arzis remained silent, and this silence—none would ever know this—cast her into fear like nothing else. Arzis was silent. This was bad... truly bad.

Here's the issue. First thought: let her know they're here; but fortunately Arzis thinks quickly, immediately severing this thread. Let who know, about whom? Who could've thought—incredible, but Arzis spotted Toya. She's among these lions, collared.

He thought quickly, and very quickly darkened the understanding that things were bad. Get Toya out. This very moment. But reality. How to take her, how to retrieve her, how to save her? No way. Forces too unequal, everything unfavorable. Overwhelming odds. Impossibility of a good solution. For a moment—admittedly—he wanted to get up and simply leave this place. He'd done everything for Mauna, let her sit and wait for her rescuers, who should be hurrying, stumbling over their paws (a Messenger of the Empire was lost!). Toya... but what, but how? Yes, exactly right: get her, save, take for himself; he knew perfectly well this is what he wanted, but Arzis is a lion of reality, he always sees its huge fortress wall before him—and understood the hopelessness of this desire. Forces too unequal, time too short, possibilities too small, no space and time for anything. Besides...

Ah yes, there's still Mauna here.

Becoming dhaar is simple. You just need to arrive in the Empire, not being Suung (or Helsian), and say you want to live here and serve the Suungs (who else). That's all. If you're a lioness, they'll make you big iron rings in your ears, two-three per ear, sometimes four, sometimes even five; similar ones are also worn by Mistresses of Life (only on the left), but we won't talk about them, they're uninteresting to us, completely uninteresting, nothing interesting happens with them. If you're a lion—they'll definitely cut your mane, very thoroughly (and then you cut it yourself, just as thoroughly), and also shove rings in your ears, or nose, or both, or won't particularly insist on rings and shoving them somewhere; but all this depends on the Empire's pride.

There is such a law in the Suung Empire, called simply: 'On Dhaars.' It's old. Probably as old as the Ashai-Keetrah Codex. And it changes as often and unsystematically as the Ashai-Keetrah Codex (well no, that's an exaggeration, not as often and not as unsystematically). There are many things forbidden to dhaars; there are many things permitted to be done with them. There are even some things they're allowed to do; dhaar can, for example, buy a bucket, if a bucket is suddenly needed (but not a house, that's forbidden).

Yes, any adult Ashai-Keetrah can kill any dhaar without special ceremonies, investigations, trials and other such excesses. A patrician too.

Well fine, why jump straight to such cruelties. You can wipe your hands on dhaar fur, it's written down like that. But trading dhaars in the Empire isn't allowed, and hasn't been for a long time, and many Suungs frowned at this—good business going to waste; ah, the old days were something (everyone who remembers them has died—the times were a hundred years ago). In the Empire you can't trade in lionkind at all; learned Suungs consider this wise, meaningful; on Hustru streets they consider it stupid.

But in Helsia—you can. And Helsians, protectorate of the Empire ('almost Suungs,' as they consider themselves; 'almost dhaars,' as Suungs consider them), quite happily trade. But killing dhaars just like that seems forbidden to everyone, unlike in the Empire, even to Fire priests (amazing Helsian faith, incredible mixture of everything around: Fire priests worship goddess-mother, fertility goddess): they're merchandise, who just spoils goods like that. And it would seem better for a dhaar to be living merchandise than a dead victim of some Ashai-Keetrah, greedy for blood and malice. But no: all dhaars in the Empire (and outside it) feared and hated Helsia, and got along quite well as guests of the Suungs. But why? Because Ashai and patricians practically never kill dhaars, it's an exceptional rarity, picturesque exoticism; they don't even think about dhaars, they have more important things to do. But if you end up in Helsia with dhaar rings or a trimmed mane, becoming sudden living merchandise is quite a simple thing.

Vaalu-Mauna. She also doesn't think about dhaars, she's not even just Ashai, she's a Messenger; for her to think about a dhaar is like thinking about a broken cart wheel lying by the roadside. Mauna will complicate everything. She complicates everything. She won't let him save Toya; and not out of malice, but simply because there's no sense in it. And even if she suddenly does allow it, what then? Then Mauna is in danger again, and is that in the plans? Oh, no. They will inevitably fall into great danger again if Arzis does anything for Toya, however insignificantly small.

Yes-yes, here too everything's clear. Yes, now he'll tell Mauna: Toya is here. There's nowhere to go, this truth of life must be conveyed; or maybe not convey it, but just leave like that, without explaining, without letting Mauna turn around, just leave and that's all... But if he tells her, then it's clear what will happen. Crystal clear. After a moment of amazement, and possible hot-tempered (stupid) decision, any, the only thing Mauna can rightly do is quietly whisper: "Take me away from here." Obviously, what a risk; despite still unknown intrigues, the Empire's living interest is in Mauna being alive, content and healthy, Messaging, and not thinking of risking herself even half a tail's worth for a dhaar who served her in kitchens and somewhere there, in the basement, and lingering in one tavern with lions who quite possibly almost killed her yesterday. Either way, they need to leave, Arzis thought, there's no other reasonable path; Toya must be left, Toya must be given up, Toya must be sold, all of them, the whole 'Family' (what a stupid word, Arzis suddenly thought)—all of them died for Vaalu-Mauna's life, so Toya should... Well, except those who remained at the fort, we don't count those unlucky ones. Arzis didn't want this, he very-very strongly didn't want this, he very-very strongly wanted to snatch Toya from life's jaws; but this very life doesn't care what exactly we want.

Arzis hated all this, these sadistic whims of fate, so he even decided for a moment that he'd simply disappear. Sometimes you just want to walk away from all kinds of decisions. To hell with them. With Mauna. Yes, with Mauna. And with T... To... Ah, fine. Did what he could. And

what's it to him? He has everything of his own, nothing foreign, his own life, do what you want. Nothing for him to do, only solve lionesses' problems, well screw them, how much can one endure.

Mauna blinked, looking at him, slowly, not noticing that she herself was trying to eat with the spoon upside down.

He sighed. No, at least this lioness, the Messenger, treasure of the Sung Empire, must be brought to the end; maybe he'll even get rich, they'll reward him or something like that. Must finish the job, Arzis hates unfinished business. And he's gotten used to her, even attached, Mauna even pleases him, in many ways, she's admirable. Mistress, after all... Sworn-Bond on him, after all! He likes her, but now he'll like her a bit less, because there will be frightened, correct: "Take me away from here, don't think about her, let's go, let's go, we got lucky again, let's go." Also such, tearful: "How can you think about a dhaar when my life is at stake?" Or not tearful. But cold, and reasonable. Possibly also a meaningless promise: "We'll find her, save her, later. Definitely, of course." Yes, more like this. Mauna is very reasonable, she calculates things well.

And he'll leave Toya here. Because of Mauna, and because of reality. You can't fight a sword with a spoon. Toya doesn't see him. Toya doesn't see them. And glory to Vaal.

Oh, no, not glory! He met Toya's gaze. Quick hand to mouth, meaning be quiet, be quiet, just be quiet, don't give yourself away and don't give us away. Her amazed-frightened-forlorn look, such you won't forget till the end of life.

He understood he wouldn't forgive himself if he left her here. He (probably) would think up how to try to save her; more precisely, he'd think up what self-sacrificial stupidity he could do (Arzis hates such things). Yes, aha, he'll do something. And this something will probably end badly.

It seemed to Mauna that Arzis thought for eternity, frozen, with his gaze stuck somewhere in her neck.

"Just don't turn around," he reminded, very quietly. "There is... Toya. Mramri. Dhaar," reminding almost everything he knew about Toya (so little, actually!), he looked down, stuck his spoon in the food, "from the Family. In a collar with chains. There are those very ones who jumped us. Or not those very ones. But, seems like, those very ones. She's sitting with one. Old. Left-handed."

And he looked at her, with a sad smirk, meaning such are things. Mauna saw in his appearance for the first time something like confusion, even despair.

But at the same time he saw something too. Arzis, actually, had never caught her in malice during these couple of days. And now Mauna was becoming more... angry. And angrier. And angrier. More focused and angrier, and the change proved so terrifying that Arzis stared. Her teeth showed, fangs, her tiny whiskers trembled, which she—even in their situation—in the morning diligently tried to remove, he'd noticed this. Her eyes turned into two furious stars, and Arzis regretted that he'd once

brought her that Manu (Sacrifice), honestly: if Manu saw these two stars before death, one wouldn't envy him; and simultaneously—he admired that he could witness such, this ancient Suung fury. Suungs are furious, they can: everyone around knows this, and always knew, that's why there's the Suung Empire, and not something else. All he could do was watch, admire, and—it seems, even—fall in love, quickly, very quickly.

On one hand, he completely didn't expect such, it was unreasonable, inconsistent and impossible. On the other—he was only waiting for this, very secretly, very hidden.

"Arzis," he listened to her secret, so quiet incantation, slow, "I beseech by Alamut: free her. This is a lioness of our Family, she survived, she saw everything. You can. No one can. You can. I'll help, I'll act, you direct."

Arzis rushed about, internally and with his gaze. Alright, so, plans changed, think up new ones, think well and quickly, to survive, not just anyhow, not just to die for entertainment. There's a big difference: to do just for show, to mark 'I tried, didn't work out, sorry'; and to do, achieve the goal.

"We'll take her. What should I do? Direct me, direct us," Mauna pleaded, even asked permission. "I entreat you. You, no one else."

"Don't jerk around..." he ordered her, very quietly and very angrily. "Need... Need her to come out of here. Herself, or at least with one of those fuckers, and then... I don't know, we'll see..."

"Good," Vaalu-Mauna even calmly agreed with everything. The lion said what to do; therefore, the lioness is calm. She sat for a moment, turned her ears away. "They're saying to bring Toya food, and more of it," she barely perceptibly nodded there, back. "That she needs to be fattened up, or she's too thin. You can't sell thin ones for much," such amazing malice in her smirk-snarl. "And they bear cubs poorly."

"You know Helsian?" Arzis dropped his spoon in the plate.

"A little. They probably want to sell her," she noted very casually and matter-of-factly, frowning; she was calculating something in her mind, ears pressed slightly. "They captured her for sale, yes?"

He didn't answer. He only wanted to get angry aloud at the fact that she hadn't mentioned such an important thing as knowing Helsian earlier. Vaal! What a dumbass! But there was no time.

She closed her eyes, sighed, her ears drooped slightly.

"I'll lead her out," she looked at him, even solemn.

There wasn't a moment to stop her: Mauna immediately stood up. She looked herself over from head to toe, for some reason shrugged.

Arzis helplessly and soundlessly slapped the table. *So... Need... Need... Will need to...*, such useful thoughts spun. He wiped himself with his palm, wiped his whole muzzle, as he always did in great agitation. He feared sharp, sudden things; only he could do sharp things, from others it led to no good. So, Vaalu-Mauna, this delicate instrument, there she was already approaching their table. Somehow he immediately understood what was on her mind (his pimping past showing): Mauna decided to play the role of a random prostitute. Yes. Excellent. Superb. She has no idea

how it's done. She probably hasn't even seen whores in person, never. Wonderful. She's not made for this, she can't charm like Ashai with strong straya, especially such a crowd of seven heads. She's simply a Messenger.

Arzis rubbed his muzzle, moved his shoulders, and thought.

He noted: she lacked tentush and other cheap tricks, her clothing was terribly unsuitable. For example, her neck was completely covered (in-signia!), and no loose lioness covers her neck. All prostitutes love cheap tricks, it's stupid not to use them, they work.

Mauna unceremoniously grabbed a lute from the neighboring table, which had been lying there all this time. Everyone paid attention, Arzis watched her. She looked sad and melancholic, and he thought she'd make a poor slut: sad and melancholic (though even such would have her own client). With such an appearance, probably, they play lute in high society. Mauna performed a scale on the strings, and although Arzis didn't know what and how was played in high society, his ear understood: she plays decently. Toya would have said: 'Worksome.'

But the local society couldn't appreciate such brazen musical intervention (and who loves it, truthfully speaking?).

"Entertainment for good sirs, lions' desires—lionesses' life"—so Mauna said in (monstrously broken) Helsian. More precisely, this is what she intended to say. It came out something like: "Entertain pleasant elders. Lion desire—lioness live."

"*No-no-no*," they waved their hands at her.

"*Go away, hoe, no time*."

Mauna persisted.

"*What's this? Suung whore, on our side? Haven't seen one in ages!*"

"*Let her strum, come on, we'll laugh. Well, Suung bitch, put your butt here, next to me, let's have a drink! I haven't groped Suung whores yet!*"

Mauna continued trying.

"*No. Not today. Leave*."

"Tsa, dhaar? Do you know Suung?" Mauna asked Toya.

Mauna, idiotically-cheerfully-false, acted poorly, in some measure terribly; she would have been such a poor actress that it would have been even good. Why did she, an Andarian, insert the northern-Suung 'tsa'? My Vaal!

Toya nodded minutely, know-know. She observed only Mauna.

The serving female claimed the instrument from Mauna, simply and proprietarily, with a tired look.

"*Come on, leave*."

"*Leave elders. Only say dhaar old mystery, how to chope lions*," Mauna didn't notice that they'd already tried to push her away once.

"*What?*" everyone laughed.

"*She probably wanted to say 'love,' the fool*."

"*This is some trippy shit*," someone was truly amused by this phonetic confusion.

Mauna waved to Toya, meaning lean closer; Mauna had to lean on the table, stretch out, because Toya wasn't sitting at the edge. Someone

slapped Mauna under the tail (surprisingly, she didn't flinch; Arzis was afraid she'd be amazed, but prostitutes aren't amazed by anything, especially slaps on the ass); at the table it even became quiet, even listened to what she'd say there.

"Go out for need. Go out at any cost," Toya heard hotly, furiously and wetly in her left ear.

Complete failure, because Toya quite audibly replied, looking at Mauna:

"Yes, Mistress..." looking with such reverence that Arzis had never seen.

Invisibly, but some force protected Toya, because none of the Helians paid attention to this disastrous, completely revealing 'Mistress': everyone considered it some polite Suung address, even proper for dhaars: try to figure out all these Suungs with dhaars, everything's complicated with them.

Apparently, Toya understood what she'd done, because she went even grayer (though where could a Mramri go grayer!), she became dark-black-gray from fear and accidental betrayal, her ears instantly pressed down, and she breathed frequently and visibly. She stared ahead.

And, barely visible, but Arzis noticed—Mauna's shoulder twitched.

"*Hey, Suung, say 'love.'*"

"*Loofé,*" Mauna smiled, with exaggeration beyond all decency; such a smiling snarl!

"*Say 'chop!'*"

"*Chop!*" she repeated well.

"*Ha-ha-ha. Fine, go, buzz off.*"

"*Buss offé!*" Mauna echoed triumphantly with that smile.

Sparse-maned, different-eyed and cross-eyed, almost toothless, with a cataract on his eye—this was the owner who approached Arzis.

"This, what kind deal this?" he knocked on the table, frequently, like a woodpecker. "Need talk! Forty parts. Forty parts from money."

Casually, as if at home, Arzis waved his hand:

"Yes, she always pounces on whoever she sees. Loves work, tail-swisher. You're saying forty parts from hundred, yeah?" he winked at the place's owner.

"Forty from hundred, yes-yes, we is good place!" he continued getting angry, righteously, as if someone stepped on his tail.

"No problem, chief, here, this is for everything, we pay in advance, square deals," Arzis gave him a golden earring.

He couldn't count now. Simply couldn't.

"Whoa, whoa. Oh," he examined the gold. "From that side, long time no Suungs," the owner even said respectfully. "Very long time. Much money yours, Suungs!" he looked accusingly at Arzis, but also kindly, contentedly.

"Yes, yes," Arzis agreed listlessly. "And I'll tell you: they've gotten cheaper lately. Well, what's there?" he said to Mauna, who had returned, and stood up.

Moving too sharply, be calmer, he thought.

Mauna nodded, meaning let's go. On her: the strangest mixture of emotions. Arzis didn't even try to decipher it.

"I need to go outside. Could sire tell me where one can step aside?" she asked the owner, looking somewhere through Arzis.

"What?" he didn't understand. "What step?"

"She wants to piss," Arzis demonstrated on himself.

"There go, yard go," the owner pointed carelessly, very quickly counting imperials on the table.

Arzis quickly grabbed his cloak, spear with that very rag on the end (he noticed how those very Helsians glanced sideways, or did it seem so?), put his hand on Mauna's waist. They went out. Inner yard, earth picked clean, chickens.

"What did you tell her?" he asked quietly, hurriedly, angrily.

"To come out to the privy, at any cost," she looked ahead. Then—sharply!—at him. "She'll come out. And we'll take her!"

She was rejoicing! She was triumphant!

Eh, Arzzy, he squinted with amusement, rubbing his neck, mane, sticking his spear in the ground. *Recall how she got you involved. Just remember that. She's stupidly brave. She's such a fool... She's such a dreamer...*

"So. Here's what we do: she comes out alone—we all slip away together, right here, through the fence; comes out with someone..." he stepped toward the outhouse and dragged her along.

"Let's kill them all, Arzis!"

Mauna, he understood, is idiotically brave. Of course, naturally. Any Suung who became a Messenger, and even survived it, must be idiotically brave (the others probably just die along the way).

"Draw the knife. Hide it in your sleeve. If there's more than one with Toya—we leave. Understood? Understood? We leave. One—we kill. Two—we leave. Fuck... Can you stab him in the throat, here, here? Not here," he tapped chest and stomach. "There'll be armor, cloth, ribs, all that. Here, here, in the muzzle. Just don't cut me. I start strangling him, you—stab. He'll roar, shit, this whole thing's gonna crash out. Under the mane, under the mane, here-here, often-often."

Mauna generally said a monosyllabic "yes" to everything. But here's the thing: he doesn't have good rope to strangle with. Could take the carrying rope from the spear, but... takes time!

"Hide in the shithouse. Toya comes—you come out. I strangle," he didn't believe in his plan. "You work with the knife. Slash-slash-slash. Neck-neck-neck. And here, below, jaw, right here."

"Yes."

"Only I bring him down first! I bring him down. Otherwise he'll kick you. Kicks—you'll fly. Like a star from the sky. Go on, into the shitter. Sit."

"This is a privy, yes?" she noted critically.

"Go on, enough. Sit. Knife in sleeve. Hold tight. Strike true, don't be afraid. There'll be blood, warm blood, don't be afraid."

"I've never been in such places," she closed herself in.
 "Often-often, neck, chin."
 "Yes. Such a stench here."
 "Fuck, Mauna, don't let me down."
 "Don't say that. I won't let you down, Vaal won't let it happen. Unless he kicks me. Like a little star..."
 "Won't kick, I'll bring him down. Come from the side. Don't cut me."
 "Yes."
 "If we're spotted and tails come running, then run."
 "No. Don't talk."
 "What 'no,' what am I... quiet. They're coming out. Two. Her and him."
 "I see. I can see from here."
 "That's it. We work. Start only when I start. Only when I do."
 He should have told her many more things, but too late. Arzis angrily stared at the blank wall opposite, standing half-turned and pretended to pick his teeth with a claw.
Now someone else will come out. And that's it, off we go, he thought, not even getting properly angry about it.
 "Hehehe," he laughed aloud at this thought.
 Broad daylight. Unknown what's there to the right, left, even behind. And a little fence. Their plan was scandalously stupid.
We leave after this for the border, to the Empire. Something like that, he thought.
 "You going there?"
 "Huh?" Arzis didn't understand the question.
 In other languages, like the overwhelming majority of Suungs, he is hopelessly ignorant and dumb.
 "Sir going there?" the lion asked him in very good Suung.
 "No, there's this... mine's sitting there. Come out already!" he knocked on the outhouse. "There's a line forming here."
 Toya stared at Arzis unblinkingly. He looked at her; continuing to look into her eyes, he spat contemptuously and easily and continued picking his teeth, showing how indifferent he was to some young, gray, rather thin and infinitely sad Mramri dhaar with a collar. Strangely, her clothing (high skirt, shirt, for some reason an apron and those very, legendary knemids) turned out to be quite decent and not very dirty, but there were brown spots here and there; everything was, of course, ruined by thin iron shackles (bracelets on wrists, collar at neck, and all connected by chains); the captive, apparently, had not been treated too badly.
 The Helsian (or maybe even Suung?) removed his maneguard, threw it back and ruffled his mane. Arzis noticed this. And Mauna, hesitating slightly, emerged with a radiant, sunny smile that didn't suit her at all.
 "Go," the Helsian-Suung ordered Toya.
 Naturally, Toya hesitated and now began devouring Mauna with her gaze.
 "Dhaar-dear, go. Come, come. Dhaar-lionessy, come on, don't stand," Mauna told her laughingly, encouraging—go-go, don't be shy, your turn.

Toya did just that. Even slammed the creaky door behind her.

The opponent—middle-aged. This is how busy, all tired and harried heads of households look, where there's this: wife, five-six cubs, lots of troubles, definitely hunting and a good paternal home. He has kind eyes, a good male. Arzis stood directly behind the lion with kind eyes, thought something up, and calmly, methodically unwound the spear tip from the rag; it had been leaning against the fence before, thrown so carelessly that it was hard to imagine it would come to life. Then he stood behind in stance, aimed, closing one eye; and his second eye was not very kind.

"Ha-ha-ha, dhaars," Mauna laughed, gesturing exaggeratedly, even making muzzles. Like in a bad street show, honestly. "Stupid!"

Mauna—exactly from the west side. Arzis—exactly from the east side. The opponent—exactly between them.

"You're a fool too," the lion noted good-naturedly.

"*Elder, tasty, I loofe you. Ahgrr*," Mauna sighed, when instead of an answer the spear tip appeared to the world like instant lightning from his mouth, and belatedly jumped aside, remembering about stars and kicks. In her hand—a knife, and she honestly attacked him: clumsily, but furiously. He quickly, reliably fell to the ground, Arzis stepped on his ear.

"Good, good, enough, he's wasted. Don't get dirty," he said, "you'll be all bloody. Toya, get out," he knocked on the outhouse door, one board couldn't take it and broke; with his other hand he tried to pull the spear from the Helsian.

Toya emerged, and the first thing she did was rush to help the Mistress, and stuffed the Helsian's bloody mouth with a filthy rag she found in the outhouse; it was all unnecessary, he wasn't even wheezing much.

"Hey, you'll cut yourselves on the point, the spear... dammit... is stuck," finally, Arzis managed to free the weapon. "Get up."

Mauna froze, with knife in hand (very bloody), and looked at Arzis from below:

"Wanted to say... 'sweet,' and forgot the word! Ah, Vaal... lead out, don't let us perish..." she stood, breathing frequently, with blade in palm and gaze toward the tavern. Sharp turn—to Arzis. And immediately—to Toya. Then—again to Arzis. "You said you'd strangle," she reproached him, still breathless.

"Errr, said and said," Arzis searched the Helsian. "Said one thing, did another."

All around was very quiet, as if ordered.

"Don't do that to me."

"As you say, mistress," Arzis answered mockingly.

He took from him: maneguard, shifted to the back (there'll be two!); purse (unclear what's in it); short sword, the most ordinary Legate short sword, with sheath and belt, which pleased him, and Arzis with worthy dexterity attached the needed thing to himself; took off a ring, seemingly silver, but will figure it out later; took off a short cloak-lacerna, threw it to Toya, silently showed, meaning cover yourself with it, or the collar shows. Toya hesitated, Mauna helped, covered her with the hood of this very

lacerna (and it's warm around, good weather), making Toya turn into either a thief, or wild lioness, or fire-worshipping nun (there are such in Helsia, Ashai often find it funny when they spot them), or Yunian huntress (pity you haven't seen, quite a sight). Then Arzis hurriedly looked around, and nothing to do: moved the Helsian into that very outhouse, which had already gained grim Suung fame. It was hard for Arzis, but not for the first time—dragged, seated, and managed everything, closed the doors.

Too much blood, that's a problem. Old trick: he mixed blood on hands with dirt and washed as he could in the barrel for rainwater, told Mauna to do the same. Scared off a fearless chicken. Looked at himself, at spots here and there, waved his hand—will pass for hunting blood, probably.

"We're leaving."

The fence proved small, but that barrel helped. Arzis vaulted thus, Toya using barrel aid also reached the other side without issues, while Mauna overturned the barrel though still arriving where needed.

And if only anyone around, if only someone came out or something. Not a tail. Amazing. Vaal is helping, apparently.

They quickly walked down the side street, away from the tavern entrance. Arzis even walked calmly, and meanwhile rewrapped the spear tip with that same red rag, which he indeed hadn't forgotten at the crime scene. No one chased, no one roared after them.

They turned left; finally, lionkind appeared ahead, on the busy main street. Someone lay by the wall, probably a drunkard (either didn't make it to the tavern, or just the opposite).

"Right, gang," Arzis broke silence since the lionesses spoke nothing. "Now we..."

Toya suddenly halted, helplessly waving her hand, abundantly vomiting onto the street's hard, dry ground. Arzis and Mauna witnessed.

"*Seems she's had enough,*" noted in Helsian that same someone lying by the wall. He wasn't sleeping after all. Arzis looked and slightly gestured at him, with a careless motion, meaning whatever you're saying there—shut up.

Toya looked at them, and this mixture of boundless gratitude, guilt, shame, remnants of great fear, heaviest longing and readiness for anything—all this didn't leave Arzis calm, he shifted the spear to the other shoulder to embrace Toya with his left arm and press her very tightly, but then Mauna anticipated: approached, put her hand on Toya's shoulder and wiped (herself) with her own (only) handkerchief, a piece of some expensive fabric that she'd been hiding in her bosom all this time, from the very beginning.

"It's nothing. It happened to me too," the Messenger noted with great significance.

"I'm sorry," Toya despaired, and again the same thing.

"Bless you, To... let's keep going, come on," Arzis managed to catch himself on the word. They can't be flashing names around.

"Don't talk," Mauna waved him off, and said to Toya: "Look at me."

She took her by the ears under the hood, began rubbing them. The dhaar rings interfered; Mauna didn't show this.

"Look in my eyes. Breathe with me," she inhaled through her nose.

Toya, certainly, did everything, listened intently to the Mistress. Mauna whispered something under her breath, they exhaled together, and then she tapped her ears.

"Better," she stated affirmatively.

Seems like here Mauna knows what she's doing.

"Much better, Mis... mmm..." Toya also caught herself, and Arzis liked that she quickly understood everything about names, and in general. "Much, very-very," Arzis saw tears of joy for the first time in his life, he always thought it was a foolish exaggeration, and didn't happen like that. "I... *Ich*... I," she said in a mixture of languages, and then with both hands grabbed Vaalu-Mauna's palm and licked it, and this wasn't even gratitude, but amazement that all this—was possible, real, and happening to her.

Arzis mercilessly interrupted the idyll; seizing Toya in embrace while furiously nodding to Mauna, he led his lionesses. He couldn't embrace both—someone must hold the spear.

Conversations in the Queue

Amazingly, neither Mauna nor Toya asked Arzis where they were going and what next. And good that they didn't ask. He kept thinking while stepping forward, and nothing sensible came to mind. Everything came down to one thing: abandon the initial plans to roam around in Shadowrock, immediately risk and directly cross the border, to the Suung side.

"So, here it is. Now we'll cross the border. It would be good to pretend to be traders, attach to them, make an arrangement... but no time, beauties. We go like this; Vaal willing, ours won't eat us."

It was vaguely imaginable why they should be eaten. On the other hand, it was vaguely imaginable why they shouldn't be eaten. Everything was unclear and foggy. They have no bloodline papers, no bloodline books, no documents, nothing. Vaalu-Mauna has patrician insignia at her neck and elsewhere; she's a Messenger, but she only has a silver ring, and they might suddenly think it's stolen. Toya—with a collar, and a Mramri dhaar, well wonderful. Arzis looks like... Arzis. Even more wonderful. Also Mauna is prideful, and stupidly fearless. Dangerous combination. Also Mauna believes the Secret Service is hunting her, and everyone knows they're something else. The Guard of the Chamber of Ashai-Keetrah Affairs and Defense of the Faith somehow isn't very trustworthy: maybe it guards Vaal's faith, aha, but with Messengers they apparently don't do so well. So there's no trust in the Chamber itself. So shadow falls on Imperial authorities. So at the border they might know something, and it's unclear what exactly they might know (anything at all!). Everything's tail-up, complete chaos, as it always is.

Border queue. They positioned behind some wagon, halting for the first time since Toya's misfortunes on the quiet street. Since then Arzis never turned—he knew lionesses followed. Since then none spoke a word due to multitudes of foreign ears around.

"What are they waiting for? Why aren't they going?" Mauna asked.

"Well what do you mean, it's a queue," Arzis pointed to the obvious.

"They're not letting them through?"

"They let them through, just like, not immediately. Need to wait."

"We're to wait as well?" Mauna was surprised by such a strange thing as a queue in the world of warm blood. Amazing things exist.

"Yes. Go directly—we'll get boxed ears. We've had enough."

"Ah, like a Message queue," Mauna comprehended everything.

Toya stood in front of them, both, but there was little use from this, because:

"You'll tell us later how it all went, all later," Arzis gestured to stop her, so she wouldn't say anything. "You'll definitely tell how the trip to uncle went."

Vaalu-Mauna looked at Arzis and sighed at this male sense of humor.

Toya nodded silently. She cast quick glances at Arzis, but also feared them, as if looking at him was betrayal and shameful, which everyone would notice. Feelings burst from her, but their outlet was strictly forbidden, for a host of reasons; she completely didn't know what to do with them. Toya had learned her monstrous betrayal in the tavern, that enchanted thing she'd said: "Yes, Mistress..." An elderly lioness with a screaming goose in a cage bumped into her. Not knowing what to do with herself, she leaned against the wagon gear in front of them with a guilty, youthful smile, but the wagon moved, and Toya almost fell. Arzis chuckled with amusement and extended his hand to her, though it wasn't needed, she quite saved herself; but Toya quickly, very eagerly accepted the rescue, and he felt how tenaciously she grasped his forearm.

"What should we say at the border?" Mauna asked, looking around.

"Nothing, if they don't ask. Maybe we'll slip through like that."

"No, we must prepare for questioning."

Reasonable.

"The truth," Arzis leaned toward her. "We won't make up anything decent now."

Mauna didn't argue. He liked that. Mauna generally didn't argue, didn't clarify, didn't try to seek out and find another thousand reasons why his decision wasn't right; and what was right, she—like any lioness—wouldn't know, of course. No, nothing like that. She only attentively looked around, and this Arzis didn't like very much, because she did it with attention not inherent to simple lionesses. If you linger on such a look, you'll quickly understand that something's wrong with her, and that she's not like lionesses of the world are usually supposed to be.

"Gotta get out of Shadowrock, no choice," he leaned even closer to her, but not looking. "And the way things are, better to our side."

But Toya also leaned toward them. More precisely, toward Mauna, she's equal to her in height; it seems the Messenger is even slightly shorter. And they're both up to Arzis's shoulder, certainly no higher, even with ears, and even standing on tipclaws wouldn't help them. She whispered something in Mauna's ear; she nodded in agreement. Toya gestured for Arzis to bend down.

"Arzis, we traveled here," she whispered excitedly.

"Here? You and uncle, right?"

"With them, yes. Through over there, through these... warriors," she pointed to the border guards, "to Helsia. Here. From Empire to Helsia, yes. That's what they said."

"What, you know Helsian too?"

"Helsian is similar to mine-mine. Can understand many words," for some reason Toya decided to justify herself, as if knowing a language was guilt.

Arzis, adjusting his maneguard, drew Mauna into their closeness too, and now all three looked like conspiring cubs.

"Toya says these Helsians or Khalsids, or whoever the fuck they are, came from the Empire side. By the way," he asked Toya, "were these exactly the ones who captured you? Those same ones who entered the tavern?"

He needed to find everything out from Toya, Arzis understood. At least the main things. No patience to wait, and not much point either.

"Them. Yes. Them. Cruel. Torturers. I saw everything. The one who led me killed maassi Atrissa, he dragged her from somewhere by the river, all wet-wet... She spat at him. I saw everything," Toya thought, trying to discard many (un)necessary details, and there were some. "We came from there," she pointed toward the Empire side. "And entered here, into Rock-that-gives-shade, that's what they called this place, as I understood."

"Shadowrock," Mauna corrected. "So they killed my Family," she turned, looking west, toward Shadowrock, from where they'd come and from where they were leaving.

Arzis thought. There was much to think about. He gestured for Mauna not to glance around, but she just kept doing it. He turned her around himself, harshly.

"I don't get it. Why from the Empire side? How so? If they're Helsian religious freaks, how do they calmly pass the border?"

Mauna told Toya to step back.

"You heard that? They killed Atrissa," she said angrily.

"We'll ask everything later. Everything later."

"I knew it. It is them, for sure. If everything's unclear, then it's them. Helsian rebels are just their tool."

"Who's 'them'? Service?"

"Yes. Everything here is so unclean."

"That's putting it simply. We're in deep shit, Mauna. So..."

But Toya returned, squeezed in with them:

"My tormentors live here. They live in this Rockshadow, in this... this Shadowrock. I heard. They're bandits, Arzis. They kill. Torturers and they sell lionkind."

"Got it. We're still going to our folks," he told all three of them. "No choice. We'll see."

They pondered.

"Think these local... border manes, are they involved?" Arzis asked.

"They let through my Family's killers," Mauna answered with some simplest obviousness.

They thought again.

"Unconsciously. Or consciously. They let them through. Almost all my Family... almost all," she spread her hands helplessly, and Arzis understood how serious this was for her. "I don't know, Arzis. I know nothing," she looked at him with despair.

Arzis thought about if they should get away from here and somehow cross the border discreetly, but the queue was already pressing and the border guards could already see them.

Vaal, Tiamat, Naheim

The one whom various lions had given the fitting nickname 'Slim' looked at this trio and tugged his mane on the right side. He'd never had such a thing, and didn't know what to think about it.

Border post, table, two chairs. One occupied by him. The second, opposite—the one calling herself Vaalu-Mauna, a Messenger (so she introduced herself, and so it was recorded). She sits proudly, even with superiority, without the usual constraint he sees in lionesses who enter all kinds of official-military-harsh buildings. Beside her stands the one calling himself Arzis (so he introduced himself, and so it was recorded), without his spear. The spear and sword, even quite politely, were asked to be left at the post entrance, not by Slim himself, but by his subordinates. Next to Arzis stands the one calling herself Toamliaana, a dhaar of Mramri breed (so she introduced herself, but Vaalu-Mauna simultaneously introduced her as 'Toya,' and so it was recorded—'Toya'). Toamliaana, also known as Toya, stands slightly behind Arzis and directly behind Mauna, and her hands are hidden behind her back (ashamed of the chains). She stands straight, as if in formation.

Everything further is the fruit of intuition rather than reasoning: Toya irritates Slim and sows the most vague doubts in him, especially since hidden chains and collar were discovered on her; about Vaalu-Mauna he doesn't even know what to think, she doesn't allow treating this matter simply; Arzis—with him everything's simple, he has rogue stamped on his snout, such go straight behind bars pending clarification; he immediately decided the trio warranted caution and expected to cause trouble, these three turned out to be hail on his head, a lump of problems that couldn't just be taken and thrown in the trash, pushed off till tomorrow, or dumped on neighbors.

He trusted intuition, which is why he'd lived five decades, which is a lot.

They hadn't even exchanged a single word yet. Subordinates had only confusedly presented these three to Slim, and departed with relief—the commander had taken on the complex and incomprehensible matter. All he knew about them consisted of a mosaic of words, among which 'attack,' 'Messenger,' 'urgent' bristled threateningly, and on a piece of paper were recorded three names: Arzis, Vaalu-Mauna, Toya.

"With whom do I have the honor?" he began politely.

The one sitting before him had started to speak, then thought something and looked at her lion (or what is he to her? who is this Arzis anyway?). He looked at her, from top to bottom. The lioness sharply returned her gaze to Slim and, staring intently, began to speak:

"Vaal-Mauna, of House Nakht-Serai, Ashai of Messaging, daughter of Dagaz, old-blood of Andaria. At the request of my brilliant sisters and by the Empire's call, I departed for the Thirteenth Legion from Fort Shatt. I was accompanied by my bodyguards, my servants and assistants, and the Chamber Guard. Yesterday at midday, on the road between Shatt and the Helsian city," frowning, she made a strange gesture: as if stroking an invisible cat in her arms, "Yver-Savigny, we were attacked by unknowns; presumably—Khalsids. I and one of my bodyguards," she nodded at Arzis, "managed to escape. The rest, apparently, perished; I don't know their fate. During the night, I and my bodyguard made our way to Shadowrock, down the river. Here, in Shadowrock, we found one of my servants, the dhaar Toya. We had to resort to violence to take her away from unknown Helsians, who are most likely involved in the attack on my cortege. They put a slave collar and chains on her, which need to be removed quickly."

"Quickly?" the border guard seized on this.

"Exactly."

She silently showed him the insignia, showed the ring. The border guard looked attentively at everything.

"And the Chamber Guard was protecting... em... the Fiery one?"

"Yes," Mauna nodded.

"How many swords of Chamber?"

"One hundred twenty swords. But all the Guard fled just before the attackers appeared, or at the sight of attackers. Only my bodyguards fought for me, of whom there were—unfortunately—seven. The other sixteen had previously fallen ill at Fort Shatt."

Slim wrote down these two numbers: '7' and '16'

"Why did the Guard flee?"

"I also greatly wish knowing this," she shifted brow, ear while staring intently.

"This is... very... sad story," the commander scratched his scruff, extremely carefully choosing words.

"I understand doubt and even forgive irony. I need only three things: for the lion to announce to absolutely everyone that I'm here: Legate, Magistrate, Chamber of Ashai-Keetrah Affairs," Mauna counted on her fingers, "safe stay until help reaches me; meeting with any local Ashai-Keetrah, and even better—with several."

"One can probably, as a Messenger... contact other Messengers, and inform about one's, so to speak... difficult situation."

"For this I need excellent sleeping conditions, which, alas, I was deprived of this night. Because I was trying to survive."

Arzis vigorously rubbed his nose, then his whole muzzle.

"Hmm," Slim thought, looking at Mauna and not fearing her very attentive gaze. He stared, even daydreamed. An episode from cubhood came to mind, so inappropriately.

Well, okay, duties must be done.

"So. I'll order the blacksmith to remove the collar with shackles," he pointed at Toya. "Food and drink will be provided to you. Magistrate, Chamber will now be notified. Also I'll try to bring you local Ashai, for..." he thought, forgetting what this sisterhood thing is properly called, "...for... identification. Given the special importance of the matter..." he tapped his stylus on his forehead, "...I need some time to determine all circumstances and further actions. The Excellent one must wait here some time, under our protection."

"Perfect," Mauna nodded, "thank you very much. By Suung glory."

"Glory forever," the commander departed, slamming the door.

As soon as he left, Arzis began pacing around the grim room of this post.

"He's balanced, cautious. Not a fool. Everything's good," Mauna said, looking ahead. "We're in the hands of Imperial authority."

"Imperial authority. Yeah," Arzis agreed, looking out the window: this way and that, up, down, to the sides, even leaning against the wall. He looked under the table. Even climbed on the table, very quietly, and felt the wooden ceiling, the beam on it.

"Calm down, don't act suspicious."

"Yep," Arzis agreed, continuing to search around.

Chains jingling, Toya walked around a bit. She was terribly, incredibly patient, she very much wanted to go to one place, but had to endure, because such affairs were all around, and Ahey orders Mramri females to endure everything...

The commander didn't invent anything and sent for the local Ashai, while he personally headed to the Chamber. Here, in Shadowrock, on the Suung side, there was even a Chamber of Ashai-Keetrah Affairs and Defense of Faith, represented by a single lion—complete sinecure: Ashai-Keetrah have little business here as such, and the Ashai themselves—only one. Alright, here's the Magistrate. Lively here, some officials in serious armor. He looked closer—well, seems like Chamber Guard; he rejoiced—just what's needed! Maybe even, in time, the very same one that Vaalu-Mauna told about?

"We serve the Empire. Who's your commander?"

They looked at him kind of carefully. Without contempt, but assessing.

"Suung-millis Kar," they answered, seemingly reluctantly, "in the Magistrate."

He went in, found him. Try not finding him. His armor costs more than his house with wife and all goods included (he knows that an obedient Suung lioness costs quite a lot on the black Helsian market).

"We serve the Empire, Suung-millis Kar. Suung-prim-trig Setiru, commander of Imperial border post Shadowrock."

"To Suung glory. Suung-millis Kar, Chamber," he adjusted his gloves. "How may I serve?"

"A lioness was detained at the border, calling herself a Messenger, Vaalu-Mauna, with bodyguard and servant. She claims yesterday her

cortege was attacked, and she escaped by flight. During questioning she reported doubtful details, her story is incredible. But at the same time, she has insignia and sisterhood ring, and she really looks very much like Ashai-Keetrah. She is cooperative, answers questions," he reported and fell silent.

The gloves stopped being adjusted, then were removed.

"She's under guard?"

"Yes, she's at our post."

Suung-millis Kar, who is, in another reality—Earl Kairis-Tarraz, Hand of Vaal Guard (Emperor's personal Guard, also known as the Silent Ones), looked at the life-bitten border guard, then at the rain barrel.

"Setiru waits here."

He went. Little corridors of this backwater Magistrate. Second floor, portico, creaky wooden floor. His deputy and assistant, blood-brother, berates tail and mane some unfortunate Magistrate servant for unwatered horses, and further down the list. Deputy is taken aside. No. To the street.

"Target is alive."

The Silent Ones aren't supposed to show emotions, but surprise showed anyway.

"They deceived us."

Surprise vanished, replaced by vicious mockery.

"There's sirna, stamp, amulet, mirror," the deputy still offered the weakest argument.

"Everything's there. But no head. Should have been the head."

"Must fulfill the Will," obviousness from the deputy.

"I hate when Service plans operations. Complexity is the mother of failure."

"Orders?"

No alternatives here:

"Brief: target is clever fraud and impostor, wanted Empire-wide. Prepare to depart to site—border post. We capture the target, personally conduct elimination in secure location."

Both chuckled. Everyone who loves clean hands gets something else dirty as well. Should have been like this from the start, more honest. But they didn't plan the operation. Both of them, with all their hearts, hated and didn't understand this Will. But neither of them would even think to hint at this. If the Will is to kill blood-brother in sleep—they'll do it. If the Will is to kill a thousand cubs—they'll do it.

Kar, also known as Kairiz-Tarraz, returned to the border guard, who hadn't moved a single step.

"Who knows about this?"

"I came to notify Magistrate and our Chamber representative. Also ordered informing local Ashai-Keetrah, her name..."

"Stand down. Cancel order about informing Ashai-Keetrah. Don't notify anyone. This lioness is a swindler and impostor, wanted throughout the Empire. We'll immediately go to the post and take her. Setiru departs to the post together with..." he said and rubbed his belly; the threatening

situation still demanded plan correction: "More precisely, Setiru immediately departs to the post alone. Chamber Guard will now arrive at the post, you'll hand her over to us. Until then: don't spook the lioness, don't arouse suspicion, to avoid complications."

The situation was indeed escalating to threatening. From bad local food, into which, in Helsian manner, they threw everything most fatty that could exist in the world of fatty, Earl Kairiz-Tarraz, Silent One of Vaal's Hand, was mercilessly having his stomach twisted. He'd already shit himself figuratively, and now there was risk of shitting himself literally.

He walked into the toilet, in the Magistrate's back yard, which it shared with local tax collectors, town watch administration and candle-writing shop (very profitable business in border Shadowrock). Task: do everything as quickly as possible, even with damage to aesthetics. Means: scribbled scraps of tax office draft papers, which someone here thoughtfully provided. Environment: flies. Unexpected: what other, damn it, unexpected thing, at such a crucial moment?

And still, operations always carry unexpected turns. Kar (Kairiz) didn't curse, because no one has such a strict vow: neither Ashai-Keetrah, nor even Messengers, nor even Truth-Seers. The Silent Ones are forbidden to curse. Why? Complex metaphysics, there are several treatises, we refer interested parties to them⁸⁴. Here's the thing: in his sacred service, he had to transform into: ordinary Legate drengir (seemingly simple, but there are nuances); natural philosophy scholar of Mistfaln University (simple); criminal element (most difficult); and Chamber Guard drengir of Ashai-Keetrah Affairs and Defense of the Faith. Until now it seemed simple too, except one thing: he couldn't get used to a piece of equipment that Chamber guards call tache, which hangs and dangles on the belt, an embroidered badge with a small pocket, even a couple of imperials would fit in it. On it is embroidered in the high script, the Triad: 'Tiamat, Vaal, Naheim.' It's tied with two-three straps. Good? No, bad. His straps turned out somehow defective, and this tache held badly for him. Should exchange with some ordinary blood-brother, but Kairiz didn't want to do so—to shift his difficulties onto a subordinate.

So, Tiamat, together with Vaal and Naheim, fell into shit, when completing maneuvers. By duty of service, he had to dive there, get splattered, and other necessary actions...

...Toya already clawed walls; removing collar with shackles disturbed her, intensifying suffering further (no blacksmith needed—simply cut with pliers). She pressed tail tight as possible. Great shame would befall her soon. But it wasn't about her, she understood: Ashai-Keetrah had just arrived, and she entered into conversation with the Mistress and *Arzissss*.

⁸⁴ Indeed. One of them: 'Of Silence, Speech, and the Corruption of the Tongue.' —Z.

Senior sister^{85,86} Vaalu-Liara-Mirante, in the fairly distant past—Ainansgard disciplara, Amastilaari pride (Mastian, simply put), sat opposite Vaalu-Mauna. And practically immediately understood everything, looking at the Messenger. This is fire-clear—gaze, movements, feeling; dreamer. For purest formality she only took the first step, looked at Mauna's ring, and she at hers.

"Recognition Ceremony, sister?" Mauna asked.

"Recognition isn't needed by those who understand things, sister."

"Aamsuna requires no words."

"Understanding of gaze, understanding of blood, understanding of spirit."

"Understanding is water: cannot be caught, only directed."⁸⁷

Liara spread her hands.

"I was just going, they run to meet me, lucky I came out..." she said, and didn't continue. She became truly worried: "A Messenger? Here? Mauna, what happened, my Vaal? How... how?"

"This is a tragic story. But the sisterhood will definitely find out what, how and why."

"Just so. Do you need something? How are they... treating you here?" Liara contemptuously tapped the table. "Should I..."

Toya grasped this proved impossible. Mramri lioness honor would soon be shamed, and Arzis—witnessing such!—would never again... touch her. There he sits, right on table, sideways. Ahey!

"Mistress, I beg forgiveness."

"What, Toya?" Mauna turned around.

"I need-need. I really need," the dhaar leaned against the wall. "I can't wait-wait anymore."

Suddenly the door opened decisively, and the border commander entered. Seeing the local Ashai, whom he knew well, he reduced his fervor, decisiveness corroded: the order about non-notification—unfulfilled. And in general, he'd had all sorts of dealings with her, with Liara, including one delicate matter.

"What are you doing, Setiru? Release this Ashai, immediately," Vaalu-Liara attacked with demand.

"Can't yet, we're investigating."

⁸⁵ *I don't understand how we got this far without explaining ranks in the Ashai-Keetrah order. So: after Acceptance, there's sister, senior sister, and High Mother. You get senior sister almost by default after your fortieth birthday. Can be earlier. Nothing fancy. —S.*

⁸⁶ Indeed, the term 'senior sister' has been mentioned previously. Yet a crucial clarification was omitted here: every Messenger, upon Acceptance, instantly assumes the rank of senior sister regardless of age. Thus, Decisive Vaalu-Mauna, despite her youth, holds senior sister rank by virtue of her Messenger consecration. This is why her sirna bears the inscription: 'S.s. Vaalu-Mauna, Ashai of Messaging, in Glory and Blood' —Z.

⁸⁷ *Impersonating an Ashai is no simple feat but not impossible. One sister told me: "We are all pretending to be Ashai." The Ceremony of Recognition exists to catch impostors—other Ashai or certain secular officials can conduct it. It's meant to distinguish the real from the fake. The real from the fake... Ah, I digress. It works, on multiple levels. Sententiae exchange in only surface level. —S.*

"What, this is a Messenger!" she pointed at Mauna with gesture.

"We're establishing everything, Reverend Va-Liara."

"I'll establish something here now! What's wrong with you?!"

"Sister, peace to affairs," Mauna calmly intervened. "Let the Empire draw the bow unhurriedly. So what did you want, Toya?" she turned again.

"She needs to go out," Arzis pointed at Toya, but he was only studying the border guard.

"Wait, wait, Setiru," Liara approached him, grabbed his shoulder, "where are you going? Come here. Come. Look."

"What?"

"Look," she pointed at Mauna.

He looked. Mauna also looked. Her features smoothed out, her mouth opened slightly, her eyes closed a little. She exhaled as the sick exhale, recovering from pain.

"Well?" he asked uncertainly.

"This is a Me-ssen-ger. This is Ashai-Keetrah," Liara showed the obvious. Then waved her hand—these stupid males, Vaal didn't give them anything.

"Are you sure?" he asked with real concern.

Vaalu-Liara snorted contemptuously, looking away. Crossed her arms.

"If I'd known you were like this, I wouldn't have..." she didn't finish. And even threatened him, unexpectedly: "Mind me, the sisterhood keeps memory."

"I also need to go out," Mauna suddenly declared. And looked at Arzis, her eyes squinted for a moment: "Arzis, and you need to too, right?"

"Of course," he nodded readily. "Can't hold it anymore."

"Go out, of course," said Vaalu-Liara.

"Reverend, they still need guards for now," Setiru scratched himself, caught in a vise.

"Well I'll go with them, la, guards?" Liara said mockingly. "Give us one more of yours, so everything's as regulations write. La?"

"Yes. Yes. Of course."

They go out. Went out. There, in the rack stands his spear; Arzis looks with regret. Take it, not take it? Don't take. Risk... And damn, where's the sword? They took it. There's the knemid knife. And also Mauna has...

She almost pressed against him:

"He wants to kill us. In him—death, through him—death. Arzis. He changed when he came. He's dangerous, Arzis. He's dangerous, he's all black!" she whispered with convinced, strangled fury. "We need to leave here, this is a bad place."

Understood. Lionesses have new demands. They'll climb on you and start jumping on paws: do, do, do. But, generally, he knows, female demands are such a thing: bad female—bad demands; good one—good ones, though often difficult, sometimes impossibly impossible.

"Listen to me, don't dare disobey," was all he said.

And meanwhile they headed south, to the river, to the shed (Arzis was surprised they built it right here, apparently so horses could drink easier). Here's a place for horses, but no horses. Accompanying them: Ashai-Keetrah Vaalu-Liara-Mirante (none present know that amarah⁸⁸ of disciplarium rated her as the best, prophesied an interesting metropolitan future, but she ended up settling here, in border Shadowrock; sisters sometimes pitied her, but Liara actually feels very good here) and a border youth, actually strong, well-fed. Armed with protazan, guard's favorite thing, plus short legate sword. Decked out in guard gear and all.

Had to attract possible suspicion, but no choice:

"Toya, come here! Do you have my pipe?"

"What-what, Arzis?" she approached, even with a jump.

He embraced her.

"See, Toi, and you were worried, everything ended well," he said, and now—order in her ear: "I'll be first. Mauna—second. You—third. Stand in front of the border guard. In front of him. Lift your skirt up to your muzzle. Sit and immediately start pissing. You're a stupid dhaar."

She was silent.

"Third. Stupid. Sit in front of him. Skirts up, to the chin. Piss. Don't let me down," and showed her his fist, meaning try not to do it. He asked loudly: "Found the pipe? Or what?"

"No-no, Arzis, I lost it," Toya answered sadly.

"Ah, tsa. Hey, fella, you smoke?"

"No," the youth refused indifferently.

Mauna had already managed to link arms with the Ashai. They were even whispering something.

"Alright, excuse me, I'm first," Arzis hurried toward the barn.

"What about ladies first? How brutal!" Liara seriously reproached.

"Let him go. Lions can't endure," Mauna noted, stopping.

"True, true."

"Yes, it's just habit. Went first, to check."

Arzis entered the barn. The youth stood near everyone, having stuck his protazan into the ground. He swept the hay on the ground with it, like a broom.

"Ah, I see. Bodyguard, right?" Liara nodded toward the barn.

"Yes," Mauna confirmed. "The only one who survived."

"Vaal, guide us to vengeance. It could only be Khalsids."

"All correct, sister. Only them."

"Here, Shadowrock is full of Helsian trash. Totally full, Mauna."

"And there are Khalsids?"

"You won't distinguish a Helsian bandit from a Khalsid. And here they are during day—who knows what; at nights—Khalsids. Same thing... And

⁸⁸ Amarah—senior sister, the presiding authority of a disciplarium, responsible for both its governance and the formation of disciplaras under her care. —Z.

ours here are completely in cahoots with them. All painted with one brush..."

Arzis examined the shed while relieving himself. Hay. Feed troughs, water troughs, manure and its drain. Rope wrapped around wooden partition—simply a gift. Shovel. No... Inexplicably a hoe. No... Rusty iron ball on chain—Arzis doesn't know what it is, but this thing proves perfect. But large! Also threshing flail. No, this one wears maneguard, won't work—flail's too light. Now he'd want proper war club.

Disappointed, he came out.

"Now mistress, please," he pointed to the barn.

An old grindstone lies around; the bastard, it's too heavy. Everything could go wrong. Arzis stretched, yawned.

"Once this wraps, I'm getting sauced," he voiced his plans.

No one found anything to answer, and Arzis walked back and forth, whistling cheerfully.

"Weather will be good."

Mistress emerged.

Come on, Toya, don't let me down, Arzis prayed inside. He didn't like the plan, he generally didn't like anything, but couldn't think of anything better.

Toya didn't let him down. Slowly she walked toward the barn, turned to everyone; she so feared for the honor of a Mramri lioness, but in life always happens what we fear, and in the worst form; very carefully she lifted her skirts (upper, lower), and Arzis managed to note she had dirty brown streaks on her legs; she sat, and the matter went abundantly.

"My Vaal," Liara commented.

"Toya, why this *anasyrma*⁸⁹, why didn't you go inside?" Mauna reproached.

The border guard said nothing, but it's not hard to predict what would happen to him—he stared at all this young dhaar exhibitionism. Then he got hit in the scruff (on the maneguard, with the grindstone).

At first Arzis wanted to do everything somehow less radically, trying to give it all a flair of decency, nobility and all that good stuff. After all, the Mistress is still nearby. Youth gets knocked out, Ashai somehow gets tied up, and they flee; this if everything goes perfectly. Yes, by the way, he looked around where and how they'd make tracks. Seemed fine: the border guard fell muzzle forward, but dared to stir, turning over, and that was it, Arzis stopped thinking: the stone came down on his muzzle a second time. The knemid knife came out, plunged into the throat several times; he grabbed the protazan that fell from his hand. Then the protazan was aimed at Liara, he even pressed it into her belly, at the belt.

"Dare to meow, bitch—I'll end you."

She was no slouch, even managed to draw her sirna. Arzis liked this: a smart one turned up; and smart ones' steps are easier to predict than stu-

⁸⁹ Ανάσυρμα. —Z.

pid ones'. She spread her hands, holding her weapon with two fingers. Moreover, she started looking not at him, clever one, but at Mauna and Toya, at the lionesses. Reasonable move, counting on female sisterhood (obviously, Ashai-Keetrah sisterhood no longer works here; at least, he would have instantly come to such conclusion in her place). Actually, lioness sisterhood works surprisingly well in some cases: they fight and spit at each other every Vaal day, but can sometimes unite against males so effectively it's frightening.

"Don't kill a mother," important word choice, instead of just 'don't kill,' "I have children, and orphans. Shadowrock orphans. Don't."

Vaalu-Liara wasn't even lying.

It all worked even on Mauna, she even approached the Ashai:

"Arzis, don't kill her..."

"Don't approach her. Go inside, quickly. Drop the shit. Drop the sirna."

Mauna obeyed. Liara also obeyed—dropped it.

Arzis dragged the border guard into the barn, threw him in the corner, into the hay. Mauna went after him on cotton paws. Toya remained outside, not even having stood up yet.

"Stand by the pole."

Liara stood. He gathered ropes, all kinds, began tying her up; Liara didn't resist. He tied her legs, waist, shoulders, arms, shoved cord into her teeth, tied everything. Mauna stood leaning against another post, covering her muzzle with her palms. Arzis searched Liara, looking for anything useful.

Toya tried to come in too.

"Stand at the entrance, eyes up."

He took some money. Took flint, excellent. Something in an iron jar.

"What's this?"

"Kili saf."

"What?" he put his ear to her.

"Kili saffe."

"Kiri salve," Mauna helped.

He hid that too. Started removing the sirna sheath.

"Arzis, leave her the sirna," Mauna demanded, interfering with her hands.

"Mauna, fuck, don't mess up."

"Leave her the sirna, they give it at Coming-of-Age!"

He looked at the Mistress.

"Fuck it."

He climbed into Liara's collar, bosom, rummaged there. Some envelope; crumpling it, carelessly shoved it back. What else... A bunch of pieces of cotton, for some reason in fabric.

"Leave that," Mauna demanded again. "My Vaal, sister, forgive, how complicated everything that's happening..."

He didn't leave it, took that too.

He went to the border guard. Convulsive breathing, everything very ugly. He pulled off his guard cloak, put it on himself. Pulled off the sword, hooked it on, even unhurriedly. Cards. Tobacco, though he said he didn't smoke...

Mauna looked at Liara, she—at her, then at Arzis, who was stripping the still so young border guard, alternately.

"Forgive me, sister," Mauna said such foolish words, touching the hand, shoulder of the Ashai-Keetrah. She looked at this touch, then—at her again. Aha. Yes. Forgave. Didn't even try to say anything; a lioness of Vaal can say everything with a look. "Someday I'll come to you and explain everything."

Liara shook her head as much as she could.

"You won't chome," she cursed.

Having put on the border guard's maneguard and fitted his bag to himself (didn't look what was in it), Arzis said:

"That's it, we're leaving."

He went outside, took Toya by the hand, and they all walked very quickly where Arzis directed—along the river; the terrain conveniently shielded them from the post. From a distance he quite resembles a city watch or border guard.

"Arzis, there I saw on the road those shiny ones. They rode with horses. Far away, there-there," Toya reported.

"What shiny ones?" he didn't look where she pointed.

"Shiny guard. They were with us yesterday."

"Are you sure it's them?"

"Very similar, I see far, I see good-good."

Few know that Mramri are not only sharp-sighted, but see in darkness better than other lionkind.

"Arzis, did that lion die?" Toya asked.

Without answering, he led them across the meadow, to intercept the road. Very timely. If only he could make it... Won't make it with them.

"Catch up," and he ran.

A lone single-horse cart, two-wheeled, rode briskly, on it—a gray-haired old lion. Arzis ran to intercept, remembered the East and that idiotic raid on the shamhats, from which he barely escaped (he and the small, nimble Hustrian nicknamed Nipple, who had a figure like a young lioness, the rest died; Nipple, actually, was quite something).

He blocked the path, holding the protazan in front of him with both hands, just like guards disperse crowds.

"Stop! Halt! By Imperial order!"

Or 'In the name of Empire'? Arzis thought.

"What's this?" the old lion shouted discontentedly. "I'm from our side, crossed the border today..."

Arzis dragged him from the cart, the horse snorted. He shoved him into the roadside ditch.

"Get in!" he told his lionesses, they got in. He threw off the box from behind, unbuckling it, some other simple goods, a pot rolled down the road. Toya and Mauna climbed in front.

"Stand in back, hold tight!" he told Toya.

The old lion groaned in the ditch, wet, trying to stand. And he hadn't dropped the whip.

"Ho!" Arzis struck the horse with the protazan, barely reaching its rump; jerked the reins. Things got going, the horse took a trot. He looked back at what was behind. Seemed fine, except for the cursing Listigan.

Vaal, Await in Naheim Your Brave Daughter

Arzis sensed with his tail that they wanted to step on it. Therefore in the nearest forest he turned off on a logging road, led the horse into the woods, not caring to get out later. He tied it to a tree.

"Where does this road lead?" Mauna asked, as if lions always know everything.

"From the border. Into the Empire. How should I know."

And he led them into the forest. And in time. Noise was heard; Arzis didn't think:

"Lie down."

And along the road—even visible through trees—the shiny ones passed at gallop, ten heads, maybe twenty.

"Them-them, them," Toya wailed, certain. "*Ahey, vergib mir.*"

They passed on, leaving dust.

"Arzis, are they bad?" she asked.

"Everyone's bad, Toya, only we are good. Let's go, good ones, let's go."

"The world wants to kill me!" Mauna concluded from everything; apparently decided now was the right time to start complaining.

"Quiet! Later. Hush."

They walked through sparse woods, Arzis kept the road in sight. Then—a small field. Quiet. Aqueduct, they went under a support, sheltered near it.

"Can't light a fire. Won't be good idea."

"My Vaal, what's happening? Arzis, what's with these border guards? What does the Guard want to do?"

He waved her off.

A stream under the aqueduct, because it drips from it, from the aqueduct, and they sat down to drink.

"Clever one, Toya. Your star shines bright," he praised her. "Did everything, everything as I said."

"Ahey protects us, Arzis," she showed the symbol of Ahey, which she pulled from behind her dress, timidly and simultaneously—with unbending certainty in the truth of her words. Detail: it didn't hang around her neck, she had hidden it somewhere on herself. In the darkness under the aqueduct, in the twilight, Mauna glimpsed that along with Ahey's symbol on the cord, a ring glinted dully.

"Strange they didn't take all this from you," Arzis quickly extended his hand and hid her amulet with ring behind her collar. "Keep it safe," he pressed on her, looked into her eyes.

"I saved-saved it, Arzis. I hid it."

He showed her a gesture of approval and touched Mauna's paw, simply to make her feel better. But she continued worrying about everything:

"He, this border guard, probably found out that Toya had passed through the border. He found out. This troubled him. Something's connected to this. Something's not right here. Everything's not right here. Vaal!"

"Uh-huh. I think he even knew who Toya passed through the border with."

"And the Chamber Guard is here!" Mauna grabbed her ears. "How can I serve the Empire if it betrays me? The Guard flees. The border guard decided to... kill me... sell me... hand me over? And this Liara... this Ashai! Maybe she's also involved here?" Mauna began suspecting everything and everyone.

"Probably hand you over to those very Helsians who wanted to kill you. Or to the Guard."

"To those very ones who wanted to kill me. And who captured Toya! He found out about Toya, saw her, but he also understood that I'm really a Messenger, truly, secretly, honestly, genuinely! Liara told him so! Bastard! And he wanted to hand me back! Border guards, together with Helsian scum! Guard! Chamber! Everyone wants my death! Arzis, tell me what's happening?!" well, how could it be without emotions, even from Mauna.

"We, mistress," Arzis grunted, waving his tail (falls on Mauna's paw), "should have been more careful with that sweet spy of your friend. The Service got offended."

"The Emperor will execute them all, I swear by blood," Mauna promised to the aqueduct support.

"Yeah-yeah. He'll execute, of course, everything will be. Only tomorrow. We'll sleep," he showed the lionesses where to sleep with him. "Need to sleep pressed together, don't be shy. Toya, you're on the left. Mauna, you're on the right," he decided to surround himself with lionesses, since such was the situation. "Won't make fire, draws eyes."

"No. I'll be middle," Mauna protested. "Warmer that way. Maybe I'll manage Messaging. Almost no chance, but perhaps."

"Mauna, don't Message, drop this business, maybe your sisters want to whack you too."

"Arzis, just stop," she pointed at him.

"We need to warm the Mistress, Arzis," Toya asked.

"We'll warm her."

They lay down somehow, covered themselves with everything they had. They lay there, looked at the aqueduct above; water gurgled very oddly in it, in waves—now gurgling, now not. Toya embraced Mauna, while Arzis just lay there, hands behind his head.

"Thank you for saving us," Mauna said, rubbing her nose against the edge of the cloak with which she and Toya covered themselves.

"Forever yours, forever your debtor, Arzis. I serve eternally, Mistress. Thank you. Eternally faithful servant."

"Vaal, Toya, where did you learn to speak so loftily?" Mauna turned her head slightly toward her.

"It's from one of our prayers, may the Mistress forgive my answer."

"What's to forgive, truly?" Mauna began biting the edge of the cloak.

"Can't-can't talk much about our faith, only when Suungs ask. Not good, against Rules," Toya kept trying to cover the Mistress better, and it didn't work because she kept gnawing the dirty cloak like a cub.

"Just talk, what's the matter... I was asking," Mauna looked at what she'd gnawed, and the wet traces from it.

"Yes, Mistress..."

Arzis turned sideways, away from them, staring at forest. Felt for weapons, umpteenth time. Thought: now Chamber guards will emerge from forest and tie them up.

"Toya, what is prayer?" Mauna licked her lips, as if she'd just eaten; she was trying to place her head more comfortably on the bag.

"It's when you talk to Ahey. You can do it by rote. You can do it yourself too. Only sincerely; just like that, for fun—you can't," Toya looks at the Mistress, then just nowhere.

"Does he answer?" Mauna asked practically.

"Yes. But not like... not in words. But something happens. Or you calm down. You feel that He's present."

Mauna sniffled, rubbed her nose.

"Can you message something to another Mramri through him? Tell him we're in trouble here. Let Ahey pass this to other Mramri, and they'll tell the Suungs. Only true Suungs, not all this Guard-Chamber scum."

Toya puzzled over how to ask Ahey.

"Do you have Mramri who can communicate with him, really truly communicate, in dialogue, not just roar into an unanswering abyss?"

"I already told Him that the Mistress is in trouble, and Arzis, and I. Yes, He sees anyway."

"So what, will he message to other Mramri?" Mauna pressed pragmatically.

"I don't know. Probably not, Mistress. Forgive me. But something will be done. Something will be," Toya said uncertainly.

"Something will be... That's for sure... So sorry. In any case I won't be able to contact any sister at night. Nothing will work. All metanoia is shaken up. With such you won't dreamwalk. I, like Ahey, can do nothing and am useless as a log..."

"I serve eternally, Mistress. Eternally... Sacredly..." Toya hid near Mauna.

"Eternally..." the Mistress repeated.

Arzis was already snoring.

The cool, gray morning brought them nothing outstanding, as did the heavy, wet-nosed and hungry afternoon. Arzis led them sometimes along the forest edge, sometimes by the stream, sometimes on the road, led them on local paths (once they had to turn back). Arzis—stocky, dense, stubborn, with weapons, accustomed to hardship, dirty, dark and dangerous. It was hard for Mauna, she tried, and this trying came with difficulty. Easiest, it seems, for Toya: everything somehow didn't matter to her,

light, agile, enduring; probably also accustomed to hardship, not one bad word about their fate and situation, silent following.

It would be unnecessary to retell how Arzis decided to 'stop someone and strip'em,' how Mauna inquired what this meant and how it would happen and whether there was another way out, how Toya cautiously wondered if everything could be done 'somehow differently,' and how they waited in ambush by the road, taught by Arzis to be silent, help him and do everything he said. They let some stagecoach pass. Three lions on horses. One rider on a magnificent firran, Arzis spat after him in sign of admiration. A trade caravan, an impossible target for them. Arzis was angry—everything was wrong, and time pressed—soon noon, then evening again, hunger was insufferable, and hunting in their situation he declared senseless, even harmful. Toya suggested she could catch fish, she knew how; Arzis said this was only if nothing worked out, but it was unlikely to succeed today. He cursed a lot, and Toya sometimes gave him roots that 'can be gnawed if need-need' and from which 'there will be stomach, must endure'; these roots she skillfully dug out under a bush, then even more skillfully whittled with Arzis's knife. Arzis didn't like the root, but he ate some; Mauna also tried a piece, and she didn't like it at all.

Toya generally, it turned out, could do a bunch of various small but very necessary practicalities.

Road, woods, another logging fork, they wait.

"Alright... We got marks. Play dirty, get dirty. Let's move."

"Arzis, don't kill them. Don't you dare," Mauna reminded once more. "Enough, I ask you."

"Depends how it goes," he answered, though earlier he seemed to promise that 'everything will be okay.' "When I start, hold the lioness, frighten with knife. If anything, pile on. Don't let mess happen."

Toya sighed nervously, Mauna blinked slowly.

"Toya, let's go," Mauna said.

Two lionesses went out on the road, and the acting began.

"Help, good Suungs!" Mauna was acting much better than in the tavern.

"What happened?" a considerable wagon stopped, but with one horse.

"A snake bit our lion! We... there..." Mauna clutched her head.

"Snake! La! Snake. Oh-my. How can one help here?" despite the question, the lioness was already climbing down.

"Need to transport him, at least... at least somewhere. We can't carry him."

"Let's go, have a look. I'll look."

After considering, lion also dismounted, and began looking for where to tie the horse. Not really anywhere immediately, so he suggested Toya hold it:

"Will you hold it?"

Toya, instead of answering, simply ran away after Mauna, like a wild thing. He scratched his head, abandoned the wagon, and walked with a rolling gait.

"Where are you from?" meanwhile asked the lioness, in travel dress of calm gray-brown color, without excess but solid and well-sewn. The clothing revealed her to be a lioness from quite a prosperous family.

"Andaria," Mauna answered honestly, leading the stranger to Arzis.

"What? Andaria? Good Vaal, all the way from Andaria! What are you doing here?"

"Yes, we stepped away, over there... well, for necessity, and here. Snake," Mauna wove an implausible story.

"Need to go to Shadowrock, there are good healers there, there's one wise lioness there, they treat snake bites."

"Maybe there's an Ashai-Keetrah there?" Mauna even asked.

"There is, one. Eh, how so, snakes have bred this year... Where was he bitten?" the lioness crouched near Arzis, tried to look at his pupils.

The lion also approached, observing all this disgrace skeptically.

"Ahhh..." Arzis groaned, closing his eyes. "That's it, I'm done," he even smiled weakly. "I have no life left... Brother..." he extended his hand, very weakly and very genuinely. "Come here... There'll be a request, I'm dying..."

"What? What's he saying?" the lion asked the lioness.

"La... He says, a request to you," she put her palm on Arzis's side.

"Yes? Who are you?" he also crouched down.

Instead of answering, Arzis extended his hand, pointing somewhere to the sky. The pair, lion and lioness—together turned their heads, without agreement, pricked up their ears.

Cord around the lion's neck, his brief strangled roar: Arzis began strangling, and also locked him around with legs. Mauna remembered: once, long ago, when her moondays hadn't even begun and she was still a acolyte-naysi with her mentor (now tears will come, mentor Vanaram-saya, mentor Vanaramsaya!), she'd seen how lions strangle each other in the Circle, exactly like this. Only they strangled with hands, but here Arzis strangles with cord, and this is probably unfair... Again everything's unfair...

"Hold the bitch!" Arzis ordered his lionesses.

Mauna just froze, staring at all this; she even noticed how Arzis whispered something under his breath; and then even understood that he was counting: "...three-four-five..."

The stranger, who had been smiled upon by misfortune today, also froze.

But Toya rushed to hold her; she, certainly a wife, in turn rushed to help her husband and tried to tear him from Arzis's embrace—a completely futile enterprise. So he got it even worse. Toya pushed the lioness, she held firm, and moreover—pushed Toya back, much stronger and with far greater fury, and the Mramri flew back well. Then the furious wife figured it out, and Mauna saw that she was frantically trying to pull something from her small belt pouch.

Mauna didn't know what to do: no skill in fighting and brawling with her own kind—none whatsoever. She can pierce with an arrow, yes. But

the rest? She didn't understand how it was: someone nearby trying to do something to your body: throw, strike, cut down. So she simply grabbed her arm. And that's all. But the lioness had already gotten something out—a small knife or something like an awl, couldn't tell what; with this she decided to finish Mauna, and seriously—swung either at the Messenger's head or neck; but futilely—three is more than two, after all, and Toya joined this latest tragedy. Joined much more thoroughly and irrevocably: she smashed the lioness in the muzzle with a stone, and blood sprayed and hit Mauna in the eye (warm). It was harsh, the lioness fell on her back, as in fainting, and roared with such sharp, real roar of pain.

Accurate and agile, Toya forgot nothing and stomped on her arm with her knemid, calling something in her Mramri language, very desperately. Whatever the lioness held in that hand, it fell onto the yellowish, soft grass, and this something Toya threw away like a hot coal.

Mauna touched her chin in surprise—blood there. The lioness had scratched her with her weapon. She'd never been cut, scratched by anything, no one ever, one couldn't even touch her just like that. This was so... strange. Not even painful. Didn't understand anything.

"Mistress! Hold her!" her servant-dhaar called out, just as desperately.

Right. Mauna simply took and sat on the lioness's right arm. Toya—on the left. So they held her, looking at the unfortunate one, she—in semi-consciousness. Toya had knocked out her left fang, broken her teeth, blood from nose, everything bloody.

"*Ahey, meine Schuld, meine Schuld...*" Toya said without shame. Then she looked at Mauna, she at her. They held gazes, longer, much longer than expected, than usual.

Arzis meanwhile had tied up the lion (the lion was coming to his senses, didn't rush to struggle), with Toya's belt-cord and other ropes he'd grabbed in Shadowrock, disarmed him, hands under paws, everything proper, seated him under a tree, and now unhurriedly, even lazily approached them.

He looked at everything.

"Well, you're wild for that."

They looked at him together. He didn't bother deciphering the mix of emotions in his lionesses' eyes, so simply waved his hand:

"Get up."

Now he sat on the captive, on her thighs; she didn't resist, understanding the futility of such an endeavor, only looked at him through a haze of hatred and pain. Arzis calmly tied her wrists with the leather belt for the sheath, taken from her own lion.

She declared:

"La, knew it was unclean here. Sensed it. Bastards," speaking while looking at Arzis. Then at them, at both: Toya and Mauna.

"Lady, my-my fault, lady-hamanu. Doing as... as I must," Toya restrained herself, now crying, ears pressed.

"Arzis, don't do bad things to her," was all Mauna said.

"Too late," Arzis spoke the truth.

He got up from her, scratched his mane. Waved his hands, meaning well what a mess, how to tie the paws, can't go running around looking for more cord. He changed his mind, untied her, then tied her wrists under her knees, same as the husband, and seated her beside the husband. The lioness didn't try to do anything. She understood.

"Where from and where to?" Arzis nodded, meaning 'speak, lioness'.

"From Shadowrock to Verin."

"Verin—that way?" Arzis clarified, waving east.

"That way."

Making sure everything was proper, Arzis went to the road:

"Alright. Splendid. Stay put, I'll grab the wheels."

The lioness watched them go, then bared her teeth and leaned back against the tree—apparently from pain. She looked at her lion; he sat wordlessly, already conscious, and stared unblinkingly at something dark and terrible a thousand lyens afar.

Mauna and Toya just stood there. Toya clenched her dress hem in her fist, one-two, one-two. Mauna noted she held her own palms in arattagastau.

"Vaal doesn't forgive such breaking of trust, deception in help!"

"Forgive us, good Suung," the Messenger crouched near her. "Our circumstances..."

She spat at Mauna, with blood. Having done this, the lioness waited expectantly, watching how Mauna wiped herself with that same Andarian handkerchief; then Toya, silently asking permission, helped her wipe, clean everything; it seemed the lioness was waiting for retribution. Toya then reached toward her, and the lioness squeezed her eyes shut—here it is, retribution. But no, Toya simply applied the cloth to her broken mouth, very gently; though what use: the trickles had long since gone down her neck, and the gesture had nothing practical, only symbolic.

"Who are you and what do you want?" she asked with closed eyes.

No answer followed. Toya looked at the Mistress, for her to answer such things. But Vaalu-Mauna only shook her head, spread her hands, and began crushing, torturing her fingers.

"I no longer know."

After such an answer, the lioness only sighed. It's bad when you're robbed. Doubly bad when you're robbed by crazy ones.

Arzis returned, having rolled wagon with horse, which proved restless, very restless. But he didn't bind it, giving Toya knife found in wagon; gave another to Mauna—now she should possess two knives; Mauna-bandit, everything as dreamed! Captive tensed, pressing closer to tree: knives proved alarming, but lionesses seemed relatively docile, while from this male one could expect anything—dangerous scum. She placed head on husband's shoulder—he revived for first time, observing her. Then kissed her ear.

"Don't kill him," the lioness asked Arzis.

"Why would I," Arzis answered very simply and matter-of-factly. "Are you a blacksmith?"

The lion didn't answer, but the lioness decided not to play silent games:

"Yes. Blacksmith. We have four cubs. I'm his wife."

"I see you're a blacksmith. Lucky break. Toyusha, come here, help," Arzis managed, methodically and orderly laying out this family's goods on the ground. "Come on, help here... Cheese, whole wheel! Let's wrap it up, excellent. Clothes... Hold the blanket. Listen, you're a master! Good spear tips you have. Oh!" he found more fabrics.

He took the found chemise, nightgown, tore it, and with a piece wrapped the lion's mouth so he wouldn't roar. He looked at the lioness, at her bloody mouth, scratched behind his ear—here you can't wrap a mouth without pain.

"It will hurt her. Don't do it," Mauna said.

"Somehow, uh, bandage her up," Arzis gave Mauna the remaining piece of chemise. "Don't roar, don't scream, you'll spoil everything," this he addressed to the lioness. "We'll let you go. Don't make noise, you'll be whole. The blacksmith is simply a master—but the horse is old as the world. Where is the Empire rolling to? We could use a better horse."

"Arzis, we need this?" Toya showed, setting a small chest on the ground.

"What's in there?" he asked.

Toya shrugged, and the spouses tensely remained silent.

"Money and shine in there," Arzis understood. "Fine, leave it. But take these knives. More knives is better."

"I took-took them."

Arzis went to continue managing such generous haul, rejoicing that the robbery turned out very successful, and now they'd have many useful things. Toya also simply and artlessly rummaged, without sentiment evaluating all the goods that came their way. Vaalu-Mauna watched her servant and Arzis, then crouched right beside the bound and captured pair. In her hands she crumpled that same white piece of chemise that was supposed to help the wounded lioness.

The lioness behaved somewhat strangely: whispered something under her breath, closed her eyes, and tried rubbing her bound hands. Mauna didn't look at her, didn't look in her eyes.

"Forgive me, good Suungs. Don't anger at them. I'm cause of everything. But I must return fulfilling my service. For this I require your possessions. Forgive me again."

The lion looked without emotion, more through her; the lioness stopped her odd activities, paid attention to Mauna, even frowned, measured Mauna with her gaze.

"Tell me your names, lineage, and where you're from. I have nothing to pay with now, but later I'll return everything a hundredfold."

"Are you Ashai?" the lioness didn't ask, even demanded; moved her shoulders to sit more comfortably—bound hands were going numb.

"I am a Messenger," Mauna looked into the lioness's eyes, then looked at her muzzle wound. She didn't show her insignia. Didn't show her ring.

Strange thing—the lioness seemed either familiar or something to her. But her memory for muzzles is rather poor, her mnemonics are only for text.

The spouses exchanged glances. The lion said something through the fabric, couldn't understand what. Long silence. The lioness thought, and suddenly, squinting, said:

"Ah, Messengers, emeralds of Suung spirit..."

"...emeralds of Suung spirit, greatest of the greatest, knowing the inaccessible and creating the boundless. You are the best among Vaal's lionesses, for you know no limit to the word, and the distances of the mortals don't concern you when you weave the discourse of Messengers..." Mauna carefully folded the white fabric on her knee, smoothed it, looked at no one, only down.

And now showed the insignia on her neck. And showed the ring.

"Will Vaal bless the day, are you really Ashai?" the lioness pricked up her ears and exhaled in surprise.

"Vaal-Mauna, daughter of House Nakht-Serai, Ashai of Messaging. The blacksmith's wife is familiar with the prosaic works of Boesius? Surprising," she smiled. "They're not as successful as his poetry, right?..."

"I am an Approached One⁹⁰. Stalla of Ainansgard, in past life."

"I wouldn't dare ask."

"Vaal commanded."

Mauna understood that the lioness had once also been Ashai-Kee-trah. Truly. The lioness understood that Mauna was a Messenger. Truly.

Some pot fell from the wagon, Arzis cursed, and also caught on something, and even more iron cookware clattered.

"Then my question won't seem strange: what does all this mean?"

"Khalsids attacked my cortege. They killed everyone except my dhaar servant and my... best bodyguard," Mauna cut the lioness's bonds with the knife (she willingly helped, turned to make it easier). "Long story, but it seems the Secret Service and Chamber are still hunting me, because in Shadowrock they tried to kill us. So I'm forced to hide, awaiting help from the sisterhood. I'm in danger, and I need things to survive. Supplies. Everything to..." she shrugged, didn't finish.

She placed the knife beside, in front of them.

"Incredible," was all the lioness said. She, carefully watching Mauna, who continued unfolding-folding the white fabric, cautiously took the knife and without delay began freeing her lion.

"I wasn't willing to risk trusting. My fault."

"What now?" the lioness asked. "La, how are you, Haidi?"

"Had it worse," the lion answered very quietly.

"First, let's be acquainted, good Suungs. Vaalu-Mauna, Messenger," Ashai gesture from her, gesture of introduction.

⁹⁰ *Approached Ones—those who left the sisterhood before Acceptance. Usually one of two reasons: failed the ignimara at Coming of Age, or marriage. —S.*

But the lion had a more practical view of the 'what now?' question. Having freed himself, first thing he quickly flexed his hands that had gone numb. He answered his wife's question very quietly. And then punched Mauna in the ear with his fist (his hand wasn't quite recovered yet, he aimed for the jaw and missed).

"Let's be."

In the Legate such a voice is called 'half-roar': half speaking, half roaring. 'Lehrrr berrr.' If the ear is accustomed, you'll understand all words without difficulty.

"Vaal, Haidi! Haidarr! Stop! She's real..." the lioness hissed, getting up behind him, but fell: unluckily sat her leg numb. "Don't! This is sister!"

'Behind him,' because Haidarr skillfully, softly, crouching ran toward the wagon, his tail streaming low. He didn't waste more precious time on Mauna: she sat on her knees as she was, and then reliably fell on her right side.

Now he needed to deal with the more important lion.

The disposition proved thus: the more important lion, Arzis, turned out not to be where needed (as always). He'd moved away both from the captives with Mauna and from the wagon with the restless, old dappled horse, for the usual need, and looked at the yellow foliage and gray sky, chuckling at something. Toya was bustling on the wagon, knowing nothing of what happened to the Mistress, hearing nothing and suspecting nothing, she sat with her tail to all this; but by some miracle she wasn't caught off guard by the predatory approach.

"Arzis! Arzis! Arzis!"

She instantly vanished from the wagon, and moreover—she grabbed the spear from it; moreover, she didn't freeze, didn't faint, didn't try to reason with anyone, but did the only right thing—ran to Arzis.

"What?!" Arzis's good mood instantly evaporated, pants getting wet because he had to hurry greatly.

"Want to kill-kill!" Toya correctly determined everything, running behind him.

And here it turned out that instead of a spear in her hands she had simply a shaft without any tip, causing Toya to snort in surprised despair.

"What's with Mauna?"

Toya didn't know, but no time to find out: the blacksmith was already near them, three jumps away. Deceptive maneuver from Arzis: pretended he was a risky fool and throws his spear. Jump to the side from the opponent, froze expectantly, in stance (good one, as Arzis noted). Arzis didn't see (and if he had seen, he would have been quite surprised) that Toya was flanking from the side, and snarling with bared teeth, such a natural one. Arzis didn't know that this snarl unsettled the opponent and influenced his decision to immediately rush at Arzis with a lunge; the opponent considered himself capable of winning this fight (he also knew something: blacksmith, past Legate experience, his father-drengir, his grandfather-drengir, his great-grandfather-drengir, and even minor criminal record behind him, youthful mistakes); the opponent suspected that

this lioness was quite determined, and was even trying to flank from the side, not hiding behind the lion (!), which boded ill. He had no time to notice how unskillfully, completely in female fashion Toya held the spear, more precisely, the shaft from it without any tip, and what fear was in her eyes.

"Toya, don't approach!" Arzis stopped her.

Opponent assessed Arzis stood well. Thus stand those holding spear not first time. Not second either.

"Get behind!" Arzis ordered Toya.

From the corner of his eye it was noticeable that another party was approaching the battlefield: the former captive, the blacksmith's lioness.

"Namarsi, glaive!" the lion roared to her.

"Yes!" the lioness responded with desperate determination. She'd decided something for herself. Seeing how far things had gone, she burned the hopes of pacifying everyone and settling everything, though such a thought had still smoldered a moment ago.

Glaive. Arzis really didn't like that word. So, he thought with lightning speed: Mauna was definitely killed (what else to do with her), meaning he and Toya remained as two; and opponents—two. Main opponent—with spear, without sword, without armor, but with strong wide belt, this must be considered. And the other opponent will now have a glaive. And glaive—weapon of females, and primarily—weapon of Ashai-Keetrah; pole weapon, long, such a good cleaver on a long stick, with it one can excellently chop to pieces such lionesses in dirty dresses as Toya; there are glaives longer than many spears. Simple lioness very rarely knows how to use glaive, but many Ashai, especially if from disciplarium—watch out. Even more so. If Ashai from disciplarium, then she's obligated to know how to use glaive.

It was bad that the lion told the lioness to take the glaive.

Arzis attempted intimidating, hastening events, testing opponent, entering his spearpoint zone (dangerous!). He reacted, parried—Arzis retreated.

"Vaal, all in blood!" the lioness indeed found a glaive in the wagon, and pulled it hard, but something pinned it down, and she couldn't fully extract it.

This pleased Arzis even less. Incredibly, this lioness seemed to be Ashai (or once was). "All in blood of victory!" simple lionesses don't just exclaim like that.

What was Toya doing? What could she do. She snarled, didn't approach, and didn't dare attack the lion with her stick. Getting behind him didn't work: the lion stood with his tail to the wagon, rear more or less covered. Then she, moving slowly sideways, stepped on an anthill and stumbled.

And then everything went fast. Without delay, sudden even for Arzis ready for anything, Toya swung the shaft like a huge mop and threw it at the lion. Pointlessly, without aim, no harm, he didn't even have to dodge much. But Toya wasn't trying to achieve anything outstanding with this,

she'd prepared something else: grabbing handfuls of earth with huge forest ants in her fists, she threw them in the lion's muzzle, making a desperate leap toward the opponent, and threw not once, but twice.

Arzis used this dirty gift in full. The opponent turned away, reached for his eyes, tried to respond to Arzis's thrust, but unsuccessfully (almost—Arzis got his left forearm slashed, despite the bracer), and the spear point that he himself had forged ten days ago plunged into his left side; Arzis managed to note that he wanted to cover himself with his left hand, as if there was a shield in it, only—cruel fate—no shield turned out to be there. Ancient wisdom: if it went in well, don't pull out, press further, and Arzis pressed the spear deeper, causing the roaring opponent to clumsily take a couple steps (with spear in his side under the heart and with Arzis mercilessly and angrily pressing), and collided with his lioness, who on the fourth attempt—too late—just pulled out the glaive; now the lion's weight pressed her with its edge against the wagon's side. Moreover, they both got it from Toya too: she clubbed both, indiscriminately, with that same shaft, and this skinny Mramri delivered such a blow that a crunch was heard.

Arzis's spear had no wings and the point wasn't for armor, a sharp leaf; it went through the opponent completely. The roar and yell from the lion, deafening, became wet—sure news of approaching death. Paw brace, strength of both hands, and Arzis pulled out the weapon; finished him off again, about five times. He didn't know how combat-capable the opponent's lioness was, who had fallen beside the wagon and whose leg was pinned by her lion's body, and silently pushed away Toya, who had come too close (getting in the way, dangerous for her!).

Despite the fall and everything else, the opponent didn't drop the glaive.

"Drop it, fool!" Arzis roared.

Instead the lioness made a very ambiguous, incomprehensible movement, simultaneously trying to stand: either she was trying to swing the glaive from the side, but with only one hand (impossible), or trying to defend herself, forgetting she had a weapon in her hand, or... Her muzzle expression was impossible to describe. Either one thing, or another, or a third; infinite sea of possibilities, as it always is in life. Only possibilities, forks and chances.

Arzis didn't try to decipher what all this meant, and his skill didn't give him that option. Skill knew one thing: opponents are finished off. He simply drove his spear right into the middle of her body, reliably; and then, stepping on her hand with his paw, took the glaive and threw it somewhere toward Toya. With a snarl he turned around in a circle, looking for more opponents: who else to fight, who else to drive it into, who else to spill blood?!

He turned around once more. That's it. Only Toya, breathing frequently and leaning her palm against the wagon, looking at the dying lioness. He was still standing on this lioness's hand. Arzis doesn't see what

Toya sees, because he doesn't look: the lioness holds her palm against the spear, so foreign in her body, and moans terribly, quietly.

Toya swallowed, put her palm to her mouth, looked at Arzis.

"Ah, Toyusha, good job!" he praised her furiously, raising his fist. And then punched the unfortunate wagon.

Toya shook her head, denying, 'no, Arzis, not good,' and then:

"Mistress..." and, as if coming to her senses, ran away. "Mistress!"

Arzis watched her as she ran to Mauna. But what Mistress now. Too late for mistressing. End of the Mistress. It was beginning to sink in. They killed Mauna, they killed her, they killed the one who'd become close to him, to whom he'd grown accustomed, for whom he'd felt inexplicable attraction, with whom there was an invisible connection that he was afraid to touch, that even to this day he considered mortally dangerous for himself, and forbidden; and she was necessary to him, and even necessary to the Suungs, damn them, and to the Empire, damn it... He believed in her cause. Didn't protect her.

Everything seemed to go not so badly, and now—the end.

He looked at his left forearm. It hadn't all gone without cost to him, he got his too!

Then he stepped off the lioness's hand, stepped aside, looked down. Waved: it's all hopeless. Looked at everything, shrugged, spread his hands, his tail twitched nervously; then felt his belt, pulled out the new knife, quite recently grabbed from the wagon. He already has so much of these knives like a fool has lice. He looked at the lioness and her suffering; strangely, she was still conscious and also looked at him dimly.

"Fuck me", he waved his hands again and hid the knife.

The knife won't work, she sees everything. Difficult death, for him and her. He went to the wagon, and immediate luck, as if ordered: a falchion was lying there, Vaal, how much weapon does this blacksmith have, a whole arsenal. He took it, approached the lioness, placed it beside her so she wouldn't see.

Arzis sighed; spread his hands, as if he hadn't even done all this here, but someone else; wiped himself, turned the lioness onto her stomach.

"Vaal, await in Naheim your brave daughter!..."

Toya ran up to Mauna.

"Mistress? Mistress!"

Through the haze Mauna saw, rising and holding her head, how Arzis was raising either an axe or something, and chopping something on the ground beside the wagon. She thought they were making camp, and he was chopping firewood. Probably for a fire, so they'd be able to cook something, get warm. They'd be able to eat. Probably they'd already been rescued. Or something like that.

Where am I? Where are we?

"Mistress," Toya was nearby. She stroked her like a little cub.

Mauna noticed great worry, fear in her servant's eyes. She'd seen similar once in a fellow acolyte, being a stalla, she'd woken from a nightmare; Messengers quite often sleep in one room at that age, it happens; Mauna

remembered how horrified she was by her appearance, and thought that probably she looks the same when she wakes in bed from her nightmares. And they're usual business for Messenger acolytes.

Then they pass, mostly. Well, it's a long story.

She sat up, rubbed her cheek, ear, scruff.

"Toya, what... what's happening?"

"Now it's end-end, Mistress," the Mramri said very brokenly, exhaustedly, forced a smile. "Arzis..."

Arzis was now walking toward them with quick steps, and Toya fell silent, sat down right beside her, and Mauna noted the immediacy with which Toya pressed against her. If someone sits beside you, it's usually a barely perceptible touch, especially if you're a Messenger, that's known; but Toya pressed close, warmly, the pressure of her body; just like Nel! Moreover, Mauna only now noticed that she was holding her palm, their fingers interlaced in lioness bond. Mauna looked at this and thought: *very strange*; probably a Messenger and her servant-dhaar shouldn't do this, roles don't presuppose it, is it allowed, does it happen?

"Mistress, hey, you're alive?" Arzis stood demandingly before them, spear in hand, reverse grip, large, a mysterious shadow fell from him though the day was cloudy. Mauna noted: his nose was very wet, the spear all bloody, and his left forearm—the same. All of him somehow... nightmarish. Like Vaal in nightmares. If Vaal comes to a very young, still small Messenger in her first dreams (and he will come), and if he's frightening, not full of goodness and light, as happens with some simpler souls, then he'll look exactly like this.

"He hit me," Mauna complained. "What happened?"

Instead of answering, Arzis crouched beside them, then fell back on his rear, crossing his legs in front. He tossed the spear aside, smirked at something internal. Rubbed his nose, touched Mauna's shoulder, his palm first squeezed hard, then released, and he smoothed her arm; really, convincing himself she was real, not fake; and said:

"Excellent news! Without you it would have become..." he didn't finish how it would have become. "One won't take us without claws. You won't be lost with me," he laughed, looking them eye to eye.

They listened, ears pricked.

He glanced briefly at how they held hands. And good, he thought. Bad when there's discord between females. Complicates all affairs. But he has everything in order with them, they don't quarrel. Easier to live this way.

"Good work, Toi," he swayed side to side, looking into the Mramri's gray eyes, scratched his cut forearm, examined it. "Good job."

From all this, Mauna closed her eyes and took hold of her muzzle, then bowed her head, rubbing temples and ears. Toya looked at the Mistress, then—unexpectedly—wordlessly pulled her Ahey symbol along with Arzis's ring deep from under her collar, and clutched it, looking at him; she held her hand at neck, chin, with her most important things clenched in her fist ('everything that is mine—fits in my fist,' Arzis remembered the song), and looked at him, all—silently; there was even despair

in her eyes, but not of a sad kind, no; this is a symbol, this means something, Arzis understood. Boundless faith in something. In what? In something good, Arzis thought—this is Toya after all.

He grabbed her palm from above, hid everything back under her collar. Held it there, meaning hide-hide. Toya understood. He held longer than necessary. And she placed her palm on his hand, quickly, decisively. And he, after a moment—palm on top.

So it turned out that their hands were occupied only with each other.

Mauna stirred nearby.

"I'll bandage you," Toya instantly grabbed his forearm, examining, instantly changing the whole situation from incomprehensible, charged, very-very meaningful to busy and explainable.

"Don't need to."

Toya thought, and bandaged anyway. All silently. Arzis didn't protest. Also all silently. He sat, scratched his leg, was silent more. Mauna thoughtfully rubbed her fingers in front of her, her deep thoughtfulness. Finishing with Arzis, Toya examined Mauna's ear, cheek, trying to find injury and how bad the blow turned out.

"Sorry, Mistress," Arzis spread his hands, not understanding. "They wore my tail thin, I'll tie up clients better next time. Otherwise, well... they got untied. Don't know how that happened," he looked down at the grass, locks of his mane fell down.

Mauna didn't answer, the tip of her tail twitched by her paw. She continued rubbing her hands and looking at them. She knows how it happened.

"Miracle you weren't killed," he said matter-of-factly. "Lucky. Vaal protected."

Mauna ceased rubbing hands.

"That one fought well," he turned, looked back at the wagon, where on the ground something darkly loomed, the whole slaughter vaguely visible. "And she fought well. Both good."

And, taking the spear, he rose to his paws.

"But useless—we're still better anyway."

He left.

Mauna followed him with her gaze, for some reason weakly snarling after him. She watched how he continued managing the wagon and carelessly throwing things out of it. The horse became even more restless, and he jumped to untie it from the tree.

"Toya."

"Yes-yes, Radiant Mistress?" she straightened up, adjusted her tail.

"Toya, tell me what happened."

The Mramri looked after Arzis, at the Mistress, swallowed, and her ears pressed down:

"We left Mistress here, with them. Arzis said to look their things and take what's needed. I did-did just that," she nodded, apology and guilt in her voice. "I took things. Arzis went somewhere, and I did everything-everything. And then I sensed something behind my tail."

"Something behind your tail?" Mauna perked up.

"Yes-yes, Mistress. I sensed it."

"You heard?"

"Don't know," Toya shrugged. "I sensed. I turned around, and there was this... lion. He was creeping, he was angry, he wanted to kill me completely. And Arzis too. For some reason he didn't kill Mistress," Toya wondered with directness. "I jumped down, called Arzis. Um... I... Arzis told me... and... that hamanu ran up, that lioness. And... and then Arzis killed the lion, like this," Toya showed with effort how to thrust a spear into an enemy, "and I also took-took and... hit them both with the stick, from this... from weapon. I hit with all-all my strength, Mistress. And then I ran to Mistress. And meanwhile Arzis killed that hamanu-lioness," she spoke quickly, as if burning herself on words. "I didn't see, but heard," Toya pointed to her ears laid back, meaning like this I heard, like this.

"He killed both?"

"Yes, Mistress."

She showed the same spear thrust again; she did it sharply, convincingly.

"Hmm... I was lucky, wasn't I?" Mauna said with a light half-smile, her ironic corner of mouth.

Toya uncertainly, silently agreed, nodding.

"Let's go. Vaal, great one, you are with us."

And they really went. Again everything went wrong: just as Arzis untied the horse, it rebelled and together with the wagon ran away onto the road, apparently back to Shadowrock, through bushes, much good stuff still fell out of the wagon with ringing and noise.

Arzis only spread hands.

In a moment Mauna stood looking at the slaughter arranged by Arzis. Toya nearby cried, hands folded before her; first she covered her eyes with her palm, especially afraid to even look at the decapitated, completely unfamiliar and recently quite alive lioness, then understood it was futile to hide from world's horrors—they'll catch up and overtake anyway. She said something in Mramri, very quietly; the only thing Mauna caught was something like: "*Ahey, meine Schuld. Ahey, meine Schuld. Ahey, meine Schuld...*"

"Right, we're bouncing. Spot's getting hot," Arzis announced.

He looked at crying Toya and Mauna, who slowly walked beside the body of the Approached One with a name unknown to her.

"Don't cry, Toya," Arzis said even sternly.

"Can't-can't, Arzis. This is all bad," Toya refused to obey. "We've made great sin."

Mauna stopped walking. She assessed Toya's tears with her gaze and Arzis's severe, skeptically-sad (only now noticed) appearance.

"What, Arzis, did we prove better?" her crossed arms, fingers tapping shoulder.

"Better," he said carelessly, mockingly, angrily. He looked aside, nervously spinning the spear around its axis: back and forth, back and forth.

Mauna nodded and continued her promenade:

"Of course better. One cannot strike a Messenger and not experience retribution from Vaal-Suungs. They've developed a habit: attempting Messengers, striking Messengers, lying to Messengers. Well-well."

She stood before him, freed her arms and folded them at the center of her body, stepped over the dead Approached One's paw.

"Boundlessly proud of you. Vaal, I'm so grateful for the day I met you," she said to him, from below upward. "Vaal is with us."

Tiamat

They made a fire. Toya stirs in the pot and quietly cries. Toya cries a lot, she pities the slain. Mauna is silent, looking into the flame, night.

"That lioness almost killed me. Keep that in mind."

"Yes," Toya agreed hopelessly.

"And you saved me from her knife."

"Eternally faithful. Obligated. Mistress didn't abandon me there. With them," Toya answered, stirring with the spoon. Her tear fell on the hot stone, hissed, and after this Toya began wiping herself with all her might.

"Toya, want a gag?" Mauna suddenly said.

"Me forgiveness?" Toya perked up.

"Well, gag. Do you know what a gag is?"

Amaya loved this word, Mauna first heard it from her. Mauna hit an apple, placing it on target—'that's a gag.' Mauna told how she loves throwing bow high up when running through Hunting Lands of Inner Empire—'what a gag.' Mauna got meat fiber stuck in teeth, needing mirror to remove it with needle—'gag.' Mauna went riding even in rain—and again, 'real gag'.

"Yes. Joke," surprisingly, Toya knew the word. Just didn't expect it from Mistress.

"No, joke is joke, but gag is gag. Look, we aren't our bodies. We kind of live here, inside," Mauna tapped her head, "but it's not quite like that. It's like our house. And from house one can sometimes go out, even run away. And outside the house—boundless sea of Tiamat."

Toya nodded attentively. Then, waiting for words, poured herself a bit from spoon onto back of palm, tried the stew, very thick soup. Surprisingly, tears had already dried—she adapted quickly to everything, fluid.

"There's no non-being and being, everything is one. It's simple, Toya. Take white paper, there's nothing on it, you see nothing—this will be non-being. Draw something on it: symbols, text, yourself, her, you can draw me too. This will be being. But if you put everything there, absolutely everything, all of Tiamat, then the paper becomes completely black—and you see nothing again, we've returned."

Toya threw a branch into the fire, and also sprinkled the stew with salt they'd found in the loot from the killed pair. She licked salt from her fingers.

"Like that," Mauna only said.

"Yes, Mistress," Toya agreed, as one agrees that today has bad weather and last year everything was better.

"One can leave the body and do all sorts of things," Mauna added, as if still wanting to convince the dhaar lioness of the world's amazing things.

The young dhaar didn't answer immediately.

"Mistress can do this," Toya finally said confidently, licking porridge from her palm again. "Can Message."

"Right, I can. They taught me. They-taught-me," Mauna sighed, continuing to look at the fire.

"Mistress, it's very hard for Mistress."

"Worksome."

Toya smiled sincerely, showing all her teeth. Then she removed the pot from the fire.

"Come here. Take a coal, just not hot, but warm. You'll be my Welcomer."

Toya pricked up her ears, her whole appearance—great amazement.

"Surprised? Know how this works?" Mauna positioned better, observing fire.

"Yes. My mother served Messengers much-much, taught me everything. Only Suung lionesses have this honor, Mistress."

"Oh, come on. You'll be a Suung. Consider yourself already an accepted Suung. Consider that you've already married some Suung."

"Okay," Toya quickly and completely agreed, sitting closer to Mauna.

"Interesting, how do dhaars know about Welcomers?..." The Messenger took the coal from the dhaar's hands, and began warming herself like this, warming her palms, melting.

"Mistress, all who serve Messengers long know many sheh-sheh," Toya confided very trustingly, like a terrible, huge secret. "And such that one shouldn't know—also. We, dhaars, aren't supposed to know much-much, but we learn, unwillingly. This is true."

They both look at Arzis. He's tired after the difficult day and dozes, he's run out of chatter for this day, enough, that's it, leave him alone.

"Sit closer. Take my hand, the right one, that's usual for me. We need connection... but it's already there. I had the purest connection with Atrissa. The very best. Toya, did you like Atrissa?"

"She sometimes shouted at me, Mistress. She could-could punish me. But she was good."

"Toya, now tell me something."

"About what?"

"Well, tell me how everything was during the attack. How was it?"

"I... I sat in Mistress's big cart. Aunt Sele and Aunt Basti also sat into the big cart. *Ahey, umarme ihre Seelen*. Then we stopped, screaming began, everyone roared. It was scary. Aunt Sele hugged me. We sat inside, didn't know what to do. Those... well those... came in."

"Khalsids."

"Galsids. They dragged out me and Aunt Sele and Aunt Basti. They first killed Aunt Sele, immediately, because she started screaming a lot. But she shouldn't have screamed, Khalsids don't like that. Aunt Basti said in Mramri 'don't kill her.'"

"Who 'her'? Bastiana?"

"Me. They killed Aunt Basti too, like this. Then I said-said: 'Ahey, embrace me.' They didn't kill me. Asked in Helsian who I was. I understood

and answered in Mramri that I'm dhaar Toya. They spat on me, but didn't kill. Some important lion approached, took me like this," she showed how they take by the elbow, "and walked with me like that. He walked with me everywhere like that. Everyone called him Yants, I remember-remember. I saw how they killed everyone."

"Who did you see? Who was dead?"

"Sir Uruz. They tried to ask him something, question him. He died. Sir Manaru. Sir Kharg, he had no head. Near him were very many dead Khal-sids, whole pile-pile. Sir Taynaz was dead from arrow in head. Um... Sir Talmar was dead, he fell from bridge. Sir Siigr, he was far, but I noticed-noticed. Hamanus Renaya, Shezi, Mshani, Merine, Kara, Tayra. They asked them something. I don't know what. Then they burned them in the wagon."

"Sir Meyran?" Mauna checked. He remained at the residence.

"No. He wasn't there."

"Hamanu Khizaya?" Mauna checked here too.

"She also-also stayed."

"Anweisa?"

"Didn't see."

"Sir Stan?"

"Don't know."

"Continue. They burned them alive?"

"No, dead. For some reason they burned the lionesses. They didn't burn the lions. Yes... yes, sirs Akhas, Markh, Melim. They talked to them too. But not Melim. Melim for some reason died immediately, I never saw him alive once-once."

Poisoned himself, Mauna understood.

"They were all very-very angry. Yelled a lot that everything was bad. Lady-maassi Atrissa, they dragged her from under the bridge. She couldn't say anything, but they dragged her somewhere again later. Then killed her anyway. I saw everything."

"Sir Tai?"

"Sir Tai?" Toya thought. "Don't know."

He went down to the river with us. Tai, me, Atrissa, Arzis. So he stayed by the river.

"What happened to you?"

"Well what happened. Then that lion, Yants, looked at me. He lifted my dress, looked at my legs, paws. Turned me, looked at tail. Asked if I'd birthed cubs. I said no—I'm not married. He did this to me," Toya showed how they unlace dress, collar, "looked here. Told me to behave well. He tied me here," she pointed to waist, "and made me a leash, I walked like that-that afterward. They didn't touch me much. First we walked through forest. Then put in wagon, waited there. There they tied me, and I hid everything-everything."

"What did you hide?"

"Hid Ahey," she tugged the cord at her neck. "Bit through, tore the rope, and hid it."

"Where."

"There," Toya answered artlessly.

"Why?"

"So they wouldn't take it," Toya was surprised.

She didn't want to deceive Mistress, very-very much. She'd hidden not only Ahey's symbol, but Arzis's ring too. She convinced herself that details were unnecessary.

"And then?"

"We went further, we slept in forest. They even gave me food, put collar on. For some reason they put sir Uruz's head on stick, but then threw it away in forest. Didn't beat. I thought they would take me. Didn't take, but I rubbed my finger on nail, and blood dripped on wagon, like this, from side, from head. I rubbed it all there and sat like that-that."

"What did you rub?" Mauna frowned.

"Rubbed there," Toya patted herself in front. "Then Yants got angry and asked who took-beat me, but I said I had moondays. He looked there again and spat."

"Ah, so you wouldn't be raped?"

"Yes, I thought so. Thought they wouldn't want to. But they didn't touch me much. Also looked at my teeth. I really stink now, Mistress."

"Well I, truly, don't smell like lemon water either. So what then?"

"Nothing. We passed that border, they let us through."

"So from the Imperial side you entered Helsian Shadowrock?"

"Yes."

"And the border guards didn't stop you?"

"They stopped us. They talked there, but I didn't hear and didn't look."

"And that you're in a collar, that you're a dhaar, that they're taking you to sell, did the border guards ask you anything?"

"No-no. I just sat by myself. They told me to be quiet—I was quiet. It's usually like that there, probably. I already knew they wanted to sell-sell me, that they'd take me somewhere. And then we immediately went there, into that eating house."

"Tavern."

"Tavern," Toya agreed. "And there—Arzis. And Mistress. I almost died. And Mistress came to me, I almost died... Mistress, Mistress..."

Toya hugged her, completely, got her palms all the way behind her back, rubbed her muzzle against her ear. Mauna stroked her, running along her spine: one, two, three, four, five. She remembered Ainansgard disciplarium, snow.

"Listen here," she separated the servant from herself. "I'll fall asleep. Then... I'll start to Message, but you won't see this. Don't let me be woken, protect my sleep. Then, when I start returning, you'll understand when, you'll understand, you'll sense it, then stroke my hand and ask to be resolved by Messages. Ask me to tell. Ask, ask."

"Yes."

"And try to remember what I tell you. You won't remember everything, and we have nothing to write with. Just try to remember the main things."

"Yes."

And then Mauna—snap!—fell asleep. As if she'd fainted. Toya looked after her, then Arzis croaked untimely, stirred. Toya desperately showed him, meaning don't make noise, Mistress is sleeping. She puts finger to mouth: 'Don't talk!' Just like another Mauna, with her 'don't talk.' He frowned: 'What?'

Toya didn't want to leave everything unexplained, and, very carefully moving away from Mauna, truly quietly began creeping up to him. This interested Arzis, relaxed him: lioness, fire nearby, her eyes shine, she's stalking toward you, very much wanting to do something when she creeps up to you.

She is here.

"Mistress is Messaging. Be quiet-quiet," she placed her palm on his chest (for a moment); her gaze was fixed on Mauna. "She asked-asked to guard her sleep."

Arzis sighed heavily, like males do. Hard day's night.

"She can do it," Toya rejoiced.

Indifferent to everything, he moved his legs. But everything became much cozier when Toya dragged over the pot.

"Great. I haven't eaten like a lion in a long time."

"Why aren't you sleeping?" Toya whispered demanding, took the pot, grasping it through her dress hem. "If anyone needs to sleep-sleep, it's you."

"Need to, Toya. Had stupid dream."

She took the only spoon, wiped it on the hem; thought, licked it, then spat, wiped it once more. Her tail lay on his thigh; Arzis couldn't resist and touched it. Lionesses usually have an immediate instinct, from cubhood—to move the tail away in such cases, or it's no good, who knows what might happen. But nothing, everything peaceful: only its tip twitches. Toya continued wiping the spoon, not noticing all these games with her tail, and Arzis thought that this very spoon might have been used by that married couple he killed later in the day, just yesterday morning.

Toya began feeding him. Arzis half-sat, half-lay, sprawled out, and lazily ate, looking at sleeping Mauna (profile: part of muzzle, ear peeking from under hood, Toya's cloak like a blindfold over her eyes, half-open mouth, and it seems she's grimacing either in pain or bitterness) and played with Toya's tail in his palm, and this was very soothing.

"Okay-okay. Eat, you'll sleep better so," Toya murmured near his ear, to keep quiet. "Eat, you'll sleep-sleep more."

Her movements are deliberately slow and smooth.

In the breaks the Mramri also looked at the Mistress. She'd take, feed him a spoonful, and look at Mauna; while Arzis looked continuously, slowly chewing. Toya—glance at him; then—at Mauna. She'd open her mouth slightly when feeding him. At first this amused him (he didn't laugh

outwardly, being too lazy to move), but then it stopped being amusing, because he saw her two lower fangs, and together with her eyes this made four enchanting points that glowed in the night. Small interlude: Toya tried, carefully, to take the spear from Arzis, which he hadn't let go all this time, pressing it to himself with crossed arms, and against whose shaft he'd pressed his cheek; locks of his mane flowed along it; nothing came of it, Arzis silently shook his head—don't, Toya, you won't take it. She understood, fed him again, then did something rather strange—smoothed his weapon as if it were alive, examined it along its full length.

"Don't touch it, Toyusha. It's unclean. Today it killed two good Sun-
ungs."

And what did Toya do? Not only did Toya not obey—she simply grasped it.

"You couldn't choose, and it's my fault too. Mine. I'm guilty with you. I'm guilty with you as much as you want. I'll share everything."

Now Arzis began looking at her, unblinkingly, as at Mauna earlier. Toya bore his attention worthily. Most importantly—silently: didn't ask questions, didn't giggle. The attention excited her, but Toya maintained outward calm, continuing her work. Arzis interrupted her: didn't let her feed him again, gently directed her hand to herself: 'You need to eat too.' Toya understood everything and very slowly brought the spoon to her mouth, looking into his eyes, and this was unexpected, since usually she looked down, to the side; she licked the spoon. He stroked her cheek, her scruff; felt her ears with rings. She froze with closed eyes; her quiet purring trembled through to his hand. Her hand also froze in air, with the spoon—this was somewhat funny and slightly awkward, probably; Arzis intertwined her palm's fingers with his, and they even managed together to save the spoon from falling into the abyss of night grass: it was between the lion's and lioness's palms.

Inevitable meeting. More precisely, even more precisely, let's be precise: Toya, led by Arzis, met with him; her cold inhales and warm exhales on his nose; the most delicate, most weightless kiss of his life, such had never been and, probably, never would be. Next he did the first thing he wanted: licked her teeth, her fang. She awkwardly, but very-very sincerely, genuinely—such things can't be faked—licked his nose, and the scent of her saliva remained with him.

Mauna moved, breathing frequently, noisily, head jerking unnaturally. Arzis observed, suddenly yawning full-mouthed; usually after such one licks nose, but Arzis restrained himself: wanted preserving Toya's scent; Toya pricked ears, smoothly turning.

Mauna continued breathing frequently anyway.

Toya leaned toward him, and again spoke directly into his ear, with that clear apology that they needed to speak quietly, very quietly; her palm with claws ended up on his cheek, infinitely careful. No one will know this was the most tender, most kind gesture Arzis had experienced in life so far.

"Mistress. Mistress. Arzis. Mistress. I must," Toya spoke into his ear, with accent that had grown so strong, and Arzis barely restrained himself from embracing her and asking only one thing: 'Speak, speak, speak anything.'

She pulled back, such a mixture of joy, fright, exultation in her very vague nocturnal appearance.

"I must too, Toya," he said, not aloud, inaudibly, when Toya returned to the Mistress, listening (still so quietly, quite the huntress).

Arzis sighed, yawned, reclaimed his spear, which—as it turned out—had rolled to his side. He crossed his arms tighter and closed his eyes. He exhaled very tiredly.

He won't tell what woke him. Lions don't talk about such things, especially ones like him. He dreamed of the lioness he killed. It turned out memory had preserved her name: Namarsi. He dreamed ordinary nonsense. Circle, brothel, some sex. Usually such dreams excited him, and he'd wake from them in lust. But not now. Everything was somehow different. Suddenly the lioness he was taking from behind fought him off with her paw and stood up:

"Why did you kill me?" she demanded an answer.

It turned out it was her, that very one, Namarsi. He remembered her.

"What do you mean 'why'?" Arzis tried to get angry, but uncertainly. It didn't work. Couldn't.

"Why?"

"I killed him. So I had to kill you too!"

"Coward. First time, or what?"

"In the East I killed ten Draag bitches."

He lied in the dream, he'd never even seen Draags.

"Liar. Coward. Why?" she pushed him.

"Bitch, I had to!"

"Why?"

"What do you mean why, it's Mauna, Mauna, Mauna, it's all her, everything for her, Mauna, Mauna!..."

So, screaming her name, he woke up then.

Falling asleep again, Arzis suddenly noted that down there it was somehow cold. Of course: on top of everything, he'd wet his pants again—second time in a day.

Let's All Go to Amaya

"Mistress said: if she doesn't wake when the sun is high, then must wake her. Wake strongly-strongly. Pour water, bite. Scratch! Otherwise everything could be bad-bad, Arzis. Tell me, listen, Arzis, is the sun high or not?"

Oh no, just no 'bad-bad' again. Again a new day, again new problems.

"You see, you see? Tell me. What do you say?"

"No. Don't wake her yet."

He got angry at being woken, when he could have slept more.

"Ehhh," he exhaled, then yawned, smacked his lips. "Bleh, damn."

"Oh, Arzis, I forgot," Toya didn't let up. "You can't see such things, Mistress said. Can you not look?"

"Wha... what's there... what 'such things'?"

"Such as how Mistress will wake up."

"Eh, Toya, don't worry about it," he covered his head with something. "You and I already know too much anyway."

She shrugged. If so, then so. Toya, Arzis already knows, accepts life as it is, softly, without resistance and self-deception. And especially Toya doesn't understand impractical things, but useful things—she understands very well. So as not to waste time, she was shaving with one of the many knives they'd robbed from their murderous raid, a large piece of salted pork leg, which they'd acquired by the same dishonest, vile method. She shaved quickly and meticulously, spreading at her legs a huge white cloth, which... well, it's clear where they got it. Bees for some reason were interestedly circling the tip of her lazily swishing tail, and she waved them away with her hand and cloak, but didn't move her tail—it just kept curling through the grass. *There's a hive somewhere here*, Arzis determined, a great hunter of hives and honey in cubhood; and in the East a good hive could very much brighten up stupid everyday life.

Toya also managed to keep a sharp eye on the Mistress; sometimes she'd stop work and attentively prick her ear to catch her breathing.

"Arzis, Arzis? Wake her?" Toya pestered.

She'll saw you into little rounds. Oh, this Mramri female.

"Let her sleep, Toya, honestly," Arzis said, itching to add: 'And me too.'

"She said: it will be bad..."

"No it won't. She thinks too much, and you worry too much."

Toya smiled guiltily with an exhale, that ambiguous "hmm..."; again her wet lower fangs. And returned to work. Arzis pretended to doze (lost the desire to sleep), and watched her, hidden behind a facade of fake sleep. She glanced at him several times, and made sure that their (only one here, and generally, of his kind) lion seemed to be sleeping again. Each time she sighed. The pork leg was being shaved with real fury and

malice: Toya gave herself completely to the task. She bared her teeth, and once even hissed when the knife slipped unsuccessfully; this amused Arzis, he almost gave himself away.

Then, finishing with the leg and having shaved an absolutely monstrous quantity of slices, Toya moved her ears, again carefully examined Mauna (she, as they say, slept without ears, tail, paws, and everything in general, and the blindfold reliably hid her from morning light and patches of sun that wandered across her cloak, which actually wasn't hers but Arzis's cloak, because it's thicker and warmer; though Arzis too is truly much thicker and warmer than Mauna; though Mauna, as is known, isn't thin at all, quite the opposite; she's one of those round Andarian females). Not figuring out or deciding anything about the Mistress, Toya stood and scattered beside the dented pot (already empty, since apparently yesterday Arzis had devoured absolutely everything when Toya fed him) large eggs that appeared from nowhere, gray and spotted. She drank one of them.

Duck. This Arzis definitely didn't remember being in the wagon. While eggs might have been found there, there definitely wasn't a duck. Toya held it up by its feet, examining it. For some reason she huffed with dissatisfaction; but Arzis understood why: like all game, the duck was lean and low in fat. Then, humming to herself, Toya cut off the strangled duck's head and licked blood from her fingers, even positioned her mouth to drink the blood. Arzis was very interested in what she was singing, and even pricked his ears fully, risking exposure; but in vain: he heard some words, but uselessly, since it was Mramri, not Suung. Arzis liked Mramri language more and more. There's something in it, he thought.

Then Toya quickly plucked all this, gutted it, and threw it in the pot. She ate another egg, and, as Arzis understood, the eggs were quite mature, since Toya had to chew. They did this constantly in the East too, eggs are an excellent thing; you just need to find them first. She seemed to feel guilty that they were sleeping while she ate by herself; she glanced at Arzis, but his pretense again remained undetected.

Oh, something with Mauna. Tenderly from Toya:

"Mistressy. Mistress. Mistress, we're here. We're meeting. In the world. In the world of warm blood. Mistress, I'm here, we're here, we're in the world of warm blood. Be free from Messages. Must-must."

"...warm blood," Mauna groaned.

"We're here, we're here, Messages..."

"I'm here, I'm here..." Mauna confirmed.

"Here, we, resolve..."

All this time Toya held her palm on Mauna's chest.

"Messages!" Mauna said sharply, solemnly. "First. To whom: Vaalu-Mauna. From whom: all sisters of Mastr-Fein mengir. Sisters notified of attack and the rest. Sisters boundlessly rejoice that I am alive, by Vaal's will. Sisters horrified by my situation and escape from Shadowrock. Vaalu-Nel messaged: High Mother knows I'm alive. Transmitted my con-

siderations about Khalsids, Secret Service and Chamber. Arranged: town of Verin-on-Vlea, proceed to it, on road from Shadowrock. Help already en route, they'll find me, all efforts, all possibilities. To whom: Arzis. Sisters of mengir immeasurably grateful, Messengers won't forget valor. Signature: Stone Five-Arrow-Storm-one."

Arzis had to make an effort not to stir smugly.

"On stylus," Mauna continued mercilessly, and Toya began desperately biting her claws. "By Graph... And what by Graph?... There's no Graph. Just as there's no Graph-Master."

She looked at Toya.

"Up," pointing at her with a claw, imperiously waved her hand, as if wanting to toss Toya into the sky with this gesture. Toya obediently looked up, understanding nothing, still biting her claws. She wouldn't let go of Mauna's palm for anything, because she didn't know if she could.

"World of warm blood," Mauna determined.

"In the world of warm blood, we're in the world of warm blood," Toya took Mauna's palm, grasping at familiar words; all learned by rote.

"Oh... Mmmm... Stroke, stroke, more."

Mauna pointed at Arzis, lazily-lifelessly:

"Is he sleeping?"

"Yes. First he got up. Then lay down again. Slept poorly, Mistress."

"You slept even worse," Mauna stated.

She sighed, yawned, licked her lips. Then the Messenger peered at Arzis, as one peers when drowsy or hungover.

"He's not sleeping," another lazy-lifeless gesture. "Arzis, hey, grrr! I see everything!" she suddenly took and threw an egg at him that Toya had recently placed nearby. It broke right on his chest, smearing his mane. Mauna laughed, and so sincerely as never before. "Arzis-Arzis. There's no Messenger who can be deceived like that."

Not often can one see Mauna smile!

"We know when someone's sleeping," she said, looking at Toya. "Trickster!"

"Mauna, what's this about?" Arzis lazily wiped himself.

"I thought it was a stone," Mauna said as if throwing a stone was even a favor, not something else.

The bombardment didn't end: she threw a wooden cup at him too; and they'd also acquired the cup through robbery, like almost everything. But not hard, didn't reach him, it fell by Arzis's paws.

"Arzis, don't be angry!" Toya was truly worried. "Mistress said that when she wakes up, she won't be herself," she held her palms out in front of him.

"That's it, Toya," Mauna sighed. "Now he'll rape and kill us. Or the other way around."

Arzis laughed, secretly delighted by all this. Definitely, Mauna wasn't quite herself, wasn't being herself; but the replacement turned out good, cheerful. Toya laughed too, casting quick glances between him and Mauna, pleased that everything resolved so simply, and no one was offended

by anyone, and everyone was fine, and there was no tragedy, and no stupid figuring out who was to blame.

"The other way around is impossible, Mistress!" Toya cheered up.

"What do you mean 'the other way around is impossible'?" Mauna asked seriously.

"Well... A lioness can't, hmm... do that... to a lion..." Toya answered carefully, each word said more and more cautiously.

"You know suspiciously much about such things, Toya," the Messenger said even more seriously.

And laughed, touching the Mramri's shoulder. Toya readily followed the laughter, her tail wagging. Silence hung in the air, no one said anything, so Toya filled the emptiness with action: she decided to remove the duck's head from their area. She took it, stood up.

"Toya, what are you holding?" Mauna couldn't calm down. Again this seriousness, which Toya takes at full value.

"A duck," Toya answered fearfully.

"You cut its head off."

Arzis intervened, heavy cavalry—came to Toya's aid:

"Mauna, what did you think, they ask the duck politely to sit in the pot? You have to cut its head off first to convince it."

"You see, Arzis: when I was growing up, I was forbidden from entering kitchens."

She lay on her back, put her hand to her forehead, ears pressed down:

"I'm going to be sick now."

"I'm sorry, Mistress," Toya finally threw the duck's head far away.

"You handle the sight of dead lionkind much better," Arzis said, and immediately regretted it.

Mauna didn't answer right away:

"It's not from that. It's from the Return."

She added, not looking at him:

"Returning to the world of warm blood—I often feel sick."

Arzis had never heard such a thing: 'world of warm blood.' That's how Messengers talk, he understood.

"Well, Mauna, tell us," Arzis demanded cheerfully.

She moved her ears phlegmatically.

"Let's eat, I'm so hungry," she wanted thus.

"Mistress, I tried to remember. I can tell."

"Good. Tell us," a free gesture from Mauna, meaning go ahead, go on, try. "Give me raw eggs, please. I don't like cooked ones."

"Yes, Mistress, please-please."

"Pour them right in here for me."

"Right now-now..."

"Raw eggs in soup?" Arzis twisted his mouth ironically, meaning this Mauna and her quirks.

"In Andaria everyone eats like that," the Messenger looked at him, tilting her head.

Arzis was surprised how quietly and skillfully Toya broke eggs against the pot's edge, and dashing tossed the shells far away. Privilege: Mauna ate from the only plate. Arzis and Toya had to eat straight from the pot. And they had one spoon between them. Everything's correct: the robbed couple had one plate, one pot and two spoons. Why more? Toya found a solution: here too she fed Arzis.

"Well, so what's there?" Arzis demanded news.

Instead of Mauna, who started eating, Toya began:

"Everyone knows Mistress is in trouble. We go to town Verin... town Verin. There they'll help us. You, Arzis, they won't forget how you strongly saved Mistress."

Arzis was sure Mauna would disapprove or correct. But he was wrong.

"Everything's correct."

"Do you remember well what you Message?" Arzis asked with interest.

Mauna pondered what to answer to such a clumsy question. You have to distinguish: how many Messages you can drive inside yourself and send out; how many you can receive and deliver; different days—different possibilities; after the Sacrifice much changed (for the better); other necessary Messenger logistics.

"Hard to say. Depends on what kind of night it was."

"What kind was it now?" Arzis ate, thanks to Toya's efforts.

"Doesn't get simpler. In terms of mnemonics. Not in terms of everything else."

"Must be hard, Mistress, remembering everything so well-well?" Toya asked with interest.

"No, that's the easiest part. It's always easy for me, harder for others."

"No, mistress, I'm better at bragging," Arzis decided to needle her.

He thought there'd be a 'don't talk.' No:

"*Vtai*, there you go. Tell us something, Toya."

"What?"

"For example, tell about yourself, describe your life. Name names, dates, places, events, everything-everything. Start from the very beginning. Let's test me. What if I'm broken and no longer fit to be a Messenger? I got hit on the head, that... boom... it hurt," Mauna vividly demonstrated this 'boom,' even too much so.

"Mistress doesn't say like that!... Hmm. Uh. I, I, I began living in Mramri, but I was never there even once..."

"Wait, how's that: began living in Mramri, but never been there?" Arzis was even indignant, spitting soup.

"Don't talk! Let her tell it, she's only just started," Mauna accused Arzis; he quickly got his daily portion of 'don't talk.'

"This, this is my mama," Toya put her hand to her chest, with a small bow, "took me into life, burdened herself, in Mramri, but she had to run from there, and mama fled. There was-became dangerous for her. The Suung Empire accepted her, to great gratitude. She, by great fortune, by chance, entered service in the Family, in the kitchens, in the Family of

Brilliant Vaalu-Dayana. Two Mramri braided tails for her, who... who... knew my dad very well," Toya again put her hand to her chest, with a small bow. "Everything fortunate, everything by chance. Mama is called Iri, wife of Tolorvur; dad—Tolorvur. Mama spoke Suung a little, and in the Empire learned much. She taught me. I grew and also served. Mistress-hamanu Noyna managed there, very good, very strict. They taught me to count and read. Reading better, but writing, I can write my name. We lived in Nightdance, then in Bluemount, then near Seedna. I was even in Seedna! When I was ten... or eleven... or *zwölf*... a firrasa scratched me," Toya showed a small scar on her paw. "When I turned fifteen, hamanu Noyna ordered that I go into the world, into service or wherever desired, mama immediately made me *Dham*, and everyone else from the Family said goodbye to me, and then I got sick with nose-flow, took to bed, and lay very long, and I stayed another year, and then Radiant Vaalu-Nel arrived at Excellent Vaalu-Dayana's residence. Hamanu Noyna spoke with hamanu Kayana, who ruled the lionesses of Excellent Vaalu-Nel's Family," Arzis noticed how Mauna nodded in agreement, "she ruled everything, strict and very honest, and hamanu Noyna gave me into service in Vaalu-Nel's Family. But there they told me I'd come for one day, and so it was, because two days later I ended up in the Family with aunt Sele and aunt Basti, in Radiant Vaalu-Amaya's Family, then immediately—Excellent Vaalu-Mauna's, and there was my first Sworn-Bond, for which I'm grateful to Ahey until my end. Now I'm here."

He'd heard that name before. Amaya. Something familiar. Vaalu-Amaya.

"And what does 'mama made you dham' mean?" Mauna asked with interest.

"Mama made me *Dham*, forgive me our word; this means I'm already grown and I can... live for myself... can marry, that's the main thing. Among us Mramri, a lionessy must be made *Dham*, otherwise you, you're not an adult lioness."

"So you're dham now?"

"Ah..." Toya suddenly looked at Arzis, in very obvious confusion. Unexpected, and very obvious. "Well... yes. When you marry, you're no longer *Dham*."

"And what then?"

"*Gemah. Gemahlin.*"

"It's all right. Don't be shy. I'm just curious."

"Yes, my Mistress."

Arzis remembered nothing except that Toya was now dham and that a firrasa had scratched her (interesting, how does that happen?). And also that somewhere there was Vaalu-Amaya, and right after—Vaalu-Mauna.

"So did you remember something, Mistress?" he needled her.

Mauna carefully ate her soup, and Arzis was beginning to think that she either wasn't really listening, or had simply become indifferent to her servant's story (what's there to listen to really, it could make one bored), or had actually been broken by the 'boom.'

As Bull used to say, 'Yeah, my ass.'

"Now I'll retell it," Mauna wiped herself, even with a handkerchief, oh my Vaal, next she'd demand dessert. "Give me something to drink."

"Toya, you correct right away if anything's wrong," Arzis was seized by some excitement. He'd even make bets if he could.

"Toya's mother, Iri, became pregnant in Mramri lands, but it became dangerous there, and she fled to the Empire. She ended up in Vaalu-Dayana's Family, in the kitchens. Two Mramri females spoke for her, who knew her father, Tolorvur, well. This was a fortunate accident. The mother originally knew Suung at a basic level, then learned to speak well in the Empire. She taught Toya to speak our language. Toya, growing up, lived in Vaalu-Dayana's Family and served, as dhaars do. Noyna was the mistress of lionesses in Dayana's Family, good and very strict, according to Toya's description. At the same time, Toya was taught to count and read, as well as write; Toya's education was crowned with some success, and she's capable of writing her name in Suung. Her command of Mramri writing isn't established from the story. By the way, I'm surprised, Toya, that your mother knew some Suung even back in Mramri," Mauna noted, not looking at Toya, and suddenly hiccupped very loudly.

"Bless you," Arzis wished, waving his tail. Impressed, he didn't show it, but was genuinely impressed by the retelling.

Toya put her little palm to her mouth: either from surprise from Mauna, or from Mauna's retelling.

"What was that?" the Messenger said in amazement.

"You hiccupped, Mauna, incredible," Arzis said, dead serious.

"That doesn't happen to me. Odd."

"Right, you probably don't do anything else either, and yesterday you went to the barn just for fun. Drink some more water."

"Don't talk. You're such a boor! You're just insufferable; this isn't straightforwardness, this is bad taste. Ugh."

"Ugh," Arzis confirmed contentedly.

Mauna drank some more, thanks to Toya's care.

"Toya lived, moving with Dayana's family, in Dance in the Night residence, then—in Shaanut residence near Bluemount, then in Seednamay residence, which is inside Seedna. When Toya was either ten, eleven, or twelve years old, a firrasa scratched her, leaving a scar on her left paw. When Toya turned fifteen, Noyna ordered her to go away, and her mother made her suitable for adult life, that is, dham; from context it's unclear whether Toya was being sent to serve another Messenger, which makes sense, or whether she was being sent away from the Family altogether. She untimely fell ill with nose-flow, the illness proved very long, and therefore she stayed another year. I hope you weren't sick for a whole year. Then my mentor, Nel, came to Dayana, as a result of which Toya ended up in Nel's Family for transit. Actually, Toya, you were being hastily transferred to Amaya's family. Do you remember Vaalu-Amaya?"

"Of course, Mistress," Toya nodded.

"And I remember," strangely, instead of an affirmative nod, Mauna kept shaking her head negatively. She said she remembered, but with her head—she denied it.

"Well Mauna, you're something else. With you we'd have such a gang, just a solid one. You'd remember everything and everyone," Arzis admired.

Both lionesses fell silent. Arzis lay as he was, but stopped waving his tail. Well now, got offended about the gang comment, screw it.

"You ended up with Vaalu-Amaya," Mauna added heavily, "together with dhaars Selestina and Bastiana. By the way, didn't Adalheida come with you?"

"No-no," Toya said.

"And I thought she was with you."

"Who's that?" Arzis asked.

"She died-died, Arzis. Got sick, a year ago already," Toya answered.

"Then..." Mauna stretched, yawned. "Due to known events, you transferred to my Family, and I took your Sworn-Bond. Which, as you remember, went unusually," Mauna rubbed her chin, sighed.

"I remember everything, Mistr..."

"Hey," Arzis interrupted, "I've heard this name several times already—Amaya. Tell me, Mauna, what happened with her."

Mauna didn't answer; what Arzis could determine: confused look (from Mauna? even right after the attack she looked like anything but confused), prostrate movement when she drank from the flask ('prostrate' and Mauna—couldn't think of a more stupid combination). But Toya volunteered:

"Mistress, may I tell Arzis?"

"You must," she agreed.

Toya fidgeted, somehow not hurrying to tell.

"So, Toya?" he encouraged. "What are you thinking about, you schemers?"

"I'm translating in my head," Toya squinted, putting her claw to the bridge of her nose. "I now-now."

Mauna regarded the Mramri with a slight frown.

"Our lives to fire we gave, not without cause; others stood good in our place with strong paws; now looking down, we see the river's course; of endless stream, with no remorse," Toya sang, melodically, in tune.

Mauna's very attentive ears listened to everything. And then she showed the Ashai gesture, which is also the old Suung gesture: you kiss your palm (fist for lions), then—upward; then—slowly lower it. Extreme approval, salute to heroism. Arzis kept quiet, just listened and observed everything.

It very much seemed that Toya understood the gesture well.

"In Mramri it's a little bit different-different," she hesitated, then smoothed her dress. "In Mramri it would be 'earth' instead of 'fire,' because we don't burn, but bury in the earth-earth."

"All the more so," Mauna cut off. And then altogether: she took Toya's hand and raised it up, as if presenting the victor of some unknown battle.

Arzis decided to ask about Amaya some other time, since his lionesses behave strangely when they hear about her, as if they'd sniffed dry mesmerine; and he needed obedient, calm females right now. But he received yet another piece of knowledge from the Mistress; oh my, her eyes completely on fire, just like when she wanted to devour him in Sacrifice:

"She is the best Messenger of all worlds. Flawless."

"Are we going to her, or what?" Arzis suggested. "Otherwise I dunno who we can trust, you can't tell who's full of it."

Toya sighed and for some reason touched his dirty paw, right at the claws, then altogether embraced the paw with both palms.

"We will all come to her," Mauna promised, so solemn and fierce.

Foxy on the Wagon

Arzis wiped his dirty nose, spat, and looked at the sun. He tossed the spear in his hand (that very one, yes, from the killed blacksmith).

"How are you doing there?" he turned around.

"We are well," Mauna didn't complain.

"A little more, and we'll rest," he determined.

He climbed down from the broken wheel of the cart on the roadside, and they continued walking.

They walked along a pleasant forest road, but the forest ended unexpectedly quickly and a field began. Arzis saw a fork in the distance and more saving forests. And nothing else, no houses, no lionkind. And hawks in the sky.

He feared the Guard, and indeed everything else (Arzis fears heaps of things, which is why he is what he is; primarily—alive), pondering why the blacksmith's horse had run away then and how such a thing could have happened at all. Toya carried a large clay jug on her back (water), and didn't grumble; Mauna dragged a large and light bundle on a stick, and also didn't whine. Arzis loaded himself with everything that—by instinct—he could drag for a whole day. His instinct is pretty good—in his Legate days he'd hauled all sorts of things on himself.

He tried several times to clarify the route with passersby, but to no avail—neither the merchant caravan nor the Imperial Post Service answered him anything; with yet another group Arzis decided not to clarify anything—those three lions looked too bandit-like, and they looked too attentively-mockingly.

Mauna came to the rescue:

"Listen, growling at strangers right off the bat 'where to Verin?' isn't the best idea. They'll..." Mauna didn't finish. "Let me handle it."

A rider on a firran was overtaking them, gnawing salted chicken legs and throwing the bones away.

"Strong day!" Mauna addressed him sweetly, soft Andarian accent. "Good Suung forgive me, is the town of Verin-on..."

"That way," the rider interrupted indifferently.

"No need to turn anywhere?"

"Nah," he said even more indifferently, swaying.

"Thank you."

Also, Arzis entertained himself by listening to their chatter. Yes, Mauna and Toya chattered, and a lot. He found this peculiar. And the only thing they talked about was the Family. What Atrissa was like, what hamanu Merine was like; moreover, everything was said as if everyone was alive and well. Mauna, with remarks from Toya, discussed in detail who had fallen ill in the fort from (now very suspicious) stomach pain,

and who had gone with her on that ill-fated day. Her memory for names, whole lists of names, no longer just surprised but simply made him turn around—wasn't she secretly reading from some piece of paper? But no, everything was honest: Mauna was simply compiling a list in her head, and Toya was simply helping with it.

At first Arzis thought the fork ahead wasn't a problem. Not so fast. There's a fork, and even a sign on it. But it's all blackened—someone recently burned it, damn them.

"Well, that's something," Arzis summed up, stopping. He touched the sign with his spear, and it pitifully shed ash onto the bright steel point.

The road to the left seemed somewhat wider.

"That tail on the firran, didn't he say which way to turn?"

"He said not to turn anywhere," Mauna answered.

"He didn't care what to answer. Well, on a firran I'm like that myself."

"You know how to ride firrans?"

"A little bit."

"You can't even ride a horse," Mauna mocked.

He paid no attention to her pestering, and decided:

"We go left."

"Braggart!" Mauna waved a branch and pointed at him; she'd been holding the branch since the forest.

The sun showed no mercy, the wind wouldn't help, so they didn't walk long; growing heavy, they sprawled out under a solitary tree at the road's edge. The tree had sheltered lionkind so often that the grass around was trampled, and on the bark—uneven tracks of claws, a carved heart, and fresh paw prints in the puddle by the roadside ditch.

"Look here, someone dared to go barepaw on such a road," Mauna chuckled, pointing.

"All sorts of things happen," Arzis sighed heavily as he gutted their meager and poor goods, carelessly scattering things around. "So we're not the only suspicious ones on our own two paws. Everyone else we met was on horses, or firrans, or wheels," he struck the ground enviously.

"Arzis, we all rest a little?" Toya carefully intervened, attracting attention with gestures.

"Yes, when the day cools down, we'll go further."

Hugging her knees with her arms, Mauna sat relaxed against the scratched tree with the uneven heart carved in the bark, right by her ear; chin raised, looking down from above; left leg stretched out, hand resting on her right knee; tail, as always, hidden somewhere, as it always is with Andarian females. Arzis sprawled out, having thrown off his knemids, wiggling his paw claws, and endlessly chewing the meat Toya had shaved that morning. And Toya instantly fell asleep on the spread cloak, putting her palms under her muzzle.

"Didn't get enough sleep," Mauna gestured tiredly at her servant, and returned her hand back to her knee. "Don't you want to?"

"Dunno. First I'll smash some grub, then we'll see."

"My Vaal, Arzis, not 'smash some grub' but 'dine.' Say: what do you think about this?" Mauna immediately asked, circling the surrounding world with her finger.

"About what?" he stopped chewing.

"About everything. About everything that's happening to us."

He looked at everything that was happening to them: at her, at Toya, at himself.

"I don't know, Mauna. I don't really think about things much. I like to think through, you know, one thing, second, third..."

He didn't develop the theme. Better about important matters:

"A little more, and we'll be where we need to be. I was thinking here..." he continued chewing. "Mistress, you know, the Secret Service and the Chamber will hardly be delighted that you're alive."

"Wouldn't want to be in their place."

He chuckled, laughed.

"Never figured I'd be in this game."

"Do you regret agreeing? Back then?"

"Nope," he answered immediately. "I'd be done. I wouldn't exist."

"Without you—then me neither. I wouldn't be here. I'd be sleeping in Naheim, all day long, if there are days there."

"Why specifically sleeping? How about something more fun?" he nudged her thigh.

"Well... Messengers dream of only one thing: just to sleep."

"All of them?" he looked at her, back and up.

"All. Sooner or later, but all."

"Are you at least allowed to rest from Messaging?"

"By tradition: twice a year—nine days."

"Skimpy. What a job," he waved it off, continuing to look out at the field.

"You can't do it for long, you lose the skill," Mauna instructed.

"So then," he chewed, "let's figure out how many enemies we have."

"I think the Secret Service," she moved closer to him. Now there was sleeping Toya between them. "The Chamber for sure, at least part of it. Um... I don't even know. Who else? I don't know, Arzis."

"Whoever it is, your breathing cramps their style."

"The sisters will take care of it. As soon as I meet with any of the Messengers—we're safe. They shall endeavor with all means. They know everything already. Everyone who goes against the sisterhood loses sooner or later," she said haughtily, just like that.

"There could be double-tails among yours," he showed two fingers, showed her like that, expressively. "Who knows, maybe someone's connected to the Secret Service, like that friend of yours."

"What friend of mine?" Mauna asked very unkindly.

"Well that one, whose lover we killed. You know, the Messenger."

"Fool," she touched his mane. "She wasn't connected to the Secret Service. She's just stupid."

"Why immediately 'fool'?..." he wasn't offended, but hit her again, but not on the paw this time, but on the stomach—bam in the belt.

"There are very few Messengers," she watched how he was hitting—bothering her. "There are only sixty-six of us now. You can't hide among us: too often we look each other in the eyes. And there are the second-bodies."

"Secondbobbies?" he frowned, examining a piece of dried meat.

"Secondbody. Second. Body. Soul, if you want, it'll be easier for you to understand that way. You can also say metanoia; say 'metanoia' or even 'noia' to a Messenger—she'll understand you serve us. Though noia and second body are slightly different things," she held out both hands in front of herself, looking at them. "Things, yeah... No, open traitors among us... it's difficult, Arzis, and makes no sense. Too often we have Discourse," she smirked, "Sister-bond, too many fetishes, portraits we have," she smirked, "it's a tight little world. Sisters are too close, especially in one mengir."

"Mengir? What's that?"

"Stone," she took a small pebble and placed it right on Arzis, it rolled off. "It stands in the void between worlds, we gather around it. But there's also one here, in the world of warm blood, a real one like that. Every Messenger belongs to a mengir, one of six. In my mengir—nine sisters."

"Listen, what about other worlds, do they really exist?" he pondered, looking at her. To win her over and fish out an answer, he gave her some food too.

"Thank you... Yes, many. But Messengers don't go there, we don't have time. Heaps of things to do."

Hmm.

"Listen. This is some wild stuff. Why then does nobody talk about this, and there's nothing about it in the faith, the Ashai are silent about it, nothing about it in school?" he was indignant. "Not that I went to school much. Seems like a year. Or two. Damned if I know, I don't remember..."

Mauna looked at him. He already knows so much. And knowledge, it's like that, it's—dangerous.

"Vaal, this dried meat is so tasty, someone knows their craft."

Now Arzis looked at her. Well, of course. Probably should have gone to school not one or two years, but three years. Yes. Good thing he at least reads, writes and counts perfectly—and that's thanks to Vaal.

Mauna smoothed Toya, adjusted her cloak. Said nothing.

"Let's start over. Why does the Secret Service hate you? You? What's the deal?"

"If you take it as a whole... It's an old enmity that suddenly grew into a little war. They are fools, and we are mad hens. They climb the ranks through service; and my sisters are simply bored."

"Why did we kill that one, that guy, what's his name?..."

"Which one? You've killed many."

"You know, since I knew you, I've had to work hard for glory. That tail, the lion of your friend, what's her name, well, who's also a Messenger..."

"Ah, that one. Karris was his name. He was a bad lion."

Arzis nodded, aha, well yeah, clear. We kill bad lions—we bring good, nice things.

"He wanted to use her, then died. He got lucky once, believed in himself. Like the Hustrian whore who decided to take ten clients at once: 'I believe in myself! Wheee! Grrrrr.'"

"Hah, Mauna, you're getting the hang of it, circler, gangsta," Arzis praised.

"Huntress," she said calmly.

"Alright."

He thought about whether Mauna had ever been on a real hunt.

"What do you think of her?" Mauna suddenly asked, pointing at Toya.

"She..." he looked at sleeping Toya; she slept with her mouth open. He thought what to say, reached into the bag for more dried meat. What could he say?

"I like her too. She'll be my Welcomer. For that she needs to be made a Suung," Mauna sat over Toya like a huntress holding down fallen prey with her hand.

So, Mauna sits over Toya. Between Mauna and Toya a Protectorate had long been established; but here it was heading straight toward Dominate. She looked at Arzis expectantly, and he felt this: You. I. Like. Arzis. Let's. Us.

Oh, shit, he got scared.

"And how to do that?"

"It wouldn't be difficult to ask any Circle of Seven about it. They won't refuse a Messenger, especially—me," she pointed at herself with her thumb, then with a claw—at Toya.

"The Circle of Seven can make someone a Suung?"

"Yes. Codex, Ancestral Law. It can."

"She could also get married," he suggested such a thing.

Mauna climbed over Toya, sat right at his legs, spread her svira. And went and put both palms on his thighs:

"Such. Complications. Unnecessary," and looked at him, suggestion.

And she began climbing up him, the pleasant pressure of her palms. This was both amusing and unconcealed, somewhat clumsy, and he felt uncomfortable, not himself. Bewildering female. Something betrayed her inexperience in her, ignorance of how to approach a lion; instinct told her how it was done, but practice is needed; and where would a Messenger get such practice?

Arzis thought about what to do with her. Don't get tangled up, don't miss — that's obvious. Lionesses love making everything complicated, tangling everything to impossibility—and Mauna was doing exactly that.

He was saved from deciding: creeping ever more confidently into their reality was also the fact that someone was riding along the road, from the right. Finally, Arzis looked; Mauna followed his example. And, strangely enough, reality also woke Toya (until now it hadn't concerned her, though much had been happening): she moved her ears, got up,

looked sleepily at the Mistress, who for some reason had placed her palm on Arzis's chest, smoothed her small whiskers (which she'd never done anything with and never thought to do), looked very clearly at Arzis (luminous eyes); Mauna pulled back from Arzis and again put her hand on Toya's thigh, as if fearing that Toya—the fallen prey—would escape; then the young dhaar looked at the road.

She listened very attentively for several moments, attentive ears.

"They're Mramri," she reported joyfully. She asked permission: "May I ask them for directions, may-may I?"

She clearly very much wanted to talk with them.

"Go ahead, Toyusha. We need to," Arzis allowed.

"Mistress, may I be permitted..." Toya freed herself from the captivity of the Mistress's hand, easily jumped over the ditch, light-pawed, and stood at the road's edge.

She waved to the travelers, and Arzis didn't look very long at who was riding there (it became clear they were some kind of merchants: two wagons, four horses), because he became absorbed watching Toya. He had already rested and eaten, life had returned to him, the weather—pure sunshine, bright air, blue sky. He became absorbed because somehow only now did all parts of the simple puzzle come together, the whole picture drawn after many days: Toya was light, blooming and naturally beautiful; her youth, her sweet courtesy in gestures, words and gait, her pleasantness, the impossibility of imagining her in anything bad: incomprehensible melancholy or causeless malice; her simple dress, even slightly oversized, Mramri belt, dhaar rings and nothing superfluous; even these small field flowers in the background, a little wind, warm languor of the field—everything played together with her.

She stopped the wagons, and this was very easy, because Arzis himself would have stopped for such a lioness: to listen, to look, to help with anything, no problem, you help such a one yourself, it's very easy. You help such a one, and then take her for yourself, rescuing her from some small trouble, because such careful and modest, faithful, cautious with themselves and others, practical lionesses don't get into big troubles. *Life Mistress!* Arzis thought, but then immediately remembered that Life Mistresses are midwives, who are also (in addition to everything else) Ashai-Keetrah, and he immediately corrected himself: *Mistress of good life*. Or 'simple' or 'pleasant' or 'eternal,' he couldn't decide.

Sweet Toya, he thought. And he became jealous, watching how cheerfully and successfully she conducted conversation with the Mramri, and these really were dhaar-Mramri, and gestured, pointing now east, now west; at some moment she points at them, at Arzis and at Mauna (separately), and it didn't escape Arzis that she smiled at him, but for Mauna—a mixture of nod and light bow. He became even more jealous of her, to everything in general, ready to destroy any encroachment on her, greedily awaiting the slightest provocation, and it occurred to him that...

"We turned the wrong way, wrong way for us. We need to go back," Toya reported serenely to her companions, even joyfully.

It turned out she had easily and simply convinced these Mramri to take them along. Here's the thing: they had turned left, should have gone right, but this whole company was heading to Verin-on-Vlea, and they were going the same way. There's enough room, apparently no money needed (Arzis offered himself, though they had precious little); in short, they threw in their things, climbed into the wagon, and off they went.

Toya sat beside two lion-dhaars-Mramri; certainly, she was shielded from them by a sack on which she rested her hand; Mauna sat next to Toya. Arzis had to sit on a sack, opposite, because the bench turned out to be half-broken. The arrangement proved unfortunate, Arzis determined: he didn't like that Toya and Mauna weren't beside him (right-left) or behind him, but nothing better was possible: you can't put Mauna on a sack; beside the dhaars—also not; you can't put Toya on a sack—everyone knows that for females 'sitting badly is bad,' and he himself didn't want that either, or it would turn out—he with Mauna on the bench, and Toya on some sack, alone.

But a whole part of the bench, to his right, was occupied by some lioness.

And you can't throw this lioness off the bench either, or off the wagon—after all, lionesses need to be protected.

It all began when Toya—either excited, or confused, or impatient—asked Mauna something privately, in her ear. Having listened silently, the Mistress agreed. And off it went: Toya began chattering non-stop with the two dhaars, and an older dhaar female who sat permanently at the very front of the wagon.

She spoke in Mramri. Not good—beside Suungs it's not permitted to speak in your own languages, all dhaars know this; on the other hand, at their own home they can speak in their language in front of Suungs (if you take into account that they can't have any real 'home of their own' in the Empire in the true sense, because they can't own real estate, just like lionesses, except for certain prides, but not Ashai-Keetrah, who can own anything, and anyone, just like Mistress-Mauna), and since the dhaars are in their own wagon, and even took them as traveling companions, then... The conversation was lively, with laughter; Toya gestured, like the lions did; they were very surprised about something once, and clearly asked again, and Toya confirmed, 'yes-yes-yes,' that is 'yan-yan-yan.'

Arzis tried completely futilely to understand what was being discussed. His linguistic helplessness combined with his close observation of the two young males, trying to catch them in any encroachment or rudeness toward Toya, or—oh joy, a reason!—in any movement toward her, any touching. Arzis decided he would surely kill them if they gave him cause. Maybe he wouldn't kill them, but they'd remember it. But no. These two were sickeningly careful. Quite possibly, they sensed Arzis's dangerous presence with their tails; they totally avoided looking him in the eyes, even in his direction; nevertheless, despite this, they continued

chattering with Toya. Sometimes the dhaar female joined the conversation.

The dhaars have cropped manes, as is proper. In many places dhaar lions are allowed very short manes, close-cropped, especially if the dhaars are more or less decent and of good breeding, and they had exactly that. On some dhaars it looks unforgivably good, adding dash. Exactly that case! They also have no weapons, as is proper, only clubs.

Arzis thought he should forbid Toya from talking with them. Then he doubted whether it was worth spoiling everything like that. Then he began thinking that these were all incredibly stupid thoughts, and he needed to relax and just ride.

"Are you not bad-bad there?" Toya cared.

"No. It's alright," Arzis answered.

"Want to eat, drink something?"

"Everything's fine, don't worry."

Mauna, as always, didn't look like a normal lioness. She probably can look however she wants, but just not ordinary. Instead of fussing with some handicrafts, starting conversation with a fellow traveler, dozing with arms tightly crossed and paws tucked up—she just sat calmly, sometimes looking at Arzis for long periods, indecently serious; then simply closed her eyes, but clearly wasn't sleeping. Aumlan, of course.

And suddenly Arzis, who was tormentedly observing all this world, was pulled from his trance of thoughts:

"Lion will take this thing, it's hitting my paw."

The fellow traveler lioness was addressing him, from the right, in a low voice. The only thing you could say about her was that she was a Suung (from the north) and that she had wrapped her head completely in a long khinastra, as old females usually do.

"What? What do you want?"

"Take the spear, it's banging on the floor, irritating."

"Nowhere to put it. Don't bother me, I'm listening to the conversation."

She said something to him in another language. Clearly a question. Seemed like Mramri—Arzis's exercises hadn't been in vain, and he was already catching the tone, sounds and words.

"What?" he asked again.

"How are you listening to the conversation if you don't understand Mramri?"

"As if you understand. You look like a Suung."

"So what? That's right, I'm a Suung," she answered briefly.

"And how do you know Mramri?" he turned to her.

"Mramri: I speak low form, high form, coastal dialect, fida. Helsian. Some Kafnian dialects. Northern, but bad pronunciation, won't pass for native there."

"Wow. Solid. I knew one dude who could speak Draag, and... But for a lioness to know so much..."

"I'm a translator."

Arzis apparently acquired a foolish look.

"I establish bridges, it's a trade. Why are you staring?"

Arzis did take his legendary spear, and stuck it high behind the sack, like a flagpole; the point gleamed in the sun. The dhaars glanced over.

"Nothing. Fine. Even interesting."

He fussed about, an idea came to his head.

"Listen, what are they talking about?"

"They said many things. I wasn't listening to everything."

"Well... At the beginning. What did she say?"

"She introduced herself. Toamlia, daughter of Tolorvur. Mother: Iri, wife of Tolorvur. When Mramri introduce themselves, they always mention mother and father. Not all, actually, but only..."

"Toamlia. Daughter of Tolorvur. Iri... Listen, okay, but what are they saying now?"

"So," she waved. "I work with deposit, five imperials. Half day: ten. Whole day: twenty. Won't take less today."

Arzis, without thinking, handed her ten imperials, such money he still had. Mauna, seemingly in aumlan, seemingly with closed eyes—heard this, looked at him; he paid no attention.

"Here."

She leaned down, hiding behind his shoulder, as if examining the field. Arzis hadn't asked for this, this secrecy, but immediately appreciated it.

"The dhaars are surprised. Respectful. She speaks in high Mramri, as they speak in chiefs' houses. For simple Mramri this is too lofty, and sounds unusual here. She doesn't completely, but understands low forms, so they sometimes have to repeat several times."

Pause.

"Toamlia asks if they have water or wine-juice. Answer: they have everything. She says her fiancé and his sister might need a little to drink, and..."

Oh yes, she knew her business. She translated immediately, without hesitation, simultaneously.

"Her fiancé? His sister?"

"Uh-huh. That's you. And the young-hamanu next to her is your sister. That's what she said."

"Ah... Yeah, yeah."

"Yeah," the lioness agreed.

"Listen, what does it mean... so it turns out she's from a Mramri patrician family?"

"They don't have patricians. There are chiefs, and those around them. The upper class. She's from them."

"For sure?"

"For sure. She has a dialect that even native Mramri can't properly replicate. Want me to show you?"

"Go ahead," Arzis nodded eagerly.

— *Taamlianna, mein Fräulein, geruhet-geruhet zu wiederholen: Ehrfürchtig grüße ich. Gewähret mir die Ehre.*

"*Ehrfürchtig grüße ich. Gewähret mir die Ehre,*" Toya repeated in great surprise.

"*Ehrfürchtig grüße ich...*" the translator also repeated. "Do you hear?" she asked Arzis. "How do your ears hear it? Now you. Well, repeat it."

"Eh... fertig."

The translator laughed genuinely, Toya smiled genuinely.

"Good. Thank you."

"As you say, betrothed."

Arzis wanted to get angry at her, then smirked, looked away and waved his hand; looked at Mauna—she was biting her claw. She was eavesdropping!

Meanwhile Toya's conversation continued, and the dhaars began showing her what goods they were carrying, and even—it seemed—wanted to sell something.

"Sir want buy?" they showed Arzis some pipes.

"No, no," Arzis waved them off.

"Wait, are those masks?" Mauna perked up.

"Maske, maske," the dhaars nodded, and turned to the translator for help.

"Yes, there are masks there too," the translator confirmed. "They're for Mramri holidays, Suungs very rarely buy them."

"Show me that one. No, no. That one. Give it to me!" Mauna demanded.

"They say it's one of the more expensive ones," the translator interjected.

"It can't be..." Mauna took the mask.

Toya and Arzis exchanged glances. He chuckled with amusement.

It was a fox. Unusual, white-red, with red pointed ears sticking up, sharp-muzzled. Mauna put it on and settled herself, examining everything around as if for the first time. Her eyes were visible in the slits, but barely, as a hint; red flowing lines of paint under them; and those ears—towering, alert, and black at the tips. The nose was hidden, the chin—no. Half-fox, half-lioness, and nothing less!

Here the old dhaar female committed a whole chain of crimes. First: she clapped her hands, approving the look. Second: she pulled out a bronze mirror wrapped in cloth, passed it to her lions, and they held it so Mauna could appreciate it. Moments passed during which the wagon swayed, everyone was silent, and Mauna looked at herself. And looked. And looked. The dhaars started to put the mirror away, but she firmly held it with her hand. And announced, carefully removing the mask:

"We must buy it. Arzis, buy it for me."

Yes, just like that, she up and called him by name. The remnants of secrecy—down the drain.

"Toya, tell them we're buying it."

"Um..." Toya hesitated, looking at Arzis.

"Toya!" Mauna commanded.
The young Mramri turned to her compatriots.
"Hey, seriously, money's tight..." Arzis reasonably addressed Mauna.
"Buy it. Buy, buy," Mauna demanded.
"Ninety imperials," Toya announced.
No-no-no. Arzis forbade all this:
"We don't have that much, listen, forget it."
"Toya, do you have money?" now Mauna pestered Toya.
"No-no."
"Sell something," Mauna told Arzis, still pestering Toya.
"We don't have anything!" he spread his hands.
"What do you mean? What does 'no' mean? How can it be—no money? There's always money. Robber. Sell the sword."
Arzis only stayed silent at such stupidity.
Mauna put the mask back on. From the front they announced that there was almost nothing left to Verin, just five more lyens, and the river Vlea was already on the right; Arzis and Mauna heard all this in immediate translation from the lioness-master-translator.
"Dhaars aren't allowed to trade weapons," he found his voice.
"What a bore," she said in an unusual, different voice; playful. Arzis had never heard such a tone from Mauna. "You know: there are dhaars much better than many Suungs. Right, Toya?"
"Hmm..." Toya said with a guilty smile, pressing her ears down, embarrassed.
"That's right."
And Mauna-fox extended something oblong, wrapped in cloth, to the two dhaars. Her movements were different; not more sharp, not more smooth, hard even to describe—just different.
"There are Suungs who are better than everyone. And braver than everyone, and kinder," Toya placed both hands on Mauna's leg. "Who are such... such... such as..."
She didn't finish, because the dhaars exclaimed in surprise, one of them whistled: the sirna, received from Vaalu-Mauna, looked upon the world of warm blood. The Mramri turned it this way and that, touched the guard, ran claws over the golden engraving "S. s. Vaalu-Amaya, Ashai of Messaging, for Glory and Blood," tapped the finest Norramark steel. The old dhaar female took it from them and also began examining it.
Arzis watched all this and thought only one thing: why had Mauna lied to him that she didn't have a sirna? She left it in the coach!
"I want the mask, and I give you the knife," Mauna-fox simply announced. "Tell them," she asked Toya.
"What do you mean?" Arzis spread his hands, leaning forward.
The translator observed everything attentively.
"I don't like when you're serious. I like when you're cheerful and chop everything."
"But it... it's worth a fuckton," he didn't understand. "And you know that it..."

"You said we don't have anything. Liar, you deceived me."

"They can't pay that much, what's wrong with you?"

"Always money and money with you, bah. Why do I need more, I have plenty, and there will be even more, what should I do with them? I need," she pointed at herself, sharp-muzzled, "her."

He only scratched his mane, tugged at the braid that Toya had plaited for him today. Ah yes, there she was: Toya hurriedly announced to Arzis:

"They're asking your permission: do you approve?"

"Me? Well I... I..." he was actually confused.

Confused? Not that he was confused. No. Try to confuse him. All these new female foolishness turned out to be so novel that he hadn't yet figured out how to correct it or punish it or ignore it or talk sense into it or something else.

"Arzis-Arzis, I'll be good, honestly-honestly," Mauna promised.

He understood nothing anymore. Now she's asking his permission to sell her sirna for a mask for performances before cubs. If you understand nothing about what's happening with females, then: be ironic, indifferent, playful and lazy.

Damn them all!

"Do you want this very-very much?" he leaned back.

"I'll die right now, so very-very much. My nose is even wet."

"Toi, do you believe her 'very-very much'?"

"I believe in her very much," Toya answered most seriously.

"Go ahead. Give us the mask for the knife," Arzis surrendered.

"This *Fra*... this hamanu says they have almost no money," Toya hurried to report.

"And we don't need it, we have a whole basin of money, even a barrow, right, Muni-foxy?" Arzis said mockingly.

"Muni-foxy? You said Muni-foxy?"

Arzis looked away. Just say something wrong to a lioness, and it begins

The dhaars still consulted quietly. They, of course, knew there was a catch somewhere, but didn't know where. Suddenly the translator lioness said something very confident to them, they nodded in agreement, and the old dhaar female agreed too, and they hid the sirna; thus the deal was completed.

"You need to get to Verin, right?" the translator quickly clarified, freely and without embarrassment touching Arzis's hand.

"Yes," Arzis confirmed. "Why?"

She looked at him, measured him with her gaze, he at her; she moved her ears under the khinastra, quite noticeably.

"Nothing."

"I'm Muni-foxy, I'm Muni-foxy..." the Messenger repeated melodically, not caring about sirnas and deals.

Freeing her tail from under her dress, legs crossed, tip between paws, Mauna in the mask enjoyed the ride, and hummed a pleasant tune under her nose (without words), and Arzis noted that she had a smooth voice,

and possibly she could even sing, though he'd never observed this in her and never heard it; no one interrupted her, as you don't interrupt anyone doing nice things in an excellent state of spirit, because it's so impolite to destroy someone else's pleasure. He watched her with a strange mixture of mockery and interest, because the new look suited her very well, very much so. He especially liked the sharp, high, pointed ears. Interesting thoughts crept into his mind. This frightened him: you can't have interesting thoughts about Mauna. Or you'll miss.

Toya watched Arzis. He caught her fleeting, daytime, everyday glances, now and before, many times. Mostly, these encounters ended in hide-and-seek: Toya usually looked away, pretending she wasn't looking, or it was accidental, or it wasn't her; sometimes there was a barely noticeable smile and embarrassment. Now though, with paws crossed below, hands gripping the bench, she not only withstood the meeting of gazes, but a game began, quite a game: Toya would look down, then at him, then down again, then at him again, as if inviting Arzis: 'come on, let's go, lead, down-down-down-down...'

Foxy Jumped Off the Wagon

"Have we arrived? Where are we?"

This was Mauna who had fallen asleep, right in the mask. Taking it off, she looked at the world of warm blood: the river Vlea, pebbles by the shore, a beautiful backwater.

"Arrived, of course. See: they're waiting, lined up. Especially the Chamber Guard, look," Arzis pointed at three rotten stumps.

"Really?" Mauna said surprisingly, trustingly and so melancholically, examining the stumps.

Arzis wanted to add something more, but laughed:

"I'm just pulling your ears. Sleepyhead."

"We're all sleepyheads, everyone. Such is the craft," she shrugged, and awkwardly jumped off the wagon. "Ow..." she shook her paw.

"No, Mauna, you're not everyone," Arzis looked around the new place.

"You too," she held onto the wagon, still trying to soothe the pain in her paw. You need to jump better, not just anyhow.

The translator lioness had apparently done enough jumping in her life, and very carefully climbed down from the wagon, and when she walked, she limped badly. She is still quite fine, prime age of strength, but used a stick.

"Are we here for long?" Arzis inquired of her.

"We'll go further a bit later, Verin is nearby," the translator answered calmly. "Let the horses drink, the dhaars want to sit. Do what you want."

"Yes, boss," Arzis gave her Legate honor, and continued washing in the water. He thought: undress or not? He very much wanted to get into the river, but was afraid that the Guard would appear right now and chop them into sausages. On the other hand, what would he do if they showed up—whether naked or clothed?

"We're very dirty, we'll soon have lice, and we'll get sick," Mauna accused, as if Arzis had thrown them into a swamp, infested them with lice and sent diseases.

Arzis picturesquely pointed at the water with both hands, as at a treasure and solution.

"There, please."

"But we won't do it here, we're embarrassed," Mauna demanded conditions. The mask stuck up amusingly with its ears on her neck, she pushed it aside.

No problem. He pointed to the backwater, over there, to the right. Hide yourselves and have fun.

"Let's go, Toya," Mauna sighed heavily, doing him an extraordinary favor, making unthinkable concessions. What did she want, proper bath-houses here?

So, he needs to be closer to them, also to the right. Threw off his gear, piled it in the bushes. Arzis checked, could he be seen from the road? Didn't seem like it. Belt with sword (from that border youth), bag (from that border youth), very nice and light shoulder guards, dirty gambeson (warm as fuck), tunic, throw the sack here, another one (smaller), bracers, gloves from the belt, flask (need to fill with water here), tunic, knemids, maneguard; he didn't put the spear in the bushes, uncomfortable without it, but placed it nearby, by the bank, on the rocks. Most of all he liked his wool neck wrap, it's great—neither hot nor cold in it; also you can pull it over your ears, and so on.

He sat in the water—cold. Lay in the water by the bank, on the rocks—almost got carried away. Sat again, stretching his legs, leaning on his palms. You can wash your mane like this: stick your head in the water and start scratching it there. That's it.

“Some beer would be nice,” he squinted, looking at the high sun.

Well, soon there would be. Need to get into an inn in that Verin, and sit there, making forays into the town, assessing what where how; since help was promised and all the rest, that means beer would be too.

He got out and sat on the warm stones, scratched his chest, lazily pulled his belt toward himself. In that bag from the border guard, there's definitely flint in it, but also something else that Arzis had never pulled out, either because there was no time or he was lazy. So... Greasy papers, some accounting or fiscal numbers, an inventory. Oh, stylus, so our border guard was literate. Tobacco pouch; and he said, the bastard, that he doesn't smoke (but for some reason there was no pipe). Though what difference does it make to Arzis, he certainly doesn't smoke, can only chew it, for company. Nipple once gave him chewing stuff with some crap, Arzis caught such a bright high, it was too fun, and he swore off taking anything from the Hustrian. Oh wow, not bad, small scissors, and excellent ones, Arzis even trimmed his claw with them. He'd have to show it to the lionesses, they'd immediately find use for them. There was no money. The papers were almost blown away by the wind, and Arzis reluctantly weighed them down with pebbles; they kept lifting, and he noticed they had more than only numbers on them.

He took them to look. Not bad: drawn with stylus were rows of wagons, a border tower, a palisade—the artist drew what he saw around him. That the border guard turned out to be an artist, Arzis also understood: innate talent, no other way; probably someone even taught him. How did he end up in border guards at all? Idiot. On the other hand, Arzis also ran off to the Legate at sixteen—also a fool (an even bigger one). On another paper he saw a bottle in wicker, a piece of cheese, grapes; everything stands on a table. Well, beautiful, lifelike but:

“Dude probably had the munchies,” Arzis concluded. “Should have drawn some meat,” he took the stylus and carelessly added a piece of dried pork leg. No, here's what's what: still the border guard turned out much better.

What the artist wanted on the third paper—Arzis didn't understand. Maybe he wanted nothing. Maybe he did want something, but not what, but who. There's a table, and standing behind it: a lion (on the left), a lioness, and another lioness. The lion with a spear... Wait.

"Is that me, or what?" Arzis peered incredulously, even touched himself with a claw.

Yes, it was him. He's looking to the side and smirking. The lioness in the middle with a collar (Toya!), she's looking at Arzis from below; the collar too big, not like in life, and spiky (actually there were no spikes on it). And the lioness on the right looks straight at you; the border guard was definitely captivated by her gaze, probably everything was drawn for its sake, unmistakable; Arzis could practically hear the drawn Mauna about to say 'don't talk.' She could latch onto you, turn you inside out like a glove, she could.

Arzis looked this way and that, even turned the paper over; on the back—fiscal prose of life again. He spread his hands, setting the art aside on the stones.

"Well, what was I supposed to do?"

He rocked back and forth on his ass, threw a stone in the river.

"No, really, what was I supposed to do? Say: 'Hey, grunt, we'll be going now, don't... no hard feelings'? Or what? Had to fuck you up with this stone, it's the job. More precisely, with grinding stone. I have a mistress, understand? They want to kill her. There she is, there!" he tapped the drawn Mauna.

He waved it off, baring his teeth:

"Fuck you then."

A gust of wind, and the picture flew into the river, along with the other papers. Arzis tried to catch everything, even ran into the river, naked and quick, but no way—only slipped on the stones and painfully twisted a claw on his paw.

Mauna and Toya bathed in the backwater, having made sure that seemingly no one could see anything; carelessly threw their things on the bank. Mauna swam, Toya mostly stayed by the bank, and even filled water in a jug—it would come in handy; she was worried about it, wrapped in burlap. Toya washes, washes, then very critically examines herself, with a very displeased muzzle, and continues washing. Toya offered to wash Mauna, all correct, a good offer from a servant (dhaars very rarely serve a Messenger personally, though Mauna knows that, for example, the amarah of Seedna—not a Messenger, but also not just anyone—uses only dhaars in personal service, for which many twist their finger at their temple⁹¹); and so it was: Mauna stands in the water, looking around, hands on hips, sometimes wiping her nose, slightly frowning, serious, and Toya washes her like a crystal jug; there was no suitable cloth, so she washed as is. Toya didn't avoid anywhere or anything, but here everything came to-

⁹¹ *Vaalu-Leenayni. Cunning bitch: proper surface, rotten core. —S.*

gether—in Andaria lionesses of any stratum are very direct with each other, and Mauna is Andarian, everyone knows. What she didn't leave behind was the mask. It's on her neck, she even swam with it.

"Mistress, I please a question: what is this?" Toya touched the sun wheel near her tail.

"Insignia. Bloodline mark."

"Is it like this, like on the neck?"

"Like that."

"And I won't wash it off with water? Can-can I wash it?"

"You can. The fur blackens from burning. It's not paint," Mauna wiped her nose, facing the wind, not looking at the Mramri.

"How is it, they burn with fire?" Toya worried.

"No."

Mauna thought. Well, absence of witnesses—the whole world had turned away anyway.

"Come on, stand up, I'll wash you too."

"Fus, thank you, no-no-no, Mistress, I myself-myself, everything's fine," Toya worried even more, very verbosely.

"Don't talk," Mauna forbade. "Stand with your tail."

Not only was her back washed, but also her tail, Mauna even beat it sharply against the water, then against her palm and Toya herself, so water would come off the tip.

"Turn around."

When attention was paid to neck and scruff, the neck cord got in the way; but from behind you can't see what's kept on it, but from the front everything opened—Ahey's triangle and the ring. Mauna, wet palms, examined it, water dripped from Toya, and drops fell from Mauna too; the Mramri was silent, the Andarian—also; she read "Trust no words," but not aloud, to herself; Mauna turned it, like this and like that, and it occurred to her what would happen if she yanked everything toward herself with all her strength—what would happen then, would everything tear or not? She even tapped the ring's bronze with Ahey's copper. The time that could excuse the pause ("got tangled," "need to remove it," "interferes with washing" or "what is this?") had hopelessly passed.

"Can you tell me something, Toya?"

Exactly so: not "tell me," or even complete omission of this unnecessary in communication between a Messenger and a dhaar of her Family; amazing question: Toya not only can, she's obligated to speak, and only the truth, how else.

"What, Mistress?"

Excellent question. 'When did he give it to you?' So Mauna knows—even before that day, before everything. 'Whose ring is this?' My Vaal, this would be the stupidest question in the Empire. 'Why did he give it to you?' Well yes. How all in vain, since empathy had long ago delivered the Message to the Mistress. How long ago? Long ago.

"How did they think in the Family: it's me who killed Vaalu-Amaya?"

The Mramri, brave, she didn't avoid her gaze. Nodded, finely-finely: yes.

"Everyone?"

Mauna thought Toya would say 'I don't know.' She was sure of it, it's reasonable: how would Family dhaars know what they say in the whole Family, on the floors, not in the basement? But: yes.

"And what do you think?"

No.

What else can Toya say? Of course she'll say 'no.'

All in vain, Amaya: no one saw the symbol, didn't understand why you tied your poison to your hand; the symbolon of things, it's accessible to few. Even if they noticed, everything was taken for yet another deceivry, even more subtle than required. Well, good. All the better. Let it be.

Mauna smirked, not releasing the ring.

"Of course: you only say so because you're afraid. And rightly: I'm to blame for everything; everything—because of me."

"No," Toya said, and embraced Mauna; yes, just like then, when they first met, when confessions were made and arrows scattered down the steps; only then the dhaar stood lifelessly, and now—Mauna did.

"I knew everything even the first time, there, Mistress, when Mistress was shooting-shooting and I was carrying arrows. I learned everything then."

Mauna pulled away first again, strong-willed one; in embraces your will melts, and Mauna has more northern mountain snows than Toya has cellar ice. She put on the mask.

"Let's go to Arzis."

"Let's go-go. Where else should we go but to him, Mistress. Right?"

Mauna didn't answer.

Arzis mindlessly rubbed his maneguard with his tunic, sitting on his gambeson; he decided he wouldn't put it on for anything, warm bastard. He'd already tightened one knemid, but was too lazy for the second, so he sat like that; the spear tip already gleamed. Beautiful points this blacksmith made, what a master he was, there's even his mark; and the shaft length—perfect. He didn't know that the lioness in the fox mask had told the dhaar lioness "Let's sneak up on him," and the lionesses successfully stalked up, the wind helped their plan. He startled at the touch—sudden, and palms buried slightly in his mane, a little along his neck; he immediately recognized who it was. The palms disappeared. After sitting a bit more, waiting, he tossed aside the maneguard (nonchalantly, Arzis likes throwing everything around with a clatter), turned around.

"Careless. Guess who?" asked the fox.

Arzis didn't know that Mauna was having a day of stupid questions (and certainly actions); but he knew everything else. He immediately did this: pointed with his spear (butt cap) at Mauna, but looked at Toya.

"What makes you think so?" the fox asked again (playfully, or does it seem so?).

Now not immediately—he hesitated. Merry fangs of the fox. Serious Toya; in his opinion, even too much; interesting that she's not looking at anyone, but to the side and down.

"Toya, she would..." he didn't finish.

The dhaars and wagons, they're far away, a good two hundred steps, no less. Arzis wouldn't mind at all if they left without them, and even rejoiced that none of them bothered him; he was a bit surprised why they were hanging around here so long. But here he was beginning to guess—three firrans galloped up, three riders on them, real local chic, expensive pleasure; one firran had its muzzle painted. The dhaars said nothing about this stuff, about this meeting, the translator—also. Clear that these are local lions of business, taking tax from dhaars: where would dhaar merchants just travel around for nothing? But still unexpected. More uncertainties again, as if there weren't enough. The lions talked with the translator, she stood apart from the dhaars and a couple times pointed at them, at the Mistress and her Family (what remained of it).

The second knemid fastened, and everything else was pulled on without delay.

"Alright, beauties, let's go swim some more," he said, and immediately abandoned the idea: the three on firrans headed toward them; more precisely, two dismounted, and the third rode mounted. The translator stayed in the distance, didn't come down to the stone bank, but didn't leave either.

He looked at positions, who where what: Toya three steps from him, standing sideways to them, still wet hem of dress, scratching claw against claw (and even audible: scratch-scratch, scratch), also watching these new lions; she felt his gaze, readily looked, meaning 'I don't know what to do, but whatever you say, Arzis'. Mauna: in her mask, paws spread wide, again somewhere found some stick and holds it before her in outstretched arms, implausibly straight posture. Well really, like she's looking at horses in the back yard of her residence.

"Mauna, listen, stand like a lioness."

"Excuse me?" she looked at him.

"Stand like a lioness from an Andarian village," he said separately, slowly, "and take off the mask." And quickly added: "Damn it, just stand like Toya. And don't stand like Ashai."

Mauna obeyed halfway: the stick was thrown to the ground, the mask didn't come off, she embraced-covered herself with her arms, as if frozen—an honest attempt to portray just a lioness.

"Don't say anything, I do the talking."

Arzis tucked his spear under his right armpit, pointing the tip backward—a sign of peaceful intentions. The two in the distance climbed down from firrans, tied them up, unhurriedly walked; the third rode up like that, mounted. Toya in extreme horror at the sight of the firran with a painted muzzle; Mauna couldn't care less, performing her comedies.

"Sup, how's it hanging?" a question to Arzis.

"Everything as it should be, boss."

"Eh... And you tell me: how should it be?"

"So everyone's square."

Good.

"Ain't square, drifter," holding the firran, the boss tossed up Mauna's (Amaya's) sirna in its sheath. "Tell me where you're trying to fuck us over."

"You?" Arzis was amazed. Relaxed gesture: "No-no-no, didn't know about you. The dhaars. This is bullshit, we traded this for junk," he pointed at the sirna.

"You know, better to know about us."

"Dhaars didn't say, their fuckup," Arzis shrugged calmly.

Good.

"Not locals," the lion stated.

"No," Arzis confirmed, looked at Mauna, but she's doing nothing, still hugging herself, only this fox mask, well this is just complete incomprehensibility; looked at Toya—she's frightened and anxious, winked at her ('everything will be fine, as always'). Probably the boss was thinking the same thing about the fox, glanced at Mauna, but didn't attach significance—easygoing character, didn't take dumb things to heart. The firran sniffed around them, but showed no great interest, and Arzis determined it was young.

"The dogsnouts say: not just junk, they also weighed out wheels for this bullshit."

Lie. The dhaars gave no money.

"They're talking out their ass. Their business. If they took wheels, let them give'em where they need to," Arzis parried without difficulty, pointing first at the wagons, then at the boss.

"Eh... out their ass. They love that. Right, dogsnout?" he said to Toya.

Toya, of course, answered nothing. The lion of business stood a bit more, looked them over; meanwhile those two approached, stood on the sides. Once more looked at the sirna, drew it. He clearly understood that if the sirna was bullshit, it was extremely high-quality bullshit. If these three suckers traded such a thing for a mask, so much the better: more suckers—better for business.

"Aight, luck on the roads," he ordered. "You stay here, dhaars roll out."

"No problem, boss," Arzis instantly agreed with everything.

"I love when everyone understands everything," the boss smirked.

"As do I. Of course, we need to stay. Water. I love water. We all love water... It both soothes and carries away metanoia. And it's better for you this way."

This was all said by Mauna. Arzis slowly turned his gaze to her, the fox.

"Yeah?"

"How else. I don't like all this: everyone dies, there's no end to deaths. So it's better for you to live."

"Yeah?" he wasn't impressed.

"It is thus. To live, give back the sirna, it's not yours, I sold it to the dhaars. You burden me with troubles. We're better apart; begone, or he'll kill you," she demandingly extended her hand for the sirna.

"Well, shit. Who said?"

"I did. What, can't you hear? He," she openly pointed at Arzis, "killed the Service agent with a spear in the gut, overturning the table in front of him. He killed a Helsian mane-short who was relieving himself under a tree. He killed a Helsian lion with sad eyes, and the spear knocked out his tooth, like this. He killed a border guard in Shadowrock, just with a stone. He robbed and killed a married couple to take a piece of meat, a couple knives and a water jug. He's a born killer, he's my living weapon."

Fuck me, thought Arzis.

The boss evaluated this whole escapade. The second scratched his nose. The third didn't scratch anything, but took several steps to the side, ending up to the left. Terrible, because that's where—Toya.

"Listen, your tail-lifter is for real fucked in the head," the boss said to Arzis even quite seriously, with such compassion.

"And for the tail-lifter he'll also kill—he loves me. Yet enough, I cannot abide more deaths. They are arrayed against my hegemonikon and the Brightest Star," she again imperiously extended her hand for the sirna.

The second laughed, the third didn't laugh, but waited to see what the boss would do. He looked at Arzis, who didn't move at all, didn't change his spear position and bore such a suffering expression that the boss only led his firran back (the young one didn't understand his master and turned sideways), spat and unhurriedly, at a walk, rode away. The second without particular thought also trudged away on his own two paws, the third backed up for some time, and seemingly... seemingly that's all.

Arzis watched the retreating danger. A warm, nervous wave passed through him, went into his paws, the fur on his scruff stopped prickling. He frantically rubbed his muzzle, nose, closing his eyes tightly. Toya wasn't breathing. He slowly looked at Mauna.

"Listen, do you want to reach that Verin in one piece, or in chunks? Listen, if we die because of you, I'll kill you myself."

"Better like that than as a tail-lifter. Or," Mauna looked at Toya, "dogsnout."

"I'm not offended, it's nothing, Mistress, nothing-nothing, I don't care..." Toya pleaded.

"I," she pointed at her again with the raised stick, "command you to be offended. You must. Be offended, Toya," she looked at the danger that was approaching again, having granted only such a tiny respite, "and quickly. There's no time."

The danger was returning; the same thing—one firran, three lions.

"So, this, I don't get it. Have you already figured out what to pay for this bitch? Or should we work you over, and fuck your whores?" the boss said, having thought on the way back and gotten angry on the way back.

"Gonna run you deep," the second laughed again.

"Kill him!"

The Suungs have many legends and tales about how Ashai-Keetrah help warriors come into rage and amok, and most importantly—complete fearlessness, as much as you want, you can cart it around by the wheelbarrow, like that gold for that Messenger, such things can be told to cubs at night or on the road. Maybe once it was like that: some terribly painted one, somewhere ahead, on a horse or—even better—on a firran. But Arzis knew from himself and others that it's all not like that and all lies: Ashai in the Legate sit in forts, or in camp infirmaries, or with the main guy in camp, burn cups there or cook in heavy vats all sorts of things (useful and not so much; and if it's a holiday, then fun stuff, then we love them), they ride with supply trains, put on airs, or do nothing at all; and most of his Eastern past Arzis spent sitting in a small fort for a hundred heads, and there were no Ashai there, but there was guard duty, games of flis or sticks, and all kinds of hopeless routine.

Such things. *All nonsense and lies*, Arzis thought detachedly, dropping his spear into his hand from peaceful position, turning it around (that's a lot of time, by the way). Only victories and self-sacrifice they demand, offer them both, well because that's how it is. Like, that's what's needed. He noted dispassionately that the boss also had a spear, right-handed, and Arzis was on his left side, well there you go, and the boss's spear was short, sized for him, because with a long one it's inconvenient, and you need to know how to use it mounted. The boss probably has sore shoulders or he's just not used to it, and he should have carried his weapon over the firran's ears, but from fright-inexperience he smacked his own firran in the snout, and with the spear it didn't work out for him—everything got stuck. He would have done best to jab the firran in the sides, it would have jumped forward, and that's it: then you could easily deal with this fool and his females.

Fool-Arzis drove it into his thigh, or somewhere there, into that very thing, where it was open. Can't tell.

Alright, got a bit lucky, Arzis noted calmly, happens to anyone. In theory, the firran, enraged by such a brazen and shameless attack, should throw itself at him-her-everyone; but probably, as always, the external show let them down, and such things were revealed: the firran is young; the firran isn't properly trained; the firran got a sharp stick to the muzzle from its master, and then this very master began falling from the saddle to the left, because it hurt very much. Arzis noted all this matter-of-factly. The boss, who fell heavily (interesting why, could have stayed in the saddle, Arzis thought) could have some more, so Arzis added more. True, not for long, only one thrust, because the firran spun in place, trying to throw off its already dragging master (paw got stuck in the stirrup), and then—successfully throwing off the burden—ran off where it came from. On the way—well, shit—it knocked down the second one, who honestly wanted to help the boss, and got so carried away he didn't have time to jump aside. Arzis, by the way, noted that Mauna threw herself at the boss somehow (it's okay, let her have fun, she's always so serious). A spear is longer than a sword, especially if you're lying on the ground with this very

sword, and Arzis managed about four times to poke the second one's legs, very carefully, not risking himself at all; since he was already sprawled on the rocks, well there you go, you're welcome. The second one, after that, couldn't get up and was crawling away; sat on his tail and crawled, one leg still fine, but the other had to be dragged. He's still dangerous and holds a sword in front of him; doesn't carry spears, but he had a bow. Why had? Because he threw it aside, taking it off his back, and his quiver scattered across the rocks, arrows lying in all directions.

Well alright again. And what about the third one, Arzis wondered. Ah, the third one, he decided to chase after Toya. Generally, it's interesting to chase and catch lionesses, Arzis verified this back in cubhood, one of the most pleasant activities; he, in this cubhood of his, noticed this: suggest to a lionessy to play tag, under any pretext; chase her, then you catch her, and—the subtle moment—you'll have several instants to do what you want with her, she's all yours. There will be resistance, indignation, laughter and even claws to the cheeks (there was, there was), but that's all a little bit later, with mandatory delay. Catch the moment, well and catch lionesses. Probably the third one knew the same thing, because he chased Toya, but unsuccessfully—Toya really very-very much wanted to run away from him, unlike the lionessies of cubhood and youth. Arzis, like Mauna, missed some important initial beginnings of the chase: Toya threw a stone at the third one, no harm, just hit his chest leather; she threw a sack at him too; Toya ran away from all of them, not toward Arzis or the Mistress.

What about Mauna, he wondered. Mauna is indeed a lioness of action, it's well known fact, and was already busily slashing the boss's neck, not afraid, sitting right on him; lionesses, if they strike with a knife (and here it's not just a knife, here it's Vaalu-Amaya's sirna, which fell from the boss's hand), then they don't spare, they just slash, they're very cruel if they've decided.

Toya, making a big circle together with her pursuer, returned to Arzis, and the second one almost cut her legs when she rashly decided to run past him; he tried! The third one was catching up, but his ardor had cooled, and he stopped, because the situation wasn't looking very good.

Mauna left the execution of the boss, and, hands bloody, calmly picked up the bow. Again pushed her fox mask onto her scruff (only now), exposed her lioness muzzle, and put the sirna on her belt. She took another arrow for herself, a second, third, gripping them between her fingers. The bow turned out to be just right, by the way, long and sensible, as tall as Mauna herself, yew, even with a leather grip. The second one probably carried it for show, or decided to shoot at apples today—shooting from a firran with such a bow isn't right, won't work very well. Without much preamble she stood straight and shot at the third one, who didn't know: drag the second one with him? fight with Arzis? run away? settle the matter with talk? Hit! The arrow stuck in his leather. Okay, no problem, once more, bang, hit the leather again.

The third one decided not to tempt fate a third time. You can't take an archer, a crazy bitch-lioness-fox, she has infantry in the form of Arzis, who's doing nothing, just bristling with a stick with steel on the end; and the prize, Toya, whom he so rashly chased (and why?), had hidden behind their tails and turned into the rearguard. He simply began running away, a reasonable decision, and Mauna sent an arrow after him, but—alas—missed.

Well, no problem. Mauna gathered more arrows from the scattered quiver, and then altogether took the whole quiver and without any haste arranged the arrows neatly in it, and threw it over her back. Arzis, so as not to waste time, still tried to poke the second one's legs, test him this way and that, crouching low to the ground and making thrusts, but he unexpectedly briskly deflected everything with his knemid. No, well not completely unsuccessfully, poked soft spots a couple times, he roared and cursed.

Only now did Arzis notice that he, the second one, was saying something, maybe even begging. And generally, probably there were all sorts of words, but he heard nothing; the fading echo still lived in his ears (without which there's no space and no love)—‘kill him, kill him, kill him’. He suddenly remembered that, actually, it ought to be furious and terrifying, or just terrifying; but before that he'd somehow forgotten.

While he was remembering all that and dispelling the Mistress's echo in his consciousness, Mauna was riddling the second one with arrows, a simple target, spread out on the river stones—methodically, without any extras. That one, more alive than all the living, didn't even think of dying, and broke off a couple of them. Already the fourth, fifth. She didn't approach him, just walked around in circles. The sixth changed much, because it hit his jaw, and he—until then still fine—stopped resisting. Still alive, but already finished.

Having done the deed, Mauna suddenly ran toward the road, at a quick trot, with the bow.

"Where-where, Mistress?" Toya's voice completely brought Arzis back.

All the necessary and unnecessary experiences, rages, angers and fears crashed down on Arzis at once; they waited indignantly, driven into a corner. He ran after Mauna like that, heavily, and gasping from everything that surged from that corner. And Toya, of course, ran after him.

There it is. The dhaars, seeing all the events from afar, naturally rolled away as fast as they could. But they left someone behind—the translator lioness. Either because they have some scores and disagreements of their own; or because she's lame, and simply didn't manage to jump up; unclear.

“Halt!” Mauna demanded of her.

The lioness tried to go somewhere, but hopelessly. She stopped, turned around. What she saw: a lioness, well that very one who seemed calm-half-mad, and likes to sing, with a mask on her scruff, her ears

pressed down from the mask, palms bloody, bow and arrow in the other hand, just pure horror, to frighten cubs and not only them.

"Did you tell them about the sirna?" she pointed the arrow at her; the translator noted this gesture—so imperious, as if she every day points arrows at such small fry as her, Myrianfa, or simply Myri, or—as the local criminals nicknamed her—Licky (because 'to lick,' because 'tongue,' because translator, and they find it all funny, though it's useful to them).

"Whom? About what?" trying to play dumb or what.

"It's you," the lioness nodded, laying the arrow on the string. "I sentence you."

Bad day: such a one can sentence to only one thing. And you can't run away.

"For what?"

The question clearly puzzled the lioness, she thought about the reason.

"The dhaars honestly traded, but you dishonestly reported," she decided.

What injustice.

"I work with them," she pointed at those who, if still alive, not for long. "Many here work with them. And all... and all dhaar merchants. Hard to imagine what will happen now..."

That's true. This one, these ones, they dealt with some serious manes. Try to explain yourself now, get out of it, oh, there will be questions for her, if this madfemale doesn't riddle her with arrows, and there are still three left.

"Dhaars can't trade weapons," Myri added the obvious. "They would have come to them anyway."

"Mistressy, don't," the Mramri, kind, young, embraced the madfemale, hung on her neck, directly shielded Myri with herself.

"Get on your knees. Beg forgiveness from the Messenger, Suung," said the lioness-fox, barely withstanding the peaceful attack of the Mramri.

Well, what can you say.

"I can't, my leg won't let me," Myri answered honestly.

Their chief arrived. What a sight; not smeared with blood, but looks worse than the madfemale. This one won't start conversations, will kill now and won't scratch himself. But it seems he decided to kill not her first: the Mramri was pushed away, and the fox grabbed the collar and shook:

"You fucked us up, Mauna!"

He shook her again, good and hard.

"I—speak! You—shut up! I—speak! Toya—shuts up. There she is, she," he pointed at the Mramri, "she understands such simple things. But you, supposedly a sister of un-der-stan-ding—jack! Shit!"

The lioness with the bow didn't resist, but pointed the arrow at the Mramri:

"I present: dogsnout," and now pointed at herself: "Pleased to meet you: fucked-up tail-lifter."

"You know why you're so stupid?" he tapped her chest with his finger.

"Tell me," the fox asked calmly.

"Because you've never gotten it in the mug! Someone else always took it for you!"

"So give it to me."

The lion drew back his hand.

Go ahead, hit her, Myri thought maliciously, clenching her fists. *Smack her.*

The Mramri seemed to keep the fox's punishment in sight, but didn't interfere; she seemed unwell, bent over, palms on thighs. "*Everything will be fine, everything will be fine, everything will be...*" she said at once, in her native language.

To great disappointment, he didn't hit. He grabbed her by the muzzle and began leading her around, tormenting, but already clear he wouldn't hit and wouldn't even strangle. The madfemale didn't resist at all, her arms hung limp, the bow dangled helplessly and the arrow was about to fall from her palm, and Myri, the lioness, understood everything. The Mramri, also a lioness, watched this game, very serious, and—seemingly intent, an intent gaze; Myri noticed how her tail flicked under her dress. And just when he grabbed the fox by her real ears (the lioness's ears), at that precise moment she intervened, and hung on the lion:

"Arzis! Stop! Don't do anything to Mistress! You can't! Please Arzis, everyone stop, please-please..."

Myri smirked. Young-risky, seems someone would shoot you for such things, darling, not me; and if the legs-paws were better, she could have disappeared—everyone here had already forgotten about her, the poor translator, with all these passions. But alas.

"Will you obey?" asked the lion, shaking the fox by the lioness's ears.

"Yes. What do you want?" asked the fox.

"For starters," Arzis pointed at the translator, "use this lioness to get to Verin without problems, and don't make more holes in her. It seems to me she understands how things are here."

"As you say, Arzis. What else do you want?"

"That's enough for me."

How he got them under his paw, Myri even gained respect.

"What if she betrays and sells us out?" the freed lioness looked at the translator.

"Well, Sworn-Bond her, then she won't betray," he spread his hands; probably joking.

Why 'sword'? Why 'bond' me? thought Myri.

"Good," the lioness agreed, obedient as promised, and approached. "Please, remove your cloak."

"I don't want to," Myrianfa stubbornly refused, but not without reason.

The lion didn't beat around the bush, approached himself, removed it himself, and then stood with his tail to everyone, crossing his arms and even spat. He didn't notice, but Toya and Mauna saw: instead of ears—she had half-cut stumps.

"I am a Messenger, Vaalu-Mauna. Do you know who Messengers are?"

"Yes," Myri answered distrustfully.

"You can bring me a Sworn-Bond of loyalty until your blood cools. If you do—you'll serve, you'll be in my Family."

"Do I have a choice?"

"You do. If you don't want to—you can go. I assume that because of this misunderstanding," the Messenger called it all that, 'this misunderstanding,' "you'll have troubles."

"Rather, hobble away. And there will be troubles."

"Serve me—troubles won't trouble you."

Right then.

"So you're a Messenger?" Myri leaned better on her stick, since her paw already ached from standing.

"Indeed."

"Somehow I'm not sure. Dubious circumstances, I dare note."

"She is a Messenger, mistress-hamanu, let hamanu believe," Toya assured.

"Well, look at that," Arzis said without turning around. Hard to say what he meant.

But Myrianfa followed the advice and examined Mauna. Everything's clear. Especially the bloodied palms with which she'd already smeared the bow. Oh yes.

"It seems to me you're not very prudent for a Messenger," Myri prudently noted. She added in Mramri: "*Tut mir leid für dich, Taamlianna: du läufst mit zwei Verrückten rum. Wer sind die?*"

"Mistress is very good, lady-hamanu," Toya praised the Mistress like merchandise; she let the remark about madness pass between her ears.

"I don't believe it," Myri concluded.

"Our Mistress is just what's needed," Arzis didn't turn around. "It happens to her, well, got up on the wrong paw, can flare up, gets all worked up. And misunderstandings happen."

Mauna said nothing, didn't even show her insignia with the ring.

"Let Mauna show the sirna," Myri decided for herself. There it is, on the fox's belt.

Surprisingly, Mauna wasn't offended and didn't fly into a rage again, but showed it. She examined it attentively.

"It's written 'Vaalü-Amaya' on it. And the Messenger is called Vaalu-Mauna? Listen, I'll go my way, if you don't kill me. Forgive me, for Vaal's sake, if something's wrong, I didn't want anything bad for you, and for everyone."

"What's the difference to you? If she's a fake Messenger, then the Bond will be worthless, and you'll disappear in your Verin. And this way at least lead us there quietly. That third one, motherfucker, he ran away, might bring buddies. You'll get it," he poked his claw almost at her nose, "and we'll have new troubles."

Well, at least that.

"Let's go then, I'll lead you along the Vlea through the fields."

"We'll put you on a firran, if I tame one," Arzis promised.

"First the Sworn-Bond. If not—go your way," Mauna ordered.

"Oh no, she'll bring company. Only with us," Arzis disagreed.

"Don't talk," Mauna was already ceasing to obey, she'd lasted just a little while. "Either this way, or go away."

After thinking, Myri said:

"Alright. What should I do?"

"What's your name?" Mauna asked.

"Myrianfa. Myri."

Not without difficulties, many clarifications, some explanations and a couple of bad jokes from Arzis, Myri swore to Mauna, thinking of one thing: to reach (or ride on a firran to) Verin, and there disappear in it, it's her native place after all.

And 'Kill Him' Again, and Something Else

Everything honest and without adventures: Myri slowly led them to the famous and good Verin inn 'Three Sisters' in the evening; Arzis couldn't entice-tame a firran, and quickly abandoned this idea. Since she, being local, wasn't going to sleep in it, the Mistress ordered thus:

"Do you know those dhaars? Find them. Give them back the sirna, they bought it honestly, and come tomorrow," and gave her the ceremonial weapon of Ashai-Keetrah, an element of decorum, sacred dagger, protector of Vaal's lionesses.

Getting off so cheaply, secretly rejoicing, and extremely fearing the unclear future (local criminals! Cirz's death!), Myri disappeared in Verin; and Mauna with her small Family collapsed to sleep in a room 'for four-six heads,' as the inn's hostess described everything—Arzis didn't spare the very last money. They pretended... well, pretended to be no one, no one asked, they didn't give names, even Mauna behaved nicely (deathly tired, it's visible, something completely wore her out), and that was it.

Arzis got up very early in the morning, before everyone, sat outside and examined local life. They gave him meat porridge and he ate it with a wooden spoon from a wooden plate, sitting on an overturned bucket by the well. He ate very slowly, with stops, doing nothing, unclear dreaming. Without his spear he felt so-so (left it in the room, on the stand—really a good inn), but Verin is a decent town, here you need to walk with a sword (you can with a saber, you can with a club, you can just like that), and he's all chewed up anyway. Just began thinking about pressing matters when a young Listigian lioness came, one of the inn's servants, and began fussing around the well. She exuded a pleasant scent, and generally added coziness to everything. Something about Arzis instantly pleased her, despite his chewed-up state (or thanks to it?), and she began acting silly that the well cover was so heavy, oh so heavy:

"La, will sir help open it?" she flirted right off the bat.

Arzis assessed her practically—no, not working one (working lioness, that is whore, that is tail-lifter, that is tail-swisher); she's plain-looking, but Arzis knows that ugly lionesses aren't spoiled and are reliable, often have tasty character and quite the temperament, too much attention ruins a female totally. He casually opened it. She turns the handle and stared.

"Will sir close it for me?"

"Listen, maassi, I'm getting married," to his credit, he closed it, and ate more porridge, picking at the plate. So she'd leave him alone.

"Really? And when?" she got angry.

"Tomorrow. Or maybe today."

Angry, she left. To her credit, she didn't say anything more.

So then. Oh yes, a cat approached, completely domestic and mind-bogglingly fat. Arzis didn't stop the experiment—everyone's probably interested in how fat a cat can get—and threw him some porridge. So then. Here, in this Verin, they should lay low: him, Mauna, Toya. How? It'll come to him, somehow. Need to look around, wait—there's no trust in Imperial authorities. They shouldn't be found, but they should come out themselves to some Messenger. And even then, it's a rotten idea. They decided to screw over Mauna, and who? Just about anyone. This anyone is cool and high up, and there's no point trying to play detective. Need to get out of the inn early, here they're like on a plate—where else to look for fugitives in a foreign town? Some friend of Mauna's will come, say a couple sweet words, then immediately whack and that's it.

Arzis knocked the spoon against the plate, threw the cat more food. It keeps rubbing against his paw and decided that Arzis's tail is a toy.

The problem is only that Mauna won't go for any of this and will only say one thing: 'Don't talk.' She, as is known, is owed by everyone; she, as is known, serves the Suung Empire. They should find her, take her in their arms, kiss her all over and all that.

Just thinking about her, about the name—immediately palms over eyes, open mouth, noisy exhale. Even dropped the spoon with the plate on the ground (joy for the cat). Mauna. Ma-u-na. You can start with something, right? He'd kill for her, everyone, burn the whole Empire, not to mention the rest. Scholars say the world is round, well he'd burn this round thing for her if needed. This is all the Sworn-Bond, this is how it works; it only at first seems like nonsense. Or not? Mauna can't be trusted. Arzis hadn't decided if she's dangerous for him (and it doesn't matter, if you think about it); she's already insanely dangerous for Toya. In a battle of females—Mauna against Toya—the second one has no point even entering the arena, better to hang herself right away, it won't hurt as much. She wanted to save Toya because of the Family? Not even funny. She wanted to save Toya, not because of Toya, but because of—him ("living weapon," she said (?); "he loves me," she said (?...)). With Toya she just didn't account for the fact that... Arzis, he... Arzis and Toya, they... but it's impossible to account for everything. She didn't account then, now—she will. Fuck. She is, undoubtedly, high-born, Arzis assessed this. She is, undoubtedly, courageous, Arzis assessed this. She's devoted to her Craft, young Mistress. Vaal-Suung. She is, undoubtedly, a predator: for Empire enemies, for her adversaries (don't envy them), for other Messengers, for herself. Even if they eat her, they'll choke. She should be left just here—it's only common sense; take Toya, politely say bye-bye, drop by if anything. Do sisters care? They'll find her here, in Verin's inn, Messengers can manage at least that. Do sisters want to finish her off? They'll find and strangle her here, in the inn. Either way he's not needed anymore, all this is pointless. This whole Family thing and further 'misunderstandings' shook her up, it's like shaking fizzy wine—the cork will just fly out; some of hers have already flown out. He wasn't wrong, at the very beginning, still knowing little but already perceptive, to write himself the most im-

portant, prophetic rule: 'Don't fuck the Mistress.' She won't eat him, like Manu, no, very-very unlikely. Nooo, won't eat him. But it's simply impossible, he simply can't, it's like jumping to swim in the middle of the sea—swim as much as you want, but what then? Could he? Of course he could, pffff, everything's clear as Vaal's fire here; he understood everything: whether she wants, what she wants, how she wants, and that meanwhile you can-should choke her to fainting and break her nose bloody; probably she's one of those who love when you bite the tail, and pull by it, not the ears or nape; let's leave details, there are too many, dark ones. Mauna. Ma-u-na...

Toya.

And here's Toya.

"Hi, Arzis," she said to him, and he nodded. "Cat," she took it in her arms and sat down nearby.

"Don't take him, he's eaten so much porridge he'll shit himself."

"No," Toya answered carelessly. "I'm taking him gently-gently."

Arzis believed her.

"You snored, Arzis. Mistress and I even turned you over so you wouldn't snore. But you snored anyway."

"You too," he said seriously, examining the weather.

"Really?" Toya petted the cat. "What shame."

"Toya, let's go for a walk," Arzis stood up, but first drew a bucket from the well and drank straight from the bucket; Toya, funny, offered to run for a cup, but in the end drank like this too, simply. Mishap: he wanted to lower the bucket, but everything was done carelessly, and it just began falling, unwinding the handle. Arzis didn't try to stop it—bad business.

"Damn," he looked with curiosity as it splashed in the deep well. Toya looked too, prudently leaving the cat so it wouldn't accidentally fall into the well. "Let's go."

What's here: you can go out to the road and go to Verin, the inn is on the outskirts. No. You can go see what's happening behind the inn, and so they went.

"What will we do, *Arzisss*?" she added a long, relaxing sound to his name.

He understood she was asking in general, not about right now. But about in general he hadn't decided yet; but what he had decided was to go along a path into the woods, there's even seemingly water there, lots of water, it wafts from there.

"We'll look around, see what's up. So, how's this ride treating you?"

"I was very afraid-afraid," Toya answered immediately.

They walked a bit apart, she—somewhere to the left.

"Especially then, by the river. I was very scared, what Mistress was like..."

Arzis didn't interrupt.

"...she can be so fierce, *Arzisss*. Angry, cutting, throwing from the bow... how is it... shooting-shooting. Like, how she said: 'My sacred arrow will strike...' Something like that. Sacred arrow will strike..."

He didn't remember that. So he really heard nothing, Mauna had yelled his ears off with her 'Kill him!' Straya works like that, probably.

"...when she shot that lion who was lying on the ground. And the one who chased me. You know, he was all pierced with arrows-arrows. Probably died."

"You run well, Toyusha. Good that you got away."

"What else was there to do?" she shrugged, took hold of him briefly when they stepped over a stream. "I threw a stone at him, and he got angry."

"Lucky he didn't have a crossbow," Arzis seriously pondered about such a possibility. "I think he fled here, to Verin."

"Hamanu Myri said he's from Verin, when we were walking."

He noticed that the path went down and that ahead was a lake, quite large, and above it—fog.

"Alright, arrows. So she was yelling, you say," said Arzis.

"Not yelling, no. Quietly like that, to herself. Praying to Vaal... more precisely, not praying, but..." Toya waved her hands helplessly, "...enchanting arrows with Vaal. Vaal was there, yes. Oh, Mistress," Toya appealed to the absent Mauna.

"Yes, Toi, right, you don't pray to Vaal."

"Yes-yes. Sorry," she thought to herself, and like this: "We have something similar with arrows, among Mramri, we also say such things, it's also said like that with us. It's if, well... well how to say..." Toya just didn't know how to say it.

Oh, being the first to speak of such things to a lion—great shame. No. Unless he asks, then okay.

"Look, Toya, a lake. There's even a boat," Arzis went along the small dock—the path led to it. He touched it with his paw, out of mischief, and it rocked.

"Oh, *Arziss*, don't go boat, let's not, please," she pressed against him, a little bit, two palms on his shoulder. He tickled her neck, let her bring purring into the world, looking at the water and further kicking the boat, but it didn't work—she didn't purr; the tied boat, it sailed away a bit, then returned back. And so a couple times. He noticed that the tickling stopped, and his finger slid along her mouth; this is also ticklish, lionesses laugh at such things. She didn't, only chuckled, warm air on his palm. She licked his finger, decided, he wandered along her teeth: one-two-three, there's the fang, and more. She bit a little, just little-little, well we know how.

Arzis looked around, covering her whole muzzle with his palm; invisible Mauna would have said: 'Made myein.' You know everything, Munisha. Toya stood like that, eyes closed.

"Come on, let's see what's there," he pointed at the booth by the dock, a shed, they store all sorts of things for boats there, maybe tackle, maybe something for fishing. Toya had said once that she knows how to catch fish-fish. He caught fish in childhood. Simple plan: he—in the boat, she—with a net, and off they go.

"Yes," she answered simply.

They approached, he touched the door, but it was locked with a wooden lock, of course.

"Come here," he led her behind the shed.

"Yes."

What do we have here? Well nothing: back wall, a couple hooks for ropes without the ropes themselves, for some reason an awning from rain, roughly knocked-together table under it, already half-rotten. But there's a leather canvas hanging right on the wall, also under the awning, just what's needed. He pressed Toya against this semi-soft wall, hard, his thigh between her legs, and palms—also to the wall. The lesson in the basement hadn't been in vain—Toya didn't get flustered when they kissed. A good lioness should endure, even if it presses and hurts; she has no problems with that. She has no difficulties with anything, really. Mishap: a difficult puzzle of removing a Mramri belt with one hand while licking a lioness's neck, and Arzis got angry, quick to anger, like all good lions.

"Take it off."

"*Ja*," no hesitation, the belt fell instantly.

Now what? However you like, whatever feels right. Turned her by the tail, muzzle to the wall. No, Toya, this way it'll be tight (though with you, it will not be any other way, you're a dham); here, lie on the table, no, not fully, not flat on your chest and stomach, just lean on it, sort of (it's about to crack so hard, they'll break everything here to pieces). No, don't turn around, arch your back, more, like that, yes, Toya, here you go. Inevitably, the hem of her dress went up along with her chemise, and she lifted her tail herself—no need to teach this a lioness. The dress is long, three-quarters, it'll slip down—no need to guess about that; so we'll handle it simply and pull the hem right over your head, onto those dhaar rings, not for nothing did we take off your belt. Now that's it, now Toya can't even see, she's listening to everything with her mouth half-open, slightly licking her lips, mysterious: it's always mysterious when a female's eyes are covered. He slipped his hand between her thighs, pulled her closer; well, it'll be tough this way, Toya, we need to wet you up, but there's no time, it's got to happen now, we've waited long enough. Here, lick my fingers, more; good, but we need more, so he licked them himself too; reached between her thighs again, now better; well, for the glory of the Suungs, Toya, and truly, with an eighteen-year-old Mramri dham, it'll be rough and over quick. Her tail—on his shoulder. The table proved sturdy, didn't think of breaking, and barely even creaked. Not a sound from Toya, just a turn of her head, and her fang gleamed white again, he touched it, reached for it somehow (awkward, but necessary); ha, good lioness, she licked his palm. There's a gray stripe on her tail, up her back, ending somewhere at the nape, and he liked that stripe so much. Arzis gripped her hips with his hands, the key is not to press against her fully, or he'll definitely crush her, and that'd be a loss if Toya were gone. No, Toya, we won't be here long, it's impossible, and he growled softly and now pressed her fully against the table (it'll hurt her, but that how things are

done), and it roared in his ears, exactly like Mauna commanded, shouting: 'Kill him!'; but Toya knows a thing or two, because she commanded him, without a word: 'Come in me!'; lions, no matter what they think, obey the calls and summons of females.

He placed his hands on her shoulder blades, need to catch his breath. No need to exit out of her, just stand like this, it's all good, let's relax. Oh, right, she needs to be fully made a Suung, just a couple of trifles left:

"Say: lots of blood, more blood."

"What?" Toya exhaled, still captive, still not seeing the world. She raised her head, her ears seemed to perk up, but it's hard to tell with the hem over her head.

"Say: lots of blood... more blood... It's required," he pulled the dress off her head, freeing her gaze.

"Lots. Of blood. More blood," she looked up, left, right. And indeed, her ears were perked.

There. Just one trifle left—need to go to any Magistrate or to Ashai-Keetrah. Better to Ashai-Keetrah.

"Oh, *Arzisss*," she straightened her hem, this way and that, as every female always does after such affairs.

He rubbed his nose, sat on the table. He still needed to tend to her properly—that way is good for her, it's calmer for them this way, more decent, they need it this way. But Toya wasn't tidying herself up, but stood looking around. She rushed about, here and there, looking for something.

"Fus, Arzis, sorry, turn-turn away."

It's hard to turn away here, if you're sitting on a table, so he just looked to the side. And what's the point anyway, too late now to turn around, we already know each other, Toya. Everything happened next exactly like in Shadowrock, only in this case Toya didn't even really crouched much; she leaned against awning pole with one hand, held hem with the other, and from her poured abundantly; she even pressed her forehead against the post. Well, like that toast, with the money basin: 'May females prove abundant!' Arzis saw everything from the corner of his eye, and then stopped pretending altogether, and looked at his lioness.

She was definitely feeling relief and getting much-much better.

"Why didn't you say so right away?"

"But when?" she made such a martyred smile.

Hey, Arzis knows for certain that this is unpleasant for lionesses, and even got a bit worried about all this. That very Cabbage (she was a good whore, smart female and sensible, and kind by nature, could sing and play all sorts of pipes) told him that in her youth she got a bad client: she tells him "Just a moment, I'll step away briefly," but he said no and that's it, started climbing and climbed on. She endured all this beastliness, and then complained to the pimps, and they fleeced the fool for payment twofold, and someone presented Cabbage a tall bronze pitcher as a joke, which she loved very much. So she told him that it's painful and unpleasant, and even harmful to something there; females are always dealing

with some mishap there anyway: something either burns, or hurts, or flows—no need to add more.

"You should tell me next time, or it'll hurt you like that."

"It's worksome," Toya waved her hand, releasing her hem, and smiled, no longer martyred.

Arzis laughed.

"Oh, Toya, I love you."

"I love you very much too," she wiped her hands on her dress and fastened her belt, carelessly picking it up from the ground.

He beckoned her, embraced her, kissed her nose and near her eyes. He stroked her ears, thought that he should remove her dhaar rings now; thinking a bit more, he decided to do everything properly—they'll come off later.

"Don't be angry, I drank too much water-water at the well."

"Bless you. Let's go, we'll grab something more to eat."

And they went, what else was there to do here, not go boating, really. They came to the inn, where early morning had already turned into just morning, and it was crowded. Beer in the morning is a foolish thing, so he got both Toya and himself more food—a whole pot of meat porridge. The mesmerine tea didn't work out: Arzis says "bring it", the inn's hostess got stubborn and said that dhaars aren't allowed to have it. Arzis got angry, despite Toya's smoothing over and her saying she "doesn't want-want" (liar), and decided to crush all these tea ceremonies:

"Enough! Hamanu will bring this tea! Toya, that's it, you're marrying me."

"Eh, sir," the hostess reasoned, wiping a mug, "you need to go and take her: they'll remove the rings, and she'll be among the accepted Su-ungs. Then you'll have it," she pointed at Toya.

"We'll drink now and go right away. I said it!" he knocked on his chest.

Toya went completely quiet at the table.

"Will you marry him?" the hostess asked calmly, waving the mug at Arzis.

"Okay. Yes. Fus."

"Vaal be with you. I'll bring it now," the hostess left.

Arzis winked at her, stroked her weak palm, took it, intertwined fingers.

"All done, Toya. Now you'll down some tea."

"*Arziss*. Are you honestly-honestly, or?..." and she seemed so serious, but now she's about to smile, her gaze sparkled.

"Are you crazy or what. Who throws around such words. Eat your porridge, it's great here."

"Let me feed you then. And shouldn't we ask-ask our Mistress?" she managed to simultaneously sparkle with her eyes, bite her claw and give him porridge from the pot.

"Why. Well if we need to, I'll talk to her."

Good, that's it. Arzis said it. Toya knows, if Arzis said it—that's how it'll be. She didn't ask anything more, straightened up. She took the mes-

merine tea, sighed. And then something arrived at the inn. Wow, what arrived here, good grief. The hostess of 'Three Sisters' frowned, began looking out the window, another serving lioness looked out, a third; the present lionkind turned their heads. Arzis isn't by the window, can't look out without getting up.

You can't be wrong, there's no mistake—a bunch of Chamber Guard poured into the inn. Also, it seems, town guards. Also who knows who else.

"Trouble, Toya. Guards," he said quietly to her.

"The shiny ones?" she asked in horror.

"Those very ones."

She covered her muzzle.

"Behave normally, don't show anything."

She stopped.

"Give me your hand. Let's go," he headed for the exit.

He noted: the inn's hostess was hurriedly answering something to a lion of official appearance in a cloak. Both had frightened looks.

"Chamber Guard," they stopped Arzis. "Sir, have you seen a high-born lioness yesterday-today? Young, Andarian, insignia," the Chamber guard pointed to his own neck.

"No, didn't see her," he shrugged.

"The lioness could have been with a lion and a dhaar," the guard looked at Toya.

"No, didn't see such a thing," Arzis pretended to recall. "Let's go, Sele," he said to Toya. "This is my fiancée," he clarified. "Just going to the Magistrate, big day."

The Chamber guard didn't bother delving into the personal life of someone who decided to marry himself a dhaar, and hurried off somewhere; Toya and Arzis went outside. Holy mother. There are about ten more guards here.

"What about Mistress, Arzis?" Toya wasn't exactly resisting, but her hand started pulling away from his.

Arzis stopped, looking at all this. Looked up again at the weather.

"Alright, Toi, run away yourself. First walk, then run."

"Never. What are you thinking, without you-you. No. No," he heard such a confident tone from Toya for the first time in his life.

"They'll probably kill us."

She didn't answer.

He waved his hand, silently turned around, and walked like that, dragging Toya by the hand to the second floor, into the unknown, where Mauna was sleeping (or no longer?). He reconsidered, whispered in her ear:

"Stay here, downstairs."

"No," she dug her claws into his hand. *Ahey, You are with me. Or Vaal. Sorry, Ahey, now I'll go to Vaal*, she began reasoning aloud like that, in her language.

What to do, they went upstairs.

"Maybe this is help?" Toya suggested timidly.

"Who knows. In such matters you shouldn't check," Arzis answered, though that's exactly what he was doing now. "Distance is life, closeness is death."

Arzis didn't come up with anything sensible while walking. About five heads had gathered near their room's door, one of them—an important-looking Chamber man; the inn's hostess was constantly scratching her chest; also here was that very frightened official, and by the Imperial rod in his hand Arzis more or less determined that this was, probably, the magister of Verin himself, no less. They had gathered all right, but somehow they didn't dare enter, or something.

"Stop, you can't go there," a guard intercepted them, not a Chamber one.

But those ones immediately paid attention to them. The important Chamber guard squinted:

"Sir..."

He stumbled, hurriedly pulled out a piece of paper.

"Sir Arzis?"

"Kinda... yeah."

"Sir will approach, please. Please," it was clear he was relieved.

The guard decided not to let Toya through.

"Hey, don't touch her," Arzis warned, and—of course—took her with him.

"Is Flawless Vaalu-Mauna there?" the important Chamber guard asked hopefully.

"Don't know. She was still there early this morning. Look inside, why are you standing around."

"You can't just enter a Messenger's presence," the important-chief Chamber guard said quietly, though before this he seemed to say a lot of things, even shouted, gave orders.

"With me—you can," Arzis said and entered.

Codex and Aamsuna

As expected, Mauna was sleeping there, not even twitching an ear that so much lionkind had appeared on the threshold, sleeping very peacefully, on her back, mouth open. She was breathing, her palm with the silver ring hanging off the bed (for some reason she'd removed the bandage from her finger, which Arzis had long ago told her to wrap, and which she had diligently not removed until now). Everyone stared, not knowing what to do when you see a sleeping Messenger; everyone except Toya:

"Mistressy, Mistress," she stroked her hand, kneeling beside her. "In the world of warm blood. We're here."

Mauna woke without incident, sleepily looked at Toya, then at those present. Slowly rose, leaned on her palms, yawned. Turned her neck. Arzis already knows Mauna, started smiling; that feeling when the Mistress has returned and is ready to give it to everyone: take that, scum, take-take-take! *How can you not like her?* he thought. She has a serious curve of lips, always, born that way, and even if she completely closes them, there will always remain an entrance in the middle, a dark mystery of a gap, just a tiny bit; Arzis loves this too. He also likes how she shifts her gaze, and he doesn't envy anyone whom it now captivates: one-two-three-four, one... He also likes her ears, he also likes her eyes, they always promise you something: sometimes challenge, sometimes death, sometimes reproach, sometimes loyalty, sometimes boundless confidence—never defeatism or surrender.

"Mistress," he said himself too. "Beautiful morning."

Oh, and a look for him. He smiled even wider. What difference does it make whether they die or not.

The important Chamber guard knelt.

"Chamber Guard..."

"Who ordered to find me?" Mauna demanded, instantly seizing control of the conversation.

"A directive was issued..."

"I mean, which of the Messengers, name?"

"I cannot know."

The question is pointless, really. It's easier to answer who didn't order it. Mauna doesn't know yet, and neither does Arzis (who always knows everything), and certainly not Toya, that at this very moment Vaalu-Nel, setting aside all Messaging, is arranging a massacre in Shadowrock: she's turning inside out all the local authorities and border guards, her bodyguard even enters some houses, her bodyguard chief, a towering lion for whom armor was made only separately, literally shakes the local magister; she had a long and unpleasant conversation with that local Ashai, Vaalu-Liara, from which, however, Liara emerged without consequences for

herself (clever, she kept silent about some details, and emphasized others), that Nel, who couldn't care less about any Protectorate agreements between the Empire and Helsia, which stipulate this and that, entered with bodyguards and town watch onto the Helsian side of Shadowrock and nearly burned down the eatery where Toya had taken refuge; one Helsian had his head cut off, because he was caught at the wrong time in the wrong place; and this is still not mentioning the unfortunate sinecurist in the Chamber of Ashai-Keetrah Affairs and Defence of the Faith in Shadowrock, who really did admit some 'Norramark Guard,' which seemed to him 'the very best, ideal, he'd never seen such,' and their papers were in perfect order, but now he seriously feared for his life, because ahead loomed treason to the Empire and grave crime against Ashai-Keetrah, unless in a fit Vaalu-Nel orders her bodyguard to kill him on the spot (it didn't come to that); Vaalu-Umallu meanwhile was digging around in the neighboring town, more prudently, but no less persistently, very interested in where that very Guard that accompanied Mauna had disappeared to, because it was already known that she hadn't passed through Fort Shatt, where Mauna's Family was poisoned (and which wasn't getting better, but somehow only worse); and indeed, through this town, Schaffnausen (simply Schaff), some Guard had passed, and they were helped with logistics, like all Guards, as proper, and Umalla very carefully noted and recorded all this, personally. No, they both knew perfectly well that it was agreed to meet Mauna in Verin-on-Vlea, and the main help was going there separately, but they feared that suddenly Mauna had wandered the wrong way, gotten lost or simply hadn't made it, so they were still searching the roads and surroundings.

They didn't know that they were known about in the capital, that the Thirteenth Legion knew about them, and not only that unit, that Vaalu-Vesta (She-Who-Is-Not-Spoken-Of, You-Know-Who) had requested an audience with the Emperor, and so on and so forth...

Mauna didn't bother to continue, so the magister of Verin (it is indeed him) dared to break the silence thus:

"Most Excellent, what are your orders?"

"First: invite any Ashai-Keetrah to me, and I also need Ashai vestments. Any plasis will suit me, in my size. Second: give me," she pulled out a knife from under the pillow, carelessly threw it on the table, thought, "town guard for protection, not the Chamber, and henceforth I will remain here only with any Ashai or, as a last resort, an Approached One. Third: notify everyone... notify everyone that I have been found and will await meeting in Verin. Fourth... Let sir take it down, or is sir skilled in mnemonics?" she addressed the chief Chamber guard, who still stood on one knee. "Let sir stand."

"I am recording," said the magister, and was indeed doing so.

"Fourth: notify the remains of my Family at Fort Shatt that I have been found, and that Arzis is with me, and that I have Toya with me, and the rest—perished or missing without trace. And send them to me. If my

Family is no longer there, then find out where they are, and send them to me. And lastly: everyone out."

Everyone left and quietly closed the door, except Toya and Arzis.

"So, Mistress, how did you sleep?" Arzis inquired.

"Good, thank you," she yawned and stretched.

She lied a little. She dreamed not her dreams, dreams of the Sacrifice, they are unpleasant. But one can endure that.

"These... they seem normal," Arzis nodded toward the door.

"Seems so," Mauna stood on her paws, Toya bustled around her and hid something, pulled out something, "I dove into that Chamber drengir, this septimarr, seems clean..." Mauna examined herself, even smelled her chemise. "Ugh. With all this, there's not enough empathy for everyone," she grumbled, "you'll be finished before night falls. Or even noon. My Vaal, dear Alamut."

"Mistress, there's a new chemise. Completely clean. Arzis..." Toya looked meaningfully at him, tilting her head.

"Let him stay, it's calmer with him," Mauna waved her hand. "What, you got a clean chemise?"

"Yes-yes, Mistress, I took it from the inn's hamanu, she's very-very kind."

"Good," she turned her tail to him and without any preamble pulled the dirty chemise over her head, in which she had walked-run-killed-yelled-slept-messaged-cried for three whole days (and there was such a thing as crying, no one saw except Arzis, praise Vaal). She took the new one: "Oh, indeed, Listigian patterns," she examined it. "Look, Toya, wind waves and she-wolf. Pattern. Much wind and many she-wolves."

He had seen the insignia on her neck, not once, and always told her to hide it (successfully), wrap her neck with anything. Turns out there's also a second one, hidden much better—near her tail. Okay, let's be honest—on her ass, right side. Top—left, bottom—right; symmetry. Arzis's hand itched to smack, but he restrained himself.

"Mistress, shall we eat-eat? Here?" Toya cared.

"Noooo. No. Don't want to," Mauna answered, which was strange, Arzis would have eaten in her place (but he's not in her place). He had already eaten twice this morning, actually, and still wanted more.

"Toya, you know what, go wash my chemise, and..." she thought, Arzis looks at her, she stands, he sees her, but only from behind, prudent tail down, doesn't turn around, doesn't reveal herself completely. "Get something else clean for Arzis from those hamanus, and for yourself—too. If they ask about money—say that Messenger Vaalu-Mauna will pay for everything. And tidy up here, don't let anyone walk around and enter," Mauna dressed in her dirtyish svira, tightened her Ashai belt, fitted the knife instead of the sirna (permitted by the Codex, if circumstances are bad, but this is a whole topic).

"Let's go, Arzis, take your weapon," she nodded at the spear and took the bow from the stand. She gathered the remaining four arrows, simply stuck them behind her belt.

"What, Mistress, shall we continue slashing as always?" he laughed, taking everything.

"Shooting-slashing. Let's go," she finally took the fox mask from the table, and again pulled it onto her scruff, well Mauna, just wow.

Having looked around this way and that, they went to the back yard and simply began shooting at a solid wooden fence—Mauna stuck a piece of paper on a nail, which she stole without asking from the inn's counter. Ah Mauna, criminal.

"Let's see how good these arrows are, whether they'll break. But I like them. And the bow's not bad either."

She didn't bother to wipe the blood stains off it, it had turned brown.

"If you hit the nail—you're fire," Arzis stood beside her, hands tucked behind his belt.

Just as he said it, she immediately transformed into a fox, ears perked up; there she is, white, smooth red patterns, somehow reminiscent of *distance*. Second arrow, third. Fourth, and—that's it, they're done, all over again; need to go pull them out, carefully.

"Should I go get them?" he offered gallantly, without ulterior motive.

"No. You're not a dhaari to be carrying arrows back and forth," Mauna said somehow very seriously, and did everything herself.

She drew the bowstring again; you can't see her eyes, only her mouth is visible: closed lips, and small gap in the center.

"Doesn't the mask get in the way when you shoot?"

"No. Nothing interferes with me doing my service."

"Come on, it's uncomfortable," he looked—oh!—she hit their target.

"Is that what you say? Fine, agreed, teach me. Here," she stood up to him. "Go on. Do it. Let's do this."

Yes, she stood up to him, all of her. Straight, tight, pressed all against him, the base of her tail pressing against his thigh. She held out the bow, as if to say 'take it'; he took it with his left hand; touched the bowstring, as if to say 'here'; he took it with his right. Arzis is terrible with a bow, absolutely useless, but okay, whatever. Together they drew, together they held, long, longer than necessary; strangely enough, together they hit. She looked, turning head, from bottom to top, almost pricking him with ears.

"Ooooh, Arzis, it works. Let's smash. It. More," cheerful, rejoicing.

"Want more? Cool."

"Hold your firran, I still need to decide what I want."

"We're deciding," Arzis permitted everything.

And they decided. They took the third one, together—he slowly took an arrow from her belt, and she held it, they slowly inserted it. Bang—the arrow went, didn't hit the target, bent, then fell. But Mauna wasn't discouraged, again turned her head, again sharp ears nearly scratched his chin.

"As the northerners say: tsanna?" said her mouth, and eyes in the mask.

And she nudged him with her hip, yes, right there. Flirt. This is what they call flirting. Arzis thought about, no, rather felt, that she doesn't

know how to flirt, because there was never occasion or opportunity. When would a Messenger acolyte flirt, with whom? And then the Messenger herself, the service of Messengers is—Sacrifice (offspring of sacrifice; sacrificer; sacrifice); if completely precise, it's not that she doesn't know how to flirt, even the opposite, she knows extremely well, on some other level; this is unskillful and skillful simultaneously. Amazing things.

Don't fall for this shit, Arzzy. Don't miss. Don't, Arzis reasoned coldly. Good that he was relieved with Toya, good that he's empty. This helps think clearly. Just don't. Why? Just don't.

The arrows ran out, and the bow lowered.

"I'll go pull arrows out, my turn. You're not a dhaar either."

"Not a dhaar," Mauna echoed, forgetting herself (or not?) about her usual habit of saying 'dhaari.'

But it was a pointless offer, because a dhaar was found, at such a needed time in such a needed place. She was walking with a bucket, in which laundry, washing; the bucket was set on the ground, and the arrows were pulled from the fence, all four, and diligently brought back. He looked at Toya, and from her too—a fleeting glance.

"Arzis, Mistress—arrows, please," it was offered.

Mauna took three, but left one for Toya.

"Toya, what do you know about arrows?" she asked. Mauna was still against Arzis with her tail.

Toya turned arrow in hands, examined it like an unexplicable thing, which isn't so easy to use in household. She wanted to say something, didn't dare. Wanted to say again, dared:

"We say that they, arrows, it's like union. It enters you, passes through," Toya showed how it passes, "and then into the lion too. Sacred arrow. When Mramri have *Ehe*, marriage, they say such things."

"Like this?" Mauna showed on herself, placing the arrow to her heart.

"Yes."

"And like this," Mauna showed on Arzis.

"Yes," Toya steadfastly agreed.

Mauna asked nothing more, but also placed the arrow to Toya's heart.

He became very afraid that Mauna would suddenly take and pierce her with the arrow, with all female strength. It's useful for lionesses to be jealous, who doesn't know that; but a little bit, in play, for such as Toya, very much so, they come alive, feeding on feeling; but for such as Mauna—what will happen then? Everything will happen. And that's it.

The Messenger-fox took and shot herself, hit the nail, and so the arrow bounced off, spoiling: both cracked, and the arrowhead ruined, and that's it.

"Flawless Vaalu-Mauna, Ashai of Messaging?" a lionessy voice, and they all turned around, all three of them.

Standing there are a lionessy and a lioness. Oh, the young one is in a terrible, dull, very simple dress of the most inconspicuous gray color, two white cloths crisscrossed over her chest; she's in a belt, adult and wide, like the Mistress's, and various rags hang from it, large and small, here and

there, without order. The lioness? The lioness is terrible, like death itself: with clothing about the same, but her muzzle, this is something else entirely: all dirty and dark red, completely all of it, to the ears, and mouth, and everything else, as if she took and stuck her head into some bloody mess, and everywhere on her stuck black hairs, clumps of such hair. So Toya saw everything. Arzis saw about the same, though a bit more: both are Ashai, he correctly determined, but somehow completely weird: on the lionessy—an amulet of Vaal? on the lionessy—a sirna? Arzis knows that acolyte-Ashai can't wear either one or the other, such little ones. But this one—here, please, take a look. And, what's this, what's with the senior Ashai's muzzle?

Must have been quite a party, he thought.

Mauna saw much more: Mistresses of Life.

"That's me," Mauna pushed back her mask. She nodded: "Mistresses."

Here's what they learned: these two Mistresses of Life, mentor and disciple—the only Ashai-Keetrah who are currently in Verin capable of doing anything: one fell ill with serious sickness, infected with some plague; four others left for the burning of yet another Ashai, tragic death—a dry tree fell. In the villages and surroundings there are others, if needed. There are also acolytes, but what use are they. There are also two disciplaras, but they have neither home nor anything here, just passing through. To stay at the Mistresses' home, and Mauna immediately agreed to this, is possible to some extent, but this is complicated by multiple difficulties, which can't be enumerated—they have lionesses there, beds, cradles, cubs, laundry boiling, mothers in labor roaring and all that. Moreover, there's a lion (they pointed at Arzis), but he can't go there, unless they kick him to an attic or barn, or he'll live somewhere himself, let the Magistrate figure it out, or with a neighbor (Mauna waved off all options, Arzis—only nearby). But no problem, there's a proposal: here there's a good, respected Approached One; more precisely, sister of an Approached One, local Ashai trust her very much, most decent family, two teenage sons. She definitely can be stayed with for a day or two, and more isn't needed anyway.

"Excellent," Mauna agreed. "Thank you."

Oh yes, well of course, all communication occurred unusually: the mentor was silent, only the disciple spoke. If there were questions, answers, then the mentor whispered them in the disciple's ear—and she conveyed them. Only like that.

With that, the Mistresses of Life—eternally busy and always practical—said their farewells; they didn't lament fate, neither the Messenger's nor their own, and didn't even ask what and how it happened, and why, and didn't show how sorry they were, accepting everything in life as it is.

"Mauna, what are they? What's wrong with that Ashai?" Arzis asked in surprise.

Toya looked after them, rubbing her palms and completely forgetting about the laundry and bucket.

"A Mistress of the old order, true-faith," Mauna approved, swaying with the bow. "I, truly, know little about Mistresses of Life, but respect them most among all Ashai. You're asking about her appearance, right?"

"Aha, yes."

"She strangled newborn life. A cub was born with defect, with sickness, unhealthy—so she finished it off."

Arzis had heard of such things peripherally, Toya—no. She stared at the Mistress in amazement:

"Killed-killed a cub, completely?"

"Yes. Not by her own will only, but asked the father, the mother's family. Their vows forbid answering how this is done. Excellent Ashai: little Codex, much aamsuna. Then she," Mauna yawned, "aaah, smears herself in blood and walks like that for several days in myein, that's why she only communicates through the disciple," Mauna took the bow by the shoulders and stretched herself like that, to the sides, sighing. She added: "If you, Toya, already had children, then you could spit at her, or say any nastiness."

"No, I wouldn't," Toya denied, horrified at such prospects. "No-no, Mistress."

"That's how it's supposed to be," Mauna said in a 'don't talk' tone. "Any lioness can and should, but only those with children, even dhaari, though few know about this—everyone thinks only Suungs can. Ah, yes, and pregnant too. Oh, pregnant ones absolutely must. I can't imagine how they tend to mothers in labor at this time. They walk around spat upon."

"Oh, Mistress..." Toya pitied both the Mistress of Life and the cub who lived so little in the world and immediately jumped into the horror of death. She held the arrow at her chest so no one would get hurt.

"Such is the path of Ashai. You know, Messengers also walk around spat upon, it's just not visible."

Here's what else Arzis noted: the Mistress of Life looked at Toya so attentively, a lot; her acolyte conversed with Mauna, conveyed everything, messaged the mentor's thoughts if you will, but the Mistress of Life herself looks at Toya and that's it, and not even in her eyes, but somewhere at her paws, at her chest or belly.

"Come on, Mistress, not everything's so bad," he took the arrow from Toya, and she gave it up without protest.

"I thought thus too," Mauna answered calmly, and continued stretching with the bow.

It seems that a Messenger in her position, Mauna, should have plenty of business right now, but if there was any, she didn't concern herself with it. By all appearances, she wanted to continue shooting-idling, but then they came again, now a mix of Chamber guards and local watch—this, it turned out, was Mauna's protection. She accepted the watch, sent the Chamber guards away, but also:

"Get my bodyguard an armor, weapons, everything he wants. And bring me arrows right now, the very best. The very best. Arzis, go with them, they'll give you everything."

"No, Mistress, you never know," Arzis didn't want to go.

"It's fine, if they offend me here, then I'm to blame myself. Go," Mauna insisted.

"Alright, watch yourselves here," he said to them. "Stay alert. Mauna, understand? Toya?"

"How could I not understand, I'm Ashai after all," it seems Mauna didn't forget his 'sister of understanding, but you don't understand jack-shit,' or something like that.

"Arzis, go-go, please, or I won't be able to wash everything for you," Toya also agreed.

"Combat arrows to bring? Hunting arrows?"

"Only combat, broad point. Ash arrows. I only take such."

Arzis left with the watch, turned around once: Mauna still stands, looking after him, bow behind her back; she turned her head at the last moment, fox ears visible on her scruff; Toya waved hand at him.

"Mistress, shall I go wash-wash?"

"Don't go far," Mauna warned. "We'll go together later. Look, that forest nearby? Interesting what's there."

"There's a lake," Toya answered, and bit herself. Said it in vain. Mistress will ask how she knows. She'll say she went there. Mistress will ask: with whom? She'll answer—with Arzis. Mistress will ask: what did you do there? She'll answer... And she'll answer: wanted to ride the boat. Arzis. Wanted. On the boat. But she didn't want to. And they didn't ride.

But Mistress, all-merciful Ahey, asked nothing.

Mauna stood like that, beside her—city watch, about ten heads, at respectful distance, they have no idea how to guard Messengers and what to do with them. She didn't speak with them, they also didn't bother her at first, but then still bothered, and Mauna gave orders: we'll go there now, to the lake (yes, there is one, they confirmed), and there she'll shoot, and they'll simply cordon around so no one approaches, but they shouldn't stand nearby, but farther away. No less than two hundred steps, precise Mauna determined. They brought arrows, said from the local arrow-master, a whole armful (no one told how they forcibly dragged him from the local pleasure house, where he'd been sleeping until now).

The Mramri really didn't go far, and tried to wash Mistress's chemise in the bucket, but it was going poorly, and she cursed under her breath—stains, they wouldn't come out.

"Toya, let's go."

And indeed—a lake. Very good. There's even a boat on it, even better. How can it be done? For example, like this: arrow in the back, then another, and another, in different spots, approaching closer and carefully looking; she might roar and scream, most likely, this is inevitable, but we'll manage; can also finish with a knife, will be messy, but how else. And then into the boat, and drop into the waters (or not?). Arrow in the back—that's for certain. She might run away with an arrow in her back, and for long, that's how it will be, but Mauna will catch up, it's like in the Inner Empire. Under no circumstances involve the watch in this hunt, and

not because the watch has no need for this, no—this would contradict the perennial principle of responsibility. Can everything be done differently? Well, truly, indeed: poison, arranging an accident, stumbled at height, illness, anything. It's possible and necessary, but there's neither time nor—most importantly—desire. Let's leave cheap intrigues to young-blood, old-blood does everything honestly. Arzis will understand everything, he's not stupid. He'll probably kill her for this, and let him. Or maybe the opposite—lioness dealt with lioness, without cheap shows—he'll understand such a thing. He'll shake her up, like then, and finally hit her, it's high time, how long can this go on, do at least something with me.

They came out onto the little dock. There, there are doors on this dock shack, that's what we'll shoot at. Mauna took the knife and gave it to Toya, she gave her a weapon, oh, so even more honest. Maybe Toya will even cut her, magnificent.

"Go on. Nail it."

"And what should I nail, Mistress?"

"Here," Mauna gave her Andarian handkerchief. "Take."

Stand sideways, curve the rear with the insignia. Toya has a seam running down her dress behind, down her back—a good target (Mauna also knows that she has a Mramri stripe down her back, she saw when she washed her, such natural coloring for them, Mramri). Inhaling (not very deeply, Mauna doesn't like this, it interferes) and raising and drawing to the release point, to the corner of her serious mouth, now comes the exhale. Good, can release, Toya is still walking. Hand under tension, need to release already, Toya begins fussing, she can't immediately manage to nail the disobedient handkerchief with the knife; it seems she feels sorry for the handkerchief, there will be a hole in it after all.

She relaxed her hand, but the arrow didn't go—arrow in hand. She grabbed herself by the ear, pulled, closing her eyes.

"Mistress, done. I made a hole in it. The handkerchief tore," Toya regretted.

"Yes. Come here."

Need to get angry. At this: 'Arzis! Don't do anything to Mistress! You can't!' Toya knew then what she was doing, lioness; this female, lunar and moist feeling. But no, actions must be pure, deed for deed's sake, free from simulacra; spinning up all this anger is a low trick, and interferes with shooting too.

Mauna shot carelessly, the arrow didn't even hit the door, but the doorframe.

"Go. Take it. Good arrow," Mauna found justification, after all she has about ten more (equally good) arrows on her belt.

Here's what needs to be done: all the same, but we'll spell the arrow with an ancient engram, very inaudibly, whispering quite softly under her breath:

"Vaal, direct to retribution, thy wind shall bear the sacred arrow, which shall strike the enemies of Vaal-Suungs."

Well. Release it. Can do it once more, engrams can be read many times, as much as you want, they only get better from it:

"Vaal, direct—break not thy oaths, break not thy oaths, eternally yours Amaya."

It seems the engram is a bit wrong. She relaxed the bowstring, put her palm to her eye, arrow in hand. How unfortunate to have erred then with the Sworn-Bond, why didn't she sworn Toya as simply her dhaar, whom one can stab, hang, break on the wheel, drown and shoot? To go and swear to a dhaar to preserve life, my Vaal, what a thing to bungle, what a foolish thing. Suungs preserve life for Suungs, nothing should bother you with the rest. Need to forget; there's mnemonics, it helps remember, but there's also needed the art of forgetting, the same mnemonics, only inversed, what's complicated about that, honestly. This was a mistake, this was a slip of the tongue, inexperience of a acolyte, such a thing didn't happen. And there won't be such mistakes anymore.

Toya was returning back, watching how Mistress rubbed her right eye; all in vain, because sharp-sighted Toya sees—and Mramri see far and well—Toya sees that her left one is wet, and Mistress doesn't bother to wipe it, or can't, or doesn't want to.

Need to make her a criminal. Need her to break the Bond. What did she do wrong there? Come now. Come now, remember, need to wave the gestures of mnemonics. But there's nothing; how to remember what isn't there? Then need to imagine, that's what's needed—we can invent anything, that which isn't there.

"Toya, do you obey Mistress?"

"Yes."

"That's good. Steal something from me. Take anything."

Toya was silent.

"Not even anything. Here, steal the silver ring," Mauna tried to remove it from her finger, but she hadn't taken it off for many-many moons, and it was stuck. "Help me remove it. Should we wet it, perhaps?" Mauna thought aloud; probably, if you dip the finger in water, it would help, especially since they're at the dock, there's water here, a whole sea, one could drown.

"There's salve," Toya pulled out a jar. "Arzis gave me to carry-carry. Said we got it in Shadowrock."

"Ah, kiri salve, from Liara. Give it."

Excellent, the ring came off easily and migrated to Toya's finger—Mauna put it on her, taking her weak palm. Surreal beauty of legalism: follow the Codex, exactly word for word, and everything becomes simple. A dhaar put on your ring? Of course—theft and imposture, clear death sentence. Put the huge tome of the Codex on the scales, take away all aamsuna from the other side, and everything becomes convenient, as it should be—life should be pleasant, and necessary decisions made; such a mode of action, it devours discipline, makes any serious intent impossible, annihilates the hegemonikon, but honestly, we're all adults here, lions

and lionesses, let's look at things realistically, without excessive metaphysics.

"Now we'll shoot. A couple times. You'll go. Pull them out," Mauna spoke abruptly.

"Is it necessary, Mistress?"

Need to go. Of course. You said you were obedient, Sworn-Bond, all that. But Toya went herself, not refusing service, and it became clear: she wasn't asking about 'going,' she was about 'shooting': going is necessary, shooting arrows wastefully—is not. Indeed, why this little performance with shooting at a nonexistent target on a nonexistent door. So even better, probably: everyone understands everything, I love such things.

Toya stepped away ten-fifteen paces, turned around, stood slightly sideways, folded her hands at her belly, intricately wove her palms; if you aim well and shoot, you can hit the eye. She looked somewhere toward where the inn was, touched her Ahey amulet and Arzis's ring a little.

"Look at me."

Yes, like that, because how to hit the eye if you can't see it. All the same: inhaling, drawing with exhale, release point. Nothing to be ashamed of, let's read the engram aloud (engrams are only read, not spoken):

"Vaal, direct toward retribution, thy wind shall bear the sacred arrow, break not thy oaths, eternally yours Mauna."

The bow lowered, the arrow fell on the dock. Nel always said: "You read engrams poorly, all wrong, not yours, words run away, intent askew." Maybe ride the boat, really. She threw the bow on the dock too. *Need to wash it in water*, she thought. *It's dirty anyway*.

"That's all, Toya. We've sh-shot enough. Go to that... what's it called... yard. Inn," she pointed there.

Toya didn't go to the inn, she went to her, sitting sideways on the dock; despite the fact that the svira has a pocket for the tail, it had somehow freed itself and now hung through the gap, touching the water with its tip. Toya removed the silver ring, it came off easily and simply, took Mauna's palm and put the ring back on Mistress, wove fingers with her in one palm, in all sorts of ways, and then in the second one too. Mauna showed her completely silently how sisters weave palms during the Gaze, when establishing Sister-bond: look, you place both like this, then we drive fingers into each other, look in the eyes, release one palm, take the left with both, then the right, then you can do the same thing, here, all correct, understood immediately, could take you as a Messenger tomorrow (and Mauna laughed aloud at such a thought).

"Mistress! Vaalu-Mauna Mistress!" someone called her timidly, from afar.

Both perked up their ears.

This was—what a surprise—Myri; the guard wouldn't let her through. A wave of the hand from Mauna, this distant and languid gesture was somehow noticed and they let her through. Myri limped toward them for a long time, and meanwhile Mauna examined her palms as if they were

foreign, putting the fox mask back on, and Toya looked to the side, at the water, holding onto her knees; it seems she even dug into them a little with her claws.

"Mistress, those dhaars aren't here, they didn't stay in Verin. No one to return it to," she held out Amaya's sirna. This was part of the truth, the whole truth was this: she went home, slept poorly all night, fearing that they would come to her from the Circle of the now-dead Cirz (what trouble that would be!), then thought to sell the sirna to locals for huge money, changed her mind, thought to give the sirna to the criminals (so they wouldn't touch her and to appease them), changed her mind, tried to find those dhaars, but they really had rushed through Verin, away from problems. Decided to do nothing at all. Changed her mind. Went to the inn and on the way learned that there was turmoil in Verin—they had 'rescued some important Messenger' here. It turned out that Mistress was indeed very real.

Mauna took and silently stuck Amaya's sirna behind her belt, in back.

Myri has been serving Messengers for less than a day, so she doesn't yet know that if you catch Mistress in strange activities and strange positions, you shouldn't immediately ask all sorts of questions.

"What are you doing?" she reasonably asked.

Mauna didn't answer, but Toya answered:

"Lady-hamanu Myri, Mistress is showing me how to embrace palms properly."

Chapter in Which One Lioness Cried, Seeing the Three Stars and an Flatiron

The Approached Ones. These are all those Ashai-Keetrah who couldn't pass the Acceptance, didn't reach it. There are plenty of reasons. They became simply Suung lionesses; but the sisterhood releases you, but not completely—you know something, you can do something, some even burn ignimara, though this is forbidden; therefore you are always closer to Ashai than other lionesses, you have trust, you often help them.

And so now Mauna arrived at the house of the sister of such an Approached One, who had fame and respect among Verin's Ashai-Keetrah, as—according to locals—the Approached One herself had. Name—Limarsi. Husband—an important local lion, something connected with timber; now he's not home—business. With her—Toya, with her—Arzis. Myri went home, learning with great surprise that it's all over with Verin, need to say goodbye, pack things and bring this news to two children, prepare them too; with the elder daughter it's simpler, she's happily married. About Arzis separately: he didn't miss the chance, and simply put on himself both at the Chamber, and with the town watch, and at the local weaponsmith everything most expensive and best that was possible: took a spear exactly to his height with a broad leaf (height: you raise your hand and it should reach your palm), and a Norramark steel long sword, and a dagger with engraving, and an excellent light crossbow, and legion kneemids, and legion plate for himself with pauldrons (with solar spirals on some plates, just need to blacken it in the right places, for show), belt with drengir plaques, maneguard with steel, bag, drengir gray cloak (no one bothered asking if it suited his rank: being the only bodyguard who saved a Messenger, no questions asked, and he kept quiet about his Eastern desertion), excellent tunic, leg guards, even took a good round shield, though it's inconvenient and there's nowhere to attach it, gloves with iron (chose softer and better ones, to actually wear, not for laughs), rings for forearms. The most stylish catch was the fibula for the cloak. He behaved demandingly and arrogantly: give me that, give me this, isn't there anything better? The Imperial treasury paid for everything, not even Mistress's treasury, Vaal himself ordered everything taken. He didn't betray his woolen neck thing, and put it on over all this.

When Toya saw him, he thought that the same thing would happen to her again that had happened a couple times before. But she held herself, only kept staring at him non-stop, and became completely subdued.

Mauna liked him too.

They somehow got Mauna a plasis, it fit her height and figure quite well, but only completely red, for ceremonial occasions, for igni-

mara—irony notwithstanding⁹². Yes, they got it also not without adventures, the local Chamber turned itself inside out, trying to save its reputation, namely—by hook or by crook they entered the house of one of the Ashai who was away, explaining everything by ‘high Imperial interests’ (which Ashai should favor in every way). Fortunately, her cohabiter and her acolyte were found in the house, and the plasis itself had to be taken by one of the disciplaras of Krimmau-Ammau, those very ones who are here in transit; she considered that the red ceremonial plasis would be just right (in general, correct), and she knew that Messengers don't accept patronage relations (true)⁹³, but somehow either didn't know or missed that ignimara and Messengers don't get along together at all (and that's where the failure). The disciplaras maneuvered a bit to somehow be with the Messenger, but the Chamber together with the Magistrate decided no, so as not to overload the unfortunate Messenger with a bunch of new muzzles. The disciplaras, young-youthful, just after Coming of Age, didn't realize that everything here allows them to sneeze at the Chamber together with the Magistrate, they could simply come to Mauna and at least just sit at Limarsi's at dinner (because all of this is a completely sisterly matter). But they feared the status gradient, and decided not to risk possible scandal, and disciplaras of Krimmau are not free to scandal.

In short, Mauna didn't bother with any affectations and simply took the red plasis, offering her thanks.

Yes, when she'd been introduced to Limarsi, after working through the gestures of mnemonics, Mauna began stroking her insignia. However it might be, now they'd been received into her house. Unknown how Limarsi had managed to set the table, having slaughtered a piglet—apparently she'd had help. It was a well-off household; it had a dining room, and on the dining room wall hung a painting depicting the staams of Ainansgard disciplarium, truly worthy of note.

"I cannot cease contemplating it," Mauna gazed at it, continuing to stroke her insignia.

"It is a gift from the sisterhood," Limarsi looked at the painting herself.

"The taste of the gift-givers is perfect."

They also seated Limarsi's sons at the table, two adolescents. Everything proved terribly interesting to them. But in the house there turned out to be four more cubs for some reason, smaller ones, though apparently Limarsi had two children, those same sons; this they knew from the blood-covered Mistress of Life. Well, whatever. These weren't seated at the table; they scurried about here and there—two younglions, two lionesses.

The staams of Ainansgard has three spires.

⁹² *Irony is that Messengers don't mess with ignimara. I personally never saw a Messenger lighting it up. —S.*

⁹³ *Red color is a symbol of rejecting patronage. Red-ruby amulets, plasii, rings. Circlets. Even red tentush. —S.*

"They symbolize... symbolize three virtues of the Ashai-Keetrah sisterhood. This is—fury of the Suungs. This is—loyalty to oaths and words. This is—understanding of things," one of the adolescents proved very spirited and maintained the conversation.

Mauna nodded in agreement with each of the Three Stars.

"They are just like the Flawless one herself. To survive capture among the Halsids is so... cool," the younger brother kept pace with his elder; he couldn't find a better word (the highest praise from him, actually), and his mother looked displeased.

"I was not in captivity, I was saved from that fate," she indicated Arzis. "But she," she indicated Toya, "was held captive. But sire Arzis, Vaal is great, freed my servant as well"—here Mauna omitted her own role.

Arzis maintained an important silence, ate everything, caught the adolescents' admiring gazes, and was having a grand time. Sometimes he embarrassed Toya with looks, showed her various foolishness. She was very shy. By the way, they still hadn't found new clothes for her with all those affairs ongoing, but no matter, we'll dress her up yet.

"Why does Most Excellent one not eat?" Limarsi asked with concern, looking at Mauna's empty plate and untouched cup of wine-juice.

"Just about time," Mauna smiled. "Toya, approach me."

Toya quickly stood and approached her Mistress, and Mauna let her taste the piglet from her fork and sip the wine-juice. Everyone watched this, even Arzis. No one knew, except Mauna, what this meant (Toya had never served food to Messengers; more precisely, she had served, but not in residences, not at table, but rather by a campfire, or in the middle of the road).

"This is proper," Mauna explained. "Toya, go, be seated."

Toya quickly sat.

"Sir Arzis, might the lion tell us how he saved Grand-Excellent one from captivity?" The mane-adolescents wanted fights and meat.

Arzis leaned back importantly, setting aside his fork. He thought. And launched into truthful tales. Mauna had been riding in a coach. He'd had to kill one attacker straight off, no, two, arrows and bolts whistled, one arrow stuck in his armor, he pulled it out. While they were covered, they managed to run under a bridge and dash into the forest. In the forest—for some reason—there were snakes. Three gave chase after them, among them was even a huge lioness, disgustingly muscular, yes-yes, imagine that, with a white-painted muzzle and an axe (Arzis doesn't know that Halsids don't recognize females in their ranks at all, not even to wash undergarments). One he killed again with a spear, the second he beheaded with his sword, the lioness he ran through, she fell. In fury he flipped her onto her belly, and also chopped off her head (Arzis nearly added, in his fervor, "hacked it the fuck off"). Nearby was another bodyguard, Tai, he also fought back, before him was a whole mountain of corpses. They ran down along the river, and like that, somehow, little by little they made it to Verin, fearing everything; they were nearly eaten by a wolf, a bear, and

a pack of rabid foxes. Well, and then that was it, the Empire, safety, a happy ending.

Limarsi listened to all this, covering herself with her palm. Toya listened but suspected that Arzis was either embellishing or outright lying (she knows him, she very-very knows him). The adolescents were in complete rapture. Nearby two more cubs listened, tugging at the backs of their adolescent brothers' chairs, those very same cubs who were smaller; but the lionesses found this uninteresting, they continued playing somewhere in the rooms. Mauna listened to everything impassively and without looking at Arzis, eating the piglet very carefully; she sat perfectly straight, and ate precisely as patricians eat at table, when they sit at that very table (actually, a lower-middle-stratum thing, high strata usually recline during meals)—she managed to spear small pieces on her fork and bring them to her mouth, and they—oh wonder—did not fall.

What else to tell? You really can't tell them about the murder of the barely-maned teen who happened to be pissing. You can't tell about Toya's shithouse rescue, Mauna's masterfully bad transformation into a whore (so bad it was actually good), and the spear through the mouth. You can't tell how he killed the border guard-Suung-artist with a grinding wheel to the nape, and finished him with a knife, about Toya's toilet tricks again, and how he tied the local Ashai-Keetrah to a pole, robbing her (they even took her salve, Toya should have it). You really can't tell about robbing and murdering the blacksmith and his wife (idiot, should have tied them better), and how he chopped off their heads (not from sadism, why would that be, but so they wouldn't suffer), and how before that he rummaged around searching for falchion, and the blacksmith's wife saw all this, how he had to flip her onto her belly, and it hurt her. About the misunderstanding with the Verin Circle lions and Mauna's fox-like, sacred madness of huntress it's especially worth keeping silent.

"Does the sir have a favorite weapon? That sword?" they pointed to the completely new sword that was simply leaning against the wall.

"Spear," Arzis answered simply.

"Will the sir show something with the spear?"

"Now, la, come on, stop it," Limarsi tried to intervene.

"Course I'll show, we'll go out later," Arzis answered simply.

Well that's it, Arzis had bought the brothers hook, line, and sinker.

"This painting," Limarsi directed the conversation away from all this male craziness, "was given to my sister, Namarsi, by the sisterhood of Verin. The Flawless one already knows that she is an Approached One. We are often confused, they think she is me."

"Is that so," Mauna reacted. "I dare not ask, but how exactly did Vaal command?"

A female cub approached Toya, the very youngest, becoming interested in her, and Toya familiarly took her onto her lap.

"Auntie Limi, why maassi's dwess all diwty?"

"Kayani, don't bother the... maassi. Her dress isn't dirty, she's from a long journey," Limarsi scolded the lionessy, glanced at Mauna: "Ignimara

at Coming of Age," she sighed. "Namarsi was sure everything would work out, nothing foreboded trouble. But she got very agitated, the ignimara wouldn't come and that was that. Everyone tried to help, everyone recited 'ias-ias-ias,'^{94,95,96,97,98} she was such a good stalla of Ainansgard, in such good standing. It didn't work out," she sighed. "She was supposed to arrive with her husband, yesterday even. Even the day before. That's what we arranged," Limarsi frowned. "Today is the twelfth, after all. Apparently something didn't go right for her husband, he's a blacksmith in Shadowrock, lots of work—with border guards, and Helsians dropping by, such a good craftsman. There, her children are with me now. Four of them. Pity you haven't met her yet. Maybe she'll arrive now, who knows."

The lioness touched Toya's dhaar rings on her ears:

"I wanna have wike dat too!"

The two adolescents laughed, but sobered under their mother's gaze. Mauna listened to everything attentively, continuing to eat, and nodded; this encouraged Limarsi to speak further.

"Yes, so, Namarsi... Well, it didn't work out, she had to leave the path of Ashai. But she married for great love, oh, such a story, her husband Haidarr. She met him when she was still a stalla, we all joke that she deliberately failed her ignimara so she could marry him. Oh..." Limarsi realized the inappropriateness of such lyrical family stories in the company of a Messenger. "But here we are, two nieces, two nephews."

"The hamanu says, the husband... this... Namarsi, eh... he was a blacksmith?" Arzis suddenly interjected.

"Yes, yes. Such a good craftsman, what a pity he's not here now, it would be more interesting for the sire. There, there, he even made me some pots," she laughed, "he doesn't only make weapons."

"Is there any of his weaponry in the house? I'd like to have a look," Arzis frowned, shifted his shoulders.

"Oh, la. La. That's something to ask the husband about, he has a lot. But I don't go in there, he won't even let me dust it off."

"Mom, I'll go get it, I know where everything is at father's," the son offered.

"We'll go, mom," the second one too. They'll bring Arzis a whole cart of weapons now.

"And do you know what's there from uncle Haidi? Dad has a whole pile of iron there."

"Em..." they hesitated.

"That's what I thought. Well, there's still a flatiron from him..."

"May I have a look at it? Look at the iron."

⁹⁴ *Ignimara engram.* —S.

⁹⁵ S., do you recall your Coming of Age? —Z.

⁹⁶ *Yes. It was... fast. I remember how I rejoiced receiving my own sirna and Stamp back then. She-wolf, my Stamp's sigil; I am Listigian. La! Why?* —S.

⁹⁷ I confess to a moment of sentiment. —Z.

⁹⁸ *We carry what we must; sentiment is its price.* —S.

"Rayzi, go get it. It's there, there. Well there, on the dresser. Go, give it to the sire. Yes... Most Excellent one, Namarsi told me a story, she once met a Messenger, oh, a somewhat funny story. She was sixteen, still a bit before Coming of Age, and at Ainansgard in that Season of Waters such snow fell, such a snow. So, she comes out of... what's it called... there's such a hall of poses-gestures-dances..."

"Geleisa," Mauna helped, stroking her insignia.

Meanwhile Arzis received his flatiron and began examining it. Toya watched him, rocking the cub; she sat quietly.

"Geleisa. She's going there, when someone comes out of the door, see, and she was just waiting for a friend. It occurred to her to fool around, and she goes and hooow throws a snowball, without checking who had come out. Hit, she says, right in the muzzle of some stalla, a stranger. Got scared, runs up, apologizes. And it turned out—she'd hit an acolyte of Messengers who had come to Ainansgard."

"And what happened next?" Mauna sipped the wine-juice. She drank with her eyes tightly shut.

"She rushed to embrace her, without looking properly. And then, she says, she began to understand that something was wrong, and looks—and it's a Messenger, and you can't touch them without permission. Excellent one will forgive. This is true, isn't it?"

"Alas."

"She said that what happened next was a little... surprising. The Messenger fell into the snow with her and began shouting 'I agree!' Namarsi said it was so loud her ear was ringing... Oh, she even got in trouble for it later, the mentors punished her for inappropriate behavior, la, I don't remember how... But this part of throwing oneself into snow and shouting... 'I agree'... She probably made that up. Really now."

"No. It's all true. That was me," Mauna looked at the ceiling.

"It can't be! What, it all happened just like that?" Limarsi was amazed and delighted.

"It all happened just like that," Mauna nodded calmly.

"My Vaal, what a pity she's not here! What is this! I have no words," Limarsi was in excellent spirits. "How's the flatiron?" she asked Arzis with a laugh.

Mauna glanced briefly at Arzis, at Toya.

"The very best," he didn't set it aside, but for some reason gave it to Toya, and now she sat with the lionessy and the flatiron as well, and she had to bounce the cub to seat her better; Arzis looks at Toya, she shrank back and inhaled, he pressed her paw under the table, put his fist to his mouth as if thinking. Pressed harder. Now at Mauna. She quickly looked away, and continued drinking herself into oblivion with wine-juice.

"Are there any dried fruits?" Mauna suddenly asked. "Nuts."

"La. Yes. Yes, right now, right now, of course," Limarsi left.

"Maassi, what's dis?" the cub asked Toya, tugging at the neck cord.

"Ahey," Toya answered with difficulty.

"What's ahey?"

"A sign like that," she didn't have enough breath to answer.

"And dis?" she touched near the Ahey.

"Ri... Ring."

"Why not on hand?"

"So lose not," Toya's Suung broke down.

"Why you cwyng? Aunt Limi, maassi is cwyng," the lionessy reported to the returned Limarsi, who had brought Mauna everything desired. She set the plate before herself and began quickly devouring everything piece by piece: one, two, three, four.

"Well... the maassi is tired and has been through much, she had a long journey. Get down," Limarsi weakly tried to take her niece away.

"It's nothing, me nothing," Toya answered, furiously wiping herself with her sleeve and not giving up the cub.

"She's not eating and wants eat."

Arzis remembered where he'd left his old spear. Yes, left it in the armory of the Chamber, here, in Verin. On the end was the craftsman's mark.

Meanwhile Toya was embraced and lionessy began feeding her. From the spoon everything endlessly fell, Toya endlessly caught it with her hand, still holding both the cub and the flatiron; for some reason the thought didn't occur to her to set it at least on the table. Another cub came, she also wanted to play house, and she touched Toya from the side. They're curious that Toya is crying so much: she seems so big, but acts like a little one.

"Oh," was all Limarsi said.

"*Ahey, vergib mir meine Schuld*," Toya whispered under her breath, embracing the cub very tightly and rocking a little; the flatiron was set aside, and Arzis's palm was found and grasped.

"It's from what she's been through," Mauna devoured nuts and everything like that with incredible speed, "Metanoia can drift."

"Metanoia?" Limarsi pricked up her ears.

"Consciousness," Mauna crunched a nut.

"*Ahey, vergib mir meine Schuld*."

Arzis lightly tapped Toya's palm against the table.

"Ah, yes. Namarsi would have understood immediately."

"Would have understood immediately," Mauna echoed.

"Oh, you've been through so much. Grand-Excellent one is holding up simply incredibly, and this after what we heard."

"A Messenger can command herself anything."

"Come on, manes, let's feel the spear," Arzis rose heavily, stroked Toya on the head, ears, and went out.

The teens were wildly delighted that the dining ceremonies along with the female sniffing were over, and something solid was beginning—they bounded out after him.

"I see it's tasty," Limarsi rejoiced at Mauna's appetite.

"Hamanu Limarsi, does the lioness know," Mauna didn't stop eating, little remained in the plate, "I had a mentor, Vaalu-Amaya. There were

others too, but that doesn't matter. It seems to me that with the passage of time I become more and more like her. But enough about me, I would like to hear something about Namarsi."

"What exactly?"

"Everything the lioness wishes to tell."

Well then, Mauna truly learned a great deal. This and that, and that Namarsi loves tableware very much and somehow loves tidiness rather too much (can't stand it if some thing isn't lying where it should), that she can purr so loudly that sometimes she puts on performances with it, especially if she's had a drink (she can drink a lot, almost without getting drunk), and what her wedding was like (there were fights at it, and someone had their purse stolen), and how before it she and Haidarr had come down with terrible fever because they'd wandered around all day in the rain tail knows where. Mauna never interrupted once. Mauna listened very attentively, and Limarsi secretly marveled at how attentively someone could listen to you, what a rarity that was, since everyone mostly listens to themselves, what's there for others; she'd never encountered such a conversationalist, and could only marvel and rejoice that there was such a thing in the world as Messengers (probably they all know how to listen like this). All this dragged on, all this took enormous time, evening was already falling, the lionessy had long since fallen asleep in Toya's arms, and she had long stopped crying and sat almost without moving.

When Limarsi simply ran out of things to say, Mauna thanked her and went outside, where she found Arzis. He had already conducted a swash-buckling lesson with spears, complete with swearing and the stupidest stories, which had succeeded gloriously—one brother had knocked out the other's tooth with a stick. He had already procured some beer somewhere in a tiny barrel and lay on the grass right in the middle of the courtyard, beside him a boxwood bush whose little leaves he was touching.

"Weird ass beer. Crushin' it and not even buzzed."

Mauna looked at him and determined that the beer wasn't weird at all, but quite normal, and Arzis was thoroughly drunk. For some reason there lay beside him a pile of various cords and ropes of different thicknesses. He looked at her, took off his cloak and spread it for Mauna:

"Listen, sit down, Maun."

Mauna settled on her legs.

"Listen, Mistress, gimme your hands."

She gave them. Taking a swig of beer from his mug, he began tying her hands like a prisoner's, and not jokingly, but tight.

"Now try to get free."

"Well, I can't," Mauna said immediately.

"What d'you mean you can't, come on try, move 'em back and forth, come on."

She tried. Fat chance.

"I can't."

"And I can't fuckin' understand. I took all their knives, all their shit away... hands, hic," he convulsively inhaled, then belched, "tied their hands under their legs, you still got it sweet," he showed that Mauna's hands were simply together in front. "I can do this shit-muzzled drunk, got it? Back at our shitty little fort, there," he pointed east, "there I did the tying, 'cause guarding all kinds of fuckers is cushy duty, I took on that kind of work. They brought us some fuckin' convicts once and right away brought some Draag bitches, a whole pile of 'em, and why the hell they brought them I don't know. I tied all of them for transport myself, whole lengths of cord, got it, and there was just nowhere to stick them, we had one prison barracks so we crammed the Draags in there as much as we could, and the convicts, we just dug them a pit and covered it with grating. They just sit in the pit like that, fuck it," he waved his hand, "rain, night—don't give a shit. Just toss 'em food and water through the grating."

Mauna listened to him exactly as she had to Limarsi.

"What I'm getting at, you understand?" he pressed close to her, and in a loud drunken whisper: "How could those two have gotten untied? How did I fuck up so bad?"

Mauna said nothing.

"If they hadn't gotten loose—they'd be living their lives, not a care in the world. Right now they'd have come here, would've been all laughs. Can you picture it: them here—and us here too, oh shit. You see? She's got four cubs. Ah, fuck it all," he took the mug, but Mauna took it away, even with her hands tied.

"It happened. You're not to blame. You followed the Bond and did what you had to so I would survive. There are many Suungs, there are sixty-six Messengers."

"Nah, Mauna, cut that shit. Someone's always to blame."

She had come out to tell him—it was she, Vaalu-Mauna, who had freed Namarsi, cutting the ropes, and she had freed Haidarr, and he had slugged Mauna (so it was unfair to say that no one had ever punched her in the snout), and run to Arzis. She had also come out to send him and Toya back to the inn, so they wouldn't blurt out something here; she was more worried about Toya, but realized it was pointless—you could throw that one into tophet alive and she wouldn't say anything, damn her, this high-bred dhaar bitch, Mramri nobility, damn it, I'd strangle the creature, but I can't—it's not permitted, there's no cause: gray, flawless servant, kind, may she rot in that eatery. A dog bite you to drag her out of there! Well what kind of dog, it's the Sworn-Bond, it works both ways, because there's the hegemonikon and it doesn't care, desires are powerless on the path of Ashai, the path doesn't care what you want, and what I wanted most was for Arzis to hack them all up, and for me to feel something, for someone to step up and do something for me, something huge, because Arzis is my living weapon, and he loves me. To sum up: no problems with Toya. It's with Arzis there will be a problem now.

"See, I'm to blame."

"No, it's me," Mauna forbade him.

He raised a finger:

"It's the Halsids, if you think about it," he stared at her, then waved his hand: "Nah, it's the Guard. Maun, I'm asking you, when we get out of this shit, figure out what happened there. Want me to help you, need to put some more holes in someone—we'll put 'em. I'll do everything for you," he drunkenly assured her, for some reason kissing her tail-tip. "But with this thing," he pointed at Limarsi's house, "all this—it's still my fault."

He reached for more beer. Mauna's hands were already going numb from the rope.

"Arzis, free me. Please."

He drew his dagger and cut without a word. She took his muzzle in her palms:

"You need to sleep. We'll find out everything."

No, she shouldn't tell him now that it was she who had freed Namarsi and Haidarr. Why had she freed them? Because she's a fool, and didn't obey him. I'll tell him later. Or now? Later... Or never. There's no need for him to know that his Mistress is a fool. Like Amaya.

"It's all the Guard," she confirmed all his conclusions. "Serve me—go sleep. Take Toya with you, let her warm you, wash you, you'll recover."

"Toya?" Arzis said and thought. Tell her that he's taking Toya for himself? As a wife. He'd already taken her, really, just had to go and finish the details. He's honest, even if he is a deserter, pimp, and killer and whatever else. Kind and serene Toya, what more do you need. No, no need to say anything. Mauna, she's alright, but tail knows what she'll do to Toya and what she thinks. If not for him, she'd have shot Toya long ago; you need to keep everything in mind, or you'll miss your mark. Well, without him Mauna would've croaked, but that's just talk, fairy tales. Need to get away from her. Need to, and need to. But how do you abandon her, the vixen? She'll die without you, finally get punched in the muzzle, and it's a pity; no pity for the others, no. Don't even pity those two, idiots, decided to fight back, start a little war, bang-crash, untying themselves, staging a jailbreak. Now Toya's already property, everything's his here. Kind Toya. Yes. But how do you abandon Mauna? There's still business with her, need to find these ones, these, unclear what kind yet, but we'll find them. Find them all, learn everything, she said that right, she says everything right. But don't give in and don't fuck her.

Or screw it all! Need to say it, everything as it is—a brilliant plan was born:

"Maun, you know what, let's make paws, huh? Me, you, Toya. Put on street clothes. Come on, I'll marry Toya, and maybe—I'll wife up you too. We'll just need to snatch some chest with coins, for when they come for you, eh... to take you away. We'll buy bloodline papers, buy a house or build one. Huh? You'll wash dishes, Toya will show you how. You'll kill each other, but first you'll bring cubs, and that's better than your sister-friends offing you. You'll make beautiful daughters. How many you want? Then we can marry them off to patricians, you got connections, this and

that... Look, in Listigia you can have two wives, in Yunian—four, in Andaria... How many in Andaria?"

"Come on, Arzis, come on, come on," oh, it was Mauna, but somehow became Toya, well fine, that's even better. So, where to sleep here. Ah, here's a bed, sleep here. Bam.

Toya couldn't handle to wash him—too big; but she was able to undress him, though she got scratched on various bits of metal. She was able to put him to bed, and then lay down with him, but it wasn't she who warmed him, but she who got warm from him. It didn't bother her that he was drunk, all this could be endured, not scary at all. The Mistress had said quietly not to tell anyone anything, not to give themselves away. Toya felt so sorry for the cubs. Mauna said for Arzis to sleep peacefully and to watch over him, but Toya knew this herself-herself.

Mauna didn't stay sitting with Limarsi any longer, pleaded fatigue, and besides it wasn't right to bother a lioness with such a heap of children. She thanked her restrainedly for everything and went to her room, which had been allocated to her. Around the house the city watch—a simulacrum of her bodyguards—had made a perimeter. There was no bolt, so she locked herself in by moving the dresser. Heavy. Does it hold? It holds. All right, is no one there? No one. Does no one see? No one.

She collapsed on the floor as she was, curled into a ball. Crying comes in different kinds, and there's the kind when only your mouth is open, you can't even make a sound—you're so tight; you can only hiss, as if dying, and convulsively inhale. She understood Amaya. Before it had been impossible to understand her, now it was impossible not to understand her.

Mnemonics and Will

They were taken from Limarsi's house the next day. Such a rainy, windy, disgusting day! A cortege monstrous in its size and status.

"How should we deal with Limarsi and Namarsi, Arzis?" Mauna didn't know.

"No idea," Arzis didn't know either, his head was aching. "Send her money or something."

Mauna stroked her insignia, gazing into the distance from the coach; there—fields.

"I don't think such a thing can be redeemed with money."

"Just send money, what else are you gonna do?"

Myri hadn't yet gathered everything and everyone, hadn't finished all her errands, but there was no choice—she was yanked out of Verin and taken along. She had to leave her children at home, but fortunately they were no longer small; she'd take them later, no time now, and besides they have an uncle. If you're in the Family—there's no choice: the Mistress travels—you travel.

And they carried her away from Listigia, away-away-away, eastward, to Yunian, warmer; if further south still, it would be Mauna's native Andaria. She was told: it's necessary. You've all had enough of the West and Helsia, you've messaged-suffered-warred enough, and besides a very important meeting is being arranged, everyone will be traveling from the capital (from Marna), from the East, they need to meet somewhere in the middle. Who exactly, what kind of meeting? Still unclear, but important.

They brought her to a large, old, very well-settled fortress by the city of Lvan. There they settled in, waiting. Mauna was given everything: chambers, temporary servants, temporary bodyguards (from the Chamber Guard, but what choice is there, who else would you assemble a temporary guard from), they gave her a whole chest of imperials (not particularly needed), they gave her everything. Toya and Arzis were also given much, a whole room, and what else do they need. And Myri was given things. Everything to everyone.

First of all, here is what the sisters from Marna messaged to Mauna:

PERSONAL MESSAGE. Vaal is great. Boundlessly rejoiced, we celebrate your brilliant victory for the glory of the Suungs. Imperial authority urgently requests that the remaining Family be instructed not to disseminate regarding the incident, and regarding all related matters. Strictest SS.

Victory, yes.

Nel, Umalla, and even Myanfar came briefly, each separately. Myanfar was especially moved, though she's usually a restrained lioness. They rejoiced, but had only guesses about the upcoming meeting. Nel brought her chests of clothing, decorum, everything.

"Someone from the Emperor will be there," this is what Nel knew or guessed. "From the Chamber."

About why the Chamber Guard had so abandoned and so betrayed Mauna, they honestly knew nothing. They roughly knew how and what: Chamber had traveled through Norramark, then Listigia, then Fort Shatt, then Mauna and the Halsids, then for some reason went to Shadowrock, then from Shadowrock very quickly bolted back to Norramark, and there it's trail was lost. Umalla drew all this on a map, and they looked together. Wild suppositions followed, Umalla smiled grimly, furiously jabbing at the map. They all nobly offered to give swords from their own bodyguards for Mauna, but she flatly refused—strange times had come, they themselves needed to bristle with guards, who knows what might happen.

"Mine will recover in Shatt and come, and then I'll see how to proceed," Mauna reasoned thus.

But no one came from Shatt, for terrible news arrived: the entire Family that had remained there—had also died. Some after a couple of days, some after a week, but all of them. Imperial prosecutors crawled in there; Sigas, the commander of Shatt, was relieved of duty, he wanted to throw himself on his sword from such shame, but much was happening in Helsia now, and he was sent there—no time to throw oneself on swords.

She couldn't Message normally—no Graph (lost), no Medium at all (perished). But she worked little by little on Out-Messages, all by herself. The fortress commander, as usual, took advantage of suddenly having a Messenger, and even sent one private Message. Mauna didn't resist and out-messaged everything.

She read much (they brought books from the city), rested much, conversed with Myri—this Myri turned out to be quite a remarkable person. It seems they became friends. It seems Myri took a liking to Mauna.

"Ingratitude: the best sign that one should be avoided. Such lionkind always drag themselves to the bottom, thinking they're surfacing," Myri said thus.

Near the fortress and for Lvan itself there was another Ashai-Keetrah, and for the first time in her life Mauna saw such an inert, arrogant, and simply disgusting person. As a conversationalist she proved completely empty, and she radiated contempt for Mauna—a postal worker, yet so much pomposity, Vaal save us. But here's the thing: she despised everyone in general. Mauna quickly understood why this alumna of Krimmau-Ammau disciplarium found herself quite at the top of the local hierarchy, and why the Empire liked her: she had unlionlike, fantastic ignimara. A lioness-torch: ignimara in both palms, in her ears and muzzle, and shoulders and tail. Throughout the fortress and generally throughout all Lvan burned bowls of Vaal, lit directly, not by maintained fire. And most importantly: while still in the North, this Ashai had discovered a most useful ap-

plication for her Gift: torture by ignimara; the thing proved even better than the art of Truth-Seers—everyone confessed to everything, truth poured like from a waterfall^{99,100,101}. There she, sitting in some legion among various military types, tortured with Vaal's fire everyone they gave her: criminals, some captured northerners, traitors, shamans, idiots, violators of discipline and subordination, just random lionkind who ended up in the wrong place at the wrong time. Here, in Lvan, she roasted a fiscal guy, and a fat scheme was exposed. She walked with guards, numerous assassination attempts, dozens—all unsuccessful. Mauna dove into her with empathy and mortally regretted it.

The Empire is delighted, no less.

Mauna was also delighted when on the fourth or fifth day into their fortress came not just anyone, but Tai himself! The scoundrel, rogue, cut-throat—he had survived. He settled in with Mauna and Arzis; Mauna stroked and fussed over him like close one; Arzis endlessly clapped him on the shoulder. Toya, perceiving the joyful affectation in her own way, dragged him a large pie from the kitchens, so he could eat-eat, but didn't stay to bother them there.

"Tell us, you vagrant!" Arzis pressed him.

But there wasn't much to tell. Tai saw how Arzis and Mauna fled into the forest, and took this well: the Mistress is alive, Vaal grant, she won't perish. He knew that 'you can rely on Arzis.' He delayed the attackers, a little bit, but more came running, new ones, and he barely escaped into the forest himself, running in a different direction. His left shoulder hurt from a blow, a bolt made a small hole in his back (armor saved the day), and he badly hurt his leg when running away. In general, he got off with almost nothing. He didn't run down along the river, but back to Shatt, thinking this would be better (maybe they'd chase after him), and that he'd 'never find' Mauna and Arzis. In Shatt 'all our Family were slowly dying terrible deaths' and 'they were definitely poisoned.' Tai was sure—someone had slipped something into the food. He estimated there were no fewer than five dozen Halsids, but 'incompetent.' He was absolutely certain that 'the Guard fled on purpose,' well, everyone agreed with that. When asked why Tai had moved away on the river and what he saw before the attack, he answered simply:

"My ass knew."

When Mauna asked what he thought about all of this, he didn't answer for a long time.

"Someone very influential wanted to kill the Mistress," he leaned back, looking at the candle. "I mean, the very top."

"Someone who can command the Chamber Guard or bribe them?" Mauna wrung her palms.

⁹⁹ And yet, consider this trifling matter: should everyone confess to everything, truth becomes indistinguishable from fabrication. Confession ceases to illuminate. —Z.

¹⁰⁰ *The difference, Z.: you care about truth. She don't.* —S.

¹⁰¹ You have confirmed what I feared to acknowledge. —Z.

"That wasn't the Guard," he shook his head, no-no. "With my previous Mistress I traveled a lot with the Guard. That wasn't them. I thought from the very beginning that something was wrong with them, but decided: what if it just seems that way. Everything about them was Guard-like, but it wasn't them."

"Then who were they?"

"Don't know."

Toya quickly understood what it meant to be with a male... in all ways

She imagined that the fortress room was their house, and began dragging all sorts of decor into it, to make it beautiful.

And she washed the sheets herself every day, only herself, because it was an impossible thing— all wet. And the most terrible thing, that it's from her, and nothing could be done about it, but Arzis said this was good, and that it should be so; well, then that's how it is. Well, she thought it would always be like that time at the lake, but it turns out it can be all different ways, embarrassing even to think about. The things one come up with, oh my.

Yes, and the local Mistress of Life came to Mauna, the day before the important meeting. This was something. Mauna was reading ('Suungmara and Tradition') when the door opened, and only then did someone knock on it. Mauna raised her gaze grimly and saw: in the doorway stood a huge lioness breathing heavily. Huge and old—she had never seen such fat lionesses. Never. On her was a masterina, that very dress of Mistresses of Life, terrible as life itself.

"Nearly died... whew... on those stairs... heh."

She closed the door and walked toward her, seated herself opposite, the chair squeaked pitifully.

"My ears are ringing," she wiped her wet nose with a cloth, clean as sky.

"How may I help the lioness?"

"Me? What can I help with? Oh," she lost her balance on the chair, but catastrophe was avoided.

So. They looked at each other.

"Well then, how are you here? Avrina," she patted herself on the chest.

"Mauna. Fine," Mauna reported.

"What happened to you? Everyone's talking, but I understood nothing. They say you were nearly killed in Helsia."

"Something like that," Mauna limited herself, shamelessly evaluating this Ashai with her gaze. Well yes, what did you think. It's not only Messengers who get to be eccentric.

"Oh, Vaal. Always killing and killing with them. You don't have time to bring life... and they already want to kill. How did it happen?"

"Don't know yet."

"Well, you'll find out," Avrina waved dismissively with confidence.

"If so, then may I learn why I'm honored with a visit?"

"Ah... well how... we're sisters. Maybe you need something," Avrina was surprised, and coughed.

"I have everything here."

"Good, praise Vaal," Avrina was both glad and reassured.

"Avrina troubles herself unnecessarily, I am quite well. Particularly as it poses considerable difficulty for the lioness to reach me, considering her... health."

"But you never know what's pointless and what isn't. Need to go—went. And don't look at me like that, I'm like this because I was hit on the head, and I got fat. Something there," she pointed to her head, "slipped the wrong way. Cubs in the womb can be fixed if they're not sitting right, but there you can't fix anything anymore."

"And why was it necessary to go?"

Avrina helplessly spread her hands, then raised them to the sky.

Curious, Mauna thought, and leaned against the table.

"I have both service and company here. There's even Ifana," she confessed to her for some reason. She felt like saying it. To see what would happen. Yes, there's Ifana—the Ashai of ignimara, who tortures.

"Who, Ifana?" Avrina raised her head, looking haughtily. "Ifana won't help you," steel, confident tone, a gesture of complete negation. "You avoid her. She has an evil will. You're still young, you won't be able to handle her. Though..." she squinted. "Oh," she sighed.

"And Avrina?" Mauna inquired with curiosity.

"I can handle her," the Mistress nodded assuredly. "She's as afraid of fire as those like me. I go—she hides in her burrows."

"I hardly think Ifana fears fire, I dare observe," Mauna smiled slightly.

"It's a different fire."

Avrina sighed.

"Look, even my fingers got fat. It's hard to work with such fingers," she wiggled them before herself. "Eh. But nothing to be done. I'm due for Elevation soon, but I won't go, I'll continue serving."

"Is that even possible?"

"Oh, I'll make arrangements, or bribe someone. They'll make me papers saying I'm five years younger, and that's that."

"Perhaps disciples could help?" Mauna looked at her fingers, which weren't so terribly fat after all. She knows that Mistresses need clean palms and good claw files.

"I had some," Avrina nodded importantly again. "One, two, three," she showed three fingers. "All grown up now, all scattered. I was in Seedna for a while, there I had a fourth one, Miresli."

Avrina placed her hand on the table, but didn't simply place it—she put a white cloth under it. And someone knocked at the door again; by the knock Mauna recognized—Toya. They hardly crossed paths now: a few mornings when Toya performed the Welcome for her; and she also bathed with her in the tub, only with her. And Mauna now went shooting by herself. That was all. It was midday, but Toya had just come to wash her—Mauna had acquired the habit of bathing two or three times a day; after her wanderings everything seemed to her that she was—all dirty.

Toya entered, Avrina turned around heavily; Toya froze. Several moments passed thus: Mauna looks at Avrina; Avrina at Toya; Toya at Mauna.

"The Mistress is busy, should I come later?"

"Oh," Avrina rejoiced, as if seeing a very old acquaintance. "Come here, why are you standing there. Don't stand, come, come on."

Toya cautiously walked forward, and more briskly when Mauna made a gesture to her.

"Aha," Avrina appraised her, "now turn around."

Toya looked helplessly at her Mistress.

"Do as the Mistress of Life asks, Toya," Mauna nodded.

Toya spun around in a circle.

"Aha. Lift everything up. Lift your dress. Yes higher-higher, more, yes lift it all up. Keep turning."

Toya spun around again, Avrina caught her by the tail, felt it. For some reason precisely at this moment Toya decided to introduce herself, caught by the tail and with her back to everyone

"Dhaar Toya, breed Mramri, I serve the Radiant Messenger-Mistress Vaalu-Mauna," her ears went back as she looked sideways-upward.

"Dha-ar To-ya," Avrina thoughtfully touched the base of her tail. "So you'll scream in Mramri, then," she laughed, then sneezed, somehow managing to remove another cloth and put it to her muzzle. "Now this, take this off," she pointed to the Mramri belt.

Toya removed it, Avrina took it, now placed her palm against her belly. Her gaze became absent, wandering.

"Aha. Now spread your paws. Wider. Just imagine there's a basin standing here, between your paws."

"I can do that," Toya even answered confidently, and did everything.

Avrina left her hem alone and spent a long time extracting something from behind her belt, groaning and breathing heavily. Then she smeared something on her finger, for a long time, meticulously.

"Just turn toward me, all the way. Aha. A little forward. Lean forward, there, lean against the table. Aha. Don't be afraid," and Avrina again went under her hem.

"Fus," Toya hadn't expected this, inhaled and froze, digging her claws into the table. She looked at her Mistress in fright. Yes, no one had ever bothered her there, all these years, and now it was happening every day—what was going on.

Mauna observed everything with interest.

"Three," Avrina closed an eye. "All sons," and withdrew her finger, then wiped it. "You'll howl plenty, virgin birth. But it's okay."

"She's pregnant?" Mauna asked, though what was there to ask.

"About a week. Maybe two. Since everything's fine with you, I go. Vaal in days, be well," Avrina stood and left.

Toya looked at the door, as did Mauna.

"Who was that, Mistress?"

Mauna didn't answer immediately. What could one answer to that.

"A Mistress of Life."

"So she... said... that I... that I have cubs?" Toya asked very timidly.

"Does this astonish you?"

She bit her claws, smiled fearfully, and even forgot to answer her Mistress.

But now all this waiting and sitting came to an end, and at last those who were meant to arrive had arrived.

Present: Vaalu-Mauna; Vaalu-Vesta (Messenger, Marna, She-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named); Conductor of the Emperor's Will (one of three); deputy head of the Imperial Secret Service; and the head himself of the Chamber of Ashai-Keetrah Affairs and Defence of the Faith. Formidable assembly, only the High Mother was missing, but she is 'invisibly here,' as Vesta assured them (simply impossible to come, she is in the south, in Mistfaln).

Vesta sits beside Mauna, almost like Nel, she sometimes strokes her arm. Opposite them: the Secret mane, the Conductor (in the center), the Chamber head. Mauna appears odd, unusual for a Messenger at such a meeting: she wears only a simple plasis, despite an entire wardrobe from Nel, a ring and circlet with chaindrops. No amulet (and where would she get one—it remained in the coach after all); no mirror (ordinary ones are not permitted, and she has not yet obtained a Messenger's mirror, you cannot buy such a thing in a shop); no Stamp (again in the coach). But she has a sirna! The sirna is not hers, but Amaya's. Also Mauna is the only one who ordered food and drink brought to herself, and without embarrassment crunches nuts, though this is rather inappropriate at present.

The usual introductions-courtesies-formalities, how was the journey, fine, well. Everything is actually quite simple, even intimate. All assistants, retinue, others—out.

The Conductor placed a small box before himself, and also papers. A lion with a kind, broad, tired muzzle, from the old Suungs, his mane unusually disheveled, even unkempt.

"Has he arrived?" he suddenly asked the Secret, frowning deeply.

The latter nodded. He looks as befits a Secret agent: narrow mouth, narrow muzzle, most incomprehensible appearance, as if he had been drawn as a sketch, not quite a full lion.

"Yes, Conductor."

"Good. Well then."

Vesta straightened and exhaled, as if to say, well come on, deliver your 'well then.' Mauna did nothing.

"We shall not go around in circles. I want to say immediately that I personally am very glad that the Remarkable one survived," he said, Mauna nodded, touched him with empathy, and no use—*sealed*. "I am very sorry that such an ordeal had to be endured. I think, Radiant Vaalu-Mauna, the Flawless one has many questions, many of which are uncomfortable, and some cast shadows upon Imperial authority as a whole..."

"With all due respect, that is precisely what we are doing. Going around in circles," Vesta interrupted.

She is from Naysagri. Andarians, for example, have calm temperaments. Naysagrians are more combative.

"Mauna, let us begin: I shall tell you how it is," Vesta turned to her. "You were attacked by Halsids mixed with Helsian brigands. The Secret Service set them upon you. You were accompanied not by the Chamber Guard, but by the Silent Ones, who disguised themselves as the Guard, because the Chamber," Vesta indicated the Chamber official, "could not conduct this operation, they could not understand how to execute it without violating... absolutely everything that could possibly be violated. At the necessary moment the Silent Ones, following orders, abandoned you. The Secret Service organized and supervised the entire operation. Means: to kill you and your entire escort. Goal: thereby to obtain pretext for introducing seven legions into Helsia, overthrowing the fire-priests, destroying all Halsids, immediate execution of all captured Halsids already, and establishing Dominate in Helsia, instead of Protectorate. Have I omitted anything?" Vesta asked predatorily.

It had been planned thus: to say everything as it is. But all three secular officials hesitated and simply nodded their heads.

"I was told this morning. Now you know it too."

Mauna remained silent, fingering her claws. Uncomfortable silence. The Conductor stood and laid out from the box: Mauna's sirna; Mauna's mirror; Mauna's amulet; Mauna's stamp; two of Mauna's circlets; for some reason a head veil. He looked into it, at the bottom:

"There are three more books in there. And a casket."

The sirna returned to her belt (she checked, it was hers: 'Vvalu-Mauna, Ashai of Messaging, in Glory and Blood'), now there were two of them; the Stamp returned to her belt; the mirror proved to be unprotected and it had cracked, Mauna looked at herself in it:

"Mirrors must not be handled by males."

"I beg your pardon, Flawless one," the Conductor apologized.

The amulet returned to her neck. The circlets and covering she simply set aside.

"I would have the casket."

She took it, but it was locked with a key. And her key had been lost there, in the coach. She shook it, pricking up her ear; fabric rustled, an envelope rattled. Good.

"Did they at least advanced the legions?" Mauna asked.

Probably not the question everyone expected; the Secret agent even smiled. Vesta touched her again:

"You fell out of life," she gently stroked Mauna, tenderly, "Messages do not pass through you. They introduced them, threw the fire-priests in Nasar into prisons, burned the Halsids—as they so love," she spoke with vengeance.

As a stream willingly flows where there are hollows, so the Conductor was drawn into this channel, trying in every way to avoid unpleasant discussions, explanations, questions, to delay them:

"First they sent tragic news throughout the Empire that the Messenger had perished, despite her guard. But behold, by Vaal's will, now glorious news spreads—the Messenger survived."

"Despite her guard," Mauna could not resist the sardonic remark. "Would it not have been simpler to merely send word that the Messenger had perished, and immediately carry out all that was needed? And leave the Messenger herself and her Family untouched, let them live and even serve the Empire? As if the Helsians would verify, as if they would care."

Vesta sighed heavily.

"Not simpler," the Secret answered, barely swaying from side to side. "All this was not for the Helsians. All to convince those many in the Empire who were against transforming Helsia from Protectorate to Dominate," he jerked his head slightly when speaking, his mane ties bobbing. "They are no longer opposed."

"The art of persuasion..." Mauna shrugged. "I have never mastered it. And, alas, have become its victim. I am not strong in politics, too young. But with Helsia as a Protectorate, all was not so ill, insofar as I may judge."

Now the Conductor sighed heavily:

"I would leave this complicated topic, Flawless one. Now there will be Dominate Helsia, and we shall see how badly everything goes with it."

"Everything's bad. As always."

Well, Mauna looked at those three. Will you explain yourselves, or what? No?

"How have I and my Family failed to please? Why precisely thus?"

"Pretext for war. Protectorate-Dominate."

Vesta hid herself, rubbing her eyes with her fingers.

"Let us say that certain individuals advanced this idea, including from the Secret Service and so forth, and convinced the Emperor that the Messenger could thus serve the Empire and the Suungs. All our lives are in His hands. And I shall say immediately that now all regret the decision taken, and especially the Emperor. He has seen that the salvation of the Flawless Vaalu-Mauna is a sign from Vaal."

"I could have simply been commanded, if the Emperor requires my death for the Empire. I would have gone myself, and the Halsids would have done what was needed."

"That is not how it's done," the Secret denied, no-no.

"And how is it done? Like this? Well then, I am alive," Mauna indicated herself.

"And that is wonderful!" the Conductor hastened. "Vaal did not permit it, everything turned out even better. With Helsia all moved forward, Helsia is crushed, Vaal did not allow the Messenger to perish, glory of the Suungs, defeat of the Halsids and fire-priests."

She gathered nuts and dried fruits in her fist and began consuming them. Mauna was thinking, her gaze wandering, she thinks.

"Why was the Family in Shatt poisoned to death?"

"Excess of the executor," the Secret answered.

It seems all of this is most unpleasant precisely for the Chamber official. When you look at him—you feel quite sorry for him. It seems this utterly disgusting affair weighs terribly upon him.

"Pleashe exshand shis," Mauna crunched loudly, and even offered Vesta some nuts to crunch. She politely, gently declined.

"They were not supposed to be poisoned, only to have stomach upset for a couple of days. But the executors on the ground overdid it, understood everything in their own way, and poisoned them for good."

"The Secret Service, I see, does not like us very much. However, I too sent sire Karris a just reproach."

"Sire Karris? May I know who that is?" the Conductor frowned.

"A sire from the Secret Service, perhaps he might help us learn?" Mauna looked at the Secret, pointed to him.

"Forgive me, Excellent one. I know many Karris, I need more precise information."

"This is the Karris who was lover to Vaalu-Amaya, and until recently—to Vaalu-Shiala. I killed him before departing for Helsia."

"I see," the Secret was unimpressed.

Vesta, if she was impressed, gave no sign of it. The Chamber official painfully tried to understand what was happening. The Conductor began to think what all this meant.

"May I know the motive?" the Secret asked.

"Personal antipathy. The death of Vaalu-Amaya. An attempt to entangle himself with Vaalu-Shiala and, thereby... In general, let us consider that the Secret Service and I are worthy of each other."

"Hmm. Murdered. So he worked poorly."

"The murder of Vaalu-Amaya's Family, two years ago," Mauna suddenly asked. "Is it connected to mine?"

"We are examining only our incident. What relation does such an old affair have to it?" the Secret asked in return.

Again awkward silence.

"Let us turn to constructive matters, and let us forget old grievances," the Conductor proposed thus. "We all must serve for the good of the Empire."

"Quite right," Vesta smoothed Mauna's palm.

"I agree," Mauna agreed.

Everyone seemed relieved.

"We have reached mutual understanding," the Conductor determined. "Before I read the Emperor's Decree, which directly indicates the further fate of our current matter, I wish to outline something for the Accomplished Vaalu-Mauna. Bold actions. Perseverance, suungmara, fury of a true Suung. Unwillingness to submit to enemies of the faith. A sign from Vaal. Radiant one shall depart for Marna. Prospects are still being determined, but I have every reason to believe that..." and he indicated Mauna, "...personal Messenger to the Emperor."

The Secret Service man was not greatly amazed, nor indeed was the Chamber official. Mauna was not greatly amazed either. But Vesta quite was:

"And Naamzira?" she asked with concern, leaning forward, so that her chaindrops slipped from her shoulders and swayed in the air.

"Obviously, she will go to Helsia, where the Radiant Vaalu-Mauna was headed. I think that will be precisely the Emperor's will."

Suddenly the Secret embraced the Conductor with his arm, quite like a lover, and the latter was clearly unpleasantly surprised by such treatment; however, he did not move; something was whispered in his ear, and the Secret again sat quite ordinarily, as if nothing had happened.

"So then. Excellent one?" the Conductor looked at Mauna.

"The Emperor's will. Flattered and quieted," what else could Mauna say.

Vesta fidgeted, looked at Mauna, thought to herself. She stopped touching Mauna's arm.

"Good. I too see this as... promising. And logical. And, something else. Go tell him to enter," the Conductor said this to the Chamber head.

Several long silent moments. Vesta was thinking about something, gazing out the window, fingering her amulet. The Secret made little houses with his fingers. The Conductor studied Mauna with his gaze, curious about her. Mauna remembered Amaya, devouring nuts in solitude. Inopportunely she recalled: 'Bitches, bitches, bitches, bitches.' Well why bitches, Amaya. Really now. Everyone wanted what was best, it turned out as always. Everyone tried to do something there. At least we should...

The Chamber head entered loudly with the one whom Mauna recognized instantly, though he was no longer in his farcical Chamber gear—Earl Kairis-Tarraz, now in the regalia of a Silent One. The Chamber official went to his place and sat, while the Silent One stood in the middle of the room.

"Earl Kairis-Tarraz, Silent One of the Emperor," the Conductor introduced him.

Mauna decided instantly, she did not weigh her options. How good that there are two sirnas, not one. My Vaal, the sleeves of the plasis must be completely lowered, then you can hide it. But how to draw it out unnoticed?

She struck the plate with her hand, and the few remaining nuts rolled across the floor. No one was surprised—all perceived it as agitation from a very unexpected meeting, such a bodily 'ah!' Mauna crawled after the plate, and even fussed with it there, on the floor, clumsily.

"I suppose this lion already knows me well," she managed with the plate, and everything else. "I must note: a more sensible decision on his part would be not to catch my eye."

"Let us leave this hostility behind, Excellent one. He was following orders," the Secret one thus framed everything.

How to do it? He will intercept me. Overpower me. I must... must be like Arzis! Arzis! From behind and treacherously. But how to make him

turn his back on me? How to do everything? My Vaal, where are you, my Arzis, when you are so needed, my living weapon, my lionmane, my... she did not finish the thought. *"I am stupid. And you are not."*

"What are his purposes here?"

"He wishes to resolve all misunderstandings between you two," the Chamber head spoke now, for the first time.

"Just so," Mauna said, and stood.

Arzis, be here with me, even if you are not. And you, Amaya. Indeed all of you be with me. No time to enumerate in her mind all who should be here. She approached him herself (!), even quite close, as one approaches to give a hand for kissing a ring.

"Decisive one, I wish to apologize," he said thus, reported.

Well, hardly likely he wants to. Ordered to apologize—he will apologize. Order him to kill her—he will kill. And so forth.

"Very well, I demand: remove the maneguard; kneel; bow your head; kiss the ring."

An embodiment was required. It is very difficult to attack an idea—it is amorphous, ephemeral, elusive. One must attack the embodiment. This one would be the embodiment of everything. Let it be him.

The order is very simple, and the Silent One began to carry it out. An apology requires a gesture, an act? Very well, let it be such.

If only it goes in, Mauna thought.

The sirna went into his nape just so, despite the short, hurried swing. Mauna did not release it, but pressed deeper, sat atop him, worked it back and forth as much as she could. If there is an ideal killing with a sirna, this was it—he only gasped.

"Taar, Anweisa," Mauna wanted the second one precisely for her, "Melim..."

"My Vaal, Mauna!" Vesta was first to shriek. She wasn't accustomed to such things—well, it's okay, wander about with Arzis and you'll get used to it somehow. With him it's quite fun, try it sometime.

The others all jumped up from their chairs, and such else.

"...Mizuri, Atrissa, Uruz, Manaru, Kharg, Talmar, Siigr..."

More heads ran into the room, oh, alright. Mauna withdrew the sirna, shook the blood from it (surprisingly little) and placed her paw on Kairis. All stood helplessly, not knowing what to do, and only listened to the list of names and watched as Mauna gestured mnemonics with her palm, sirna in hand—so as not to forget anyone.

"...Selestina, Bastiana. Vaal, you have guided me to vengeance."

"How is this to be understood?" the Conductor asked her. With fear, quite distinctly.

Mauna silently indicated the body, still holding the sirna in her palm. There, pray understand this.

"Everything has a price, and especially—the breaking of trust."

"But why precisely thus?"

"Excess of the executor," Mauna could not resist, wiping the sirna with an Andarian handkerchief (with the hole that Toya had made, there,

at the lake). "Does the Conductor of Will perceive that in my wanderings I have acquired a certain decisiveness, quite beneficial for any Ashai who serves the Empire and the Suungs."

Then she hid the sirna in its sheath; familiar sheath—this proved to be her sirna, not Amaya's; until now she had not even noted whose sirna she had taken.

The Secret mane looked upon all this even with interest, quite curiously nodding his head, as if he approved. The Chamber head also was not greatly distressed, and looked at Mauna simply with admiration. The Conductor was clearly accustomed to dirty deeds of another sort, therefore could not immediately compose himself. He nodded to his subordinates, and they all left, and also dragged the dead Silent One with them. Only Vesta remained.

"You have become extremely hardened, Mauna. This may harm the sisterhood, and everything in general," she approached timidly, slowly.

Behind the door an argument was proceeding.

"Will it not harm the sisterhood more that they grow accustomed to betraying us in the most base manner? Need a pretext for war? Throw a Messenger into the fire. Need some other villainy? A couple more. They could not even do this honestly and properly. Things must be done... well."

The trio returned. Surprisingly enough, they returned to their places; the two Messengers followed their example.

"Excellent one, he was carrying out the Emperor's command."

"Each bears responsibility for his decisions," Mauna answered distantly, not troubling to specify who this 'each' was. "As well as poorly executed orders," here Mauna did specify who precisely. "Had he done it well—we would not be conversing."

"Such barbarous murder within the walls of an Imperial fortress is not... a solution."

Mauna parried anything, confident:

"The Empire has no need of a Messenger who will not avenge her Family, because the Family is a small Empire, as are Messengers: we are called the Inner Empire, allow me to remind you."

"He came to apologize," the Conductor could not abandon the role of advocate, but Mauna already understood why. He was bargaining, digging up arguments to get through and past this too. He very much wanted to leave everything behind and move forward—life goes on, after all.

"He lacked the wit and honor not to catch my eye."

"He served the Empire," the Conductor's words helplessly went in circles.

"I serve the Empire too, we both endangered our lives. I risked and survived, he risked betraying a Messenger—and there you have it."

"He was valuable to the Empire, to the Emperor personally."

"Let them place in his position the one who will not fear to do everything with his own hands."

"What else could we have expected," the Chamber head spoke with conviction, "choosing as the target of this failed and treacherous operation," he pounded the table, not lightly, "a Messenger of Andarian old blood? Everyone who advised this to the Imperial Court as a mode of action should be punished."

No one had comments or objections.

"Let me say this: I believe all parties are even", the Secret said.

"Now indeed even," Mauna agreed completely. "Eternal Concord is restored."

Vesta, she had gone quite dark all over, apparently very impressed by the vision of another's death:

"Indeed. The Imperial Court decided to kill a Messenger, because why not. And this same Messenger, who has suddenly become the Emperor's personal Messenger, killed one of the Earls of the Emperor's Silent Ones. In a word—welcome to Marna."

The Secret one laughed, the Chamber official grew sad.

"We have determined everything, agreed on all. Let us read the Emperor's Decree," the Conductor said, and all stood.

"Pray understand, but I shall withdraw," the Chamber official suddenly began to leave, and indicated the walls, the doors. The Secret remained.

The Conductor waited a little, and continued. He began to read quietly, even too quietly:

"By the will of Vaal, in the name of the Emperor, in the glory of the Suungs. Imperial secret. Decree concerning the resolution of consequences of the Helsian incident, pertaining to the Radiant Vaalu-Mauna, Ashai of Messaging, and her salvation, by the will of Vaal and for the glory of the Suungs. First: to inform the Radiant Vaalu-Mauna of all details of the incident and in every way to facilitate the return of the Radiant Vaalu-Mauna to the sisterhood and ordinary life of a Messenger. By the will of Vaal."

"For the glory of the Suungs," all said, bowing slightly.

"Second: to indicate to all parties affected by the incident the high necessity of observing Imperial secrecy in all that concerns said incident. By the will of Vaal."

"For the glory of the Suungs."

"Third: to transport the Radiant Vaalu-Mauna to Marna at the first opportunity, coordinating this with the Radiant one and the sisterhood of Ashai of Messaging. By the will of Vaal."

"For the glory of the Suungs."

"Fourth: to eliminate the surviving subordinates ('Family') who served Vaalu-Mauna during the incident, to prevent violation of Imperial secrecy. By the will of Vaal."

"For the glory of the Suungs," all said, but without Mauna. She has no time: Mauna's legs give way.

"Namely," the Secret agent added, and began reading from a paper: "True Suung Arzis, True Suung Tai, dhaar Toamlia, and also True Suung

Myrianfa. In view of this, to assist Vaalu-Mauna in every way with recruiting new permanent subordinates, to wit 'Family.'"

"I would like here... I would like here..." Mauna did not know how to say it, how to extricate herself thus, and all noticed that the young Messenger had suddenly lost her predator's confidence. "Here I..." one cannot say 'object,' one does not object to the Emperor's Decree. "I do not understand."

"They know too much," this from the Secret.

"Do not kill them. Please."

"I understand sentimental feelings. But they know too much, and have seen too much," this from the Conductor.

"Look," Mauna held out her hands before herself, and she noticed that one of them was trembling exactly as Amaya's, back then, "look. True Suung Arzis. He saved me selflessly, never once abandoned me, went to all... used every possibility, accomplished everything unthinkable. How can the Empire sentence to death such a lion, who so observed the Sworn-Bond? He will be silent, I assure you, on my responsibility, I swear by Vaal."

"Well, we cannot simply take and... alter the Decree."

"Look: Tai. When they attacked the cortege, he directed the carriage to the river, which saved me. He delayed the Halsids while Arzis and I fled into the forest. There was a little river there... We ran, so, down-down-down along the river... Then he saved himself. He is a good body-guard, really, truly."

"Hmm."

"And Myri, Myrianfa: she pledged Sworn-Bond after everything, she knows nothing at all. She was not in the cortege, she is from Verin, I bound her under Verin. She is a very useful lioness, knows many languages. And she has children, children. There are children."

"Hmm," the Conductor hummed again.

"And Toya, she..."

"Who is Toya?" Vesta frowned.

"This is, I presume, the dhaar Toamliaana," the Secret one ran a claw along the list.

"Mauna, this is not even worth discussing, not worth the time, really now," Vesta waved dismissively.

"No-no-no," Mauna held out her hands, "hear me out. She..." she thought. "She is a brilliant servant, the very best now in the Empire."

The Secret laughed.

"I understand attachment, I understand exaggeration," the Conductor noted kindly.

"Mauna, this is simply ridiculous now," Vesta chided.

"What so brilliant did this dhaar Toya do?" the Secret wondered.

"She... she once made me soup, and we ate it in the morning," Mauna said, gazing into nowhere.

Laughter again.

"These events have truly affected the Radiant one. I am certain that rest is needed," the Conductor noted sympathetically, kind eyes.

And Amaya needed to rest too, occurred to Mauna.

"It will be very gentle," the Secret spoke softly, "let Excellent one not worry, no excesses. They will depart very peacefully and without pain, in sleep, no one will understand anything."

"Pray, I beseech you. Do not take them away. They will be silent, I swear, I shall oversee everything, I shall do it all."

"Hmm."

The Secret, the Conductor, Vaalu-Vesta—they all exchanged glances, while Mauna looked down and feverishly thought about her Families, dhaars, and such else.

"We could converse privately," the Conductor suddenly proposed. "Perhaps I shall be able to convince the Radiant one of certain things. Yes-yes, Most High Vaalu-Vesta, the lioness too. Yes. A meal, a meal, I too shall join shortly."

Gathering will, Mauna collected herself. She must be willful, haughty, demanding. Well, she must, and that's that.

"May we speak as 'you' and without nomen?"

"Yes, of course," Mauna agreed.

"What are you prepared to do for this?"

"Everything."

"I cannot do this like that, I shall need to pull many levers to introduce certain amendments and justify everything."

"I understand."

"Good. I shall now think what can be done... Good, I have thought," the Conductor, quick of mind, did not waste much time. "Refuse the position of personal Messenger of the Emperor."

"Yes," Mauna agreed instantly.

"You will not in any way reproach Naamzira, raise this topic with her, nothing ever anywhere."

Either the Conductor let slip accidentally, or deliberately, but he said precisely thus: 'Reproach Naamzira.'

"Yes. I have forgiven everything to everyone, no resentments. Nothing."

"Good. This..." he looked at the paper left by the Secret one. "...Myri-anfa, she knows nothing, correct?"

"No," Mauna denied convincingly, "I bound her significantly after the incident."

"So Tai and Arzis are bodyguards, correct? True Suungs..." he looked thoughtfully at the list.

"Yes."

"Valiant Suungs, correct?"

"Yes-yes," Mauna agreed completely.

"Good. Keep them under your paw. Do not let them leak. Do whatever you must, even sew their mouths shut. I can arrange and present this: heroic Ashai, valiant Suungs. It should work."

"And dhaar Toya," Mauna hurried, bargained, though never once in her life had she truly been to market.

"No, no," the Conductor grimaced wearily. "Why. I cannot justify this in any way. No."

"Please," Mauna was already completely humbling herself. "I shall simply go serve the Thirteenth in Helsia again. Or anywhere."

"Really now. No indeed. These are all... sentiments, not fitting thus. Why are we even speaking of this?"

Mauna fell silent.

"I shall need to come to the Emperor, other Conductors, certain others with something. I cannot come and say: behold, Mauna killed a Silent One, and also committed along the way to Verin certain... questionable actions," he hinted that he probably knew something about the difficult wandering, "and also goes against the Decree to remove her entire Family, and even leaves a dhaar from it, casting aside the high interests of the Empire. Moreover, you pulled her from Halsid captivity, she in no way participated in your rescue. I can make no sense of why," and here he knew something.

Mauna is silent.

"And good. You can take those three, and will go back... where was the former residence..."

"Listigia, Huntress Moon."

"Yes, and then again to Helsia. With the dhaar all will be well, she will remain here. You will tell her that she will go later, that it is necessary thus. The Secret Service will do everything with utmost care. They know their business well."

Long silence. Finally: smoothing the sleeves of her plasis, Mauna said thus:

"Conductor, I have been thinking: since she must be removed after all, I shall do this myself. It will be honest, I shall do everything so that from her death there will be benefit to me and the sisterhood."

"That is?"

"Vows forbid the answer. There is one thing."

"All the better. Very well, let her remain in the fortress, do what you consider necessary and useful. But this must be done today, at most—tomorrow. And what then of Naamzira, all as we agreed?"

"Unconditionally, all remains in force. There is no need to send ripples through the sisterhood."

"Quite right," the Conductor beamed.

Sisterhood

Vesta was found in a very good mood. It turned out that everything had 'resolved itself perfectly.'

"Vesta, help me with this."

"My Vaal, Mauna, this is simply ridiculous."

"I am begging you. Take her with your cortege. Or... or..."

"How shall I take her?" Vesta played with her stylus, the table entirely covered with papers (piled up by the Medium). "She is already confined here in the fortress, on the floor, guarded by Silent Ones, what are you thinking. It is done. Well, Maun."

Mauna stood there a while longer.

"Is she your lover or something? My Vaal, this is truly odd."

"Yes. Yes."

"Honestly, Maun, quite poor taste, forgive the sharpness. One could find a lover far better. And most proper—among the Inner Empire."

The stylus spun faster.

"By the way, regarding Naamzira: a most commendable move. You think of the sisterhood. Anyway, we shall discuss this further."

"May you attain Luana and Sixtima."

"And may you reach Vaal."

How to Become a Messenger

"Well look at that, wanted to go to Lvan, buy some things, visit the blacksmith, and the shitheads at the gates wouldn't let me out. They say until the Mistress gives orders, everyone sort of sits tight," Arzis complained to Tai.

The latter nodded indefinitely, sipping his beer. Well, if so, then so.

"So we'll be going somewhere soon."

"The sooner the better," Arzis languished from idleness in this fortress. Even tormenting Toya every day had grown tiresome.

They settled in what here, in the fortress, was called the dining room; they and the Mistress had been allocated half a floor.

Toya spun nearby, standing as she turned the spindle, she has the amusing habit of biting her tongue when working diligently at something. She very much wanted to knit something, she had some projects, and though there was no necessity for it, she said that she would spin the thread 'herself-herself'.

"Toya, give me more thread."

This was Myri, she makes candles, any kind, and scented ones too. Mauna valued her candles most highly. Myri said her mother had such a craft—made candles and sold them, and as a cub she did nothing but candles. Therefore—she went to all sorts of learned ones. Therefore—a translator. She told them one could even make a poisonous one. You make such candles, burn them day after day, and you'll feel worse and worse.

Arzis was putting off the marriage stuff, thinking they'd be leaving any day now, and there was no point going to Lvan for it. But he decided: screw it, half a day's work at most.

"They wouldn't let me out today too, I wanted to get water. They said sit-sit inside," Toya noted.

Arzis banged the table.

"That's it, Toya, I'm sick of this, those rings need to come off you. Tomorrow I'll ask the Mistress, she'll arrange us a pass and we'll go to Lvan. I found out there's a ceremonial Ashai there, and not just one. She'll do everything quickly, we'll hint that we're from the Mistress," he winked at her.

"Good. Oh, I'll dress up tomorrow then."

"La, no need, wear all your worst clothing," Myri advised. "And take the good stuff with you in a bag."

"Why?" Toya was frightened.

"The Ashai will strip you completely and throw everything in the fire. The rings from your ears too, amulets, everything. Though no, the rings

she'll probably just keep. You'll come to him naked, and that's it, get dressed afterward."

"And then we'll really get hammered," Tai found his own joy in this.

"Do you have your bloodline papers, Arzis?" Myri asked.

"Nah. In Listigia, I think," he scratched his mane, trying to remember where those papers were.

"Eh, no, la. You'll go to the Mistress, tell her you need some paper issu..."

Mauna entered. Goodness, they had never seen the Mistress like this—all dressed up, simply as if for the Emperor, crimson-crimson plasis. A fox-mask in her hand, some casket in her hand. Everyone was especially impressed by the black veil, down to her very belt. Arzis had never seen such a thing (but Tai had).

"Whoa, Mistress, we going somewhere?" Arzis asked hopefully.

"Soon, we're going now."

"Yes!" Arzis banged the table, Tai approvingly raised his mug.

"Myri, leave everything, come with me."

Myri left.

"Dressed for silence," Tai said. "She'll be silent now."

"For mynenin?"

"Mynenin," Tai nodded, and they both laughed. "Want some beer?"

"Sure."

"Wanna play flis?"

"Sure."

So they sat, but not very long, because Myri came:

"The Mistress is now in myein, she will be silent. Listen here."

Orders came from Mauna through Myri. Pack this and that in trunks. Carriage, horses. But only themselves. Toya, stay here, tend to your work.

And she tended to her work. Toya wanted to spin more thread, she stuffed more sheep's wool into her bosom and began walking around the room, sometimes looking out the window, imagining how tomorrow she would get married. To a True Suung! How sorry, if only mother Iri could see, her sister, aunt Sele and aunt Basti. She would have to ask Arzis to help write her a letter to mom. Or... oh no, Toya timidly dismissed such a thought. Ask the Mistress to help write, she has such beautiful Suung letters. Or... this was madness already... maybe she could message? No, Ahey, oh, that is soon to be Vaal, oh Vaal, it's shameful even to ask such a thing, come now. No.

"Toya, go to the Mistress," Myri ordered curtly, despite her quiet entrance. "But not to her. Go to your room, there where you live with Arzis."

Toya hurriedly pulled the wool from her bosom, dropped everything, went to Arzis's and her room; passed the guard who watched their room (it's like this they now have!), entered. Mauna stood with her back to her, she held the mirror in her hand and turned it in her lowered, relaxed hand.

"Mistress?"

"Come in, come in," the Mistress said very quietly. "Come to me."

Toya appeared before her.

"Undress, completely. Fold everything on the bed. Take off everything."

Waiting a little, Toya began to comply. But the Mistress was doing the same thing: veil, covering, circlet, chaindrops from her ears, amulet, threw the sirna on the bed, Stamp, mirror (already in its guard), removed her belt, even cast off her chemise, knemids. And the ring from her tail.

Washing? Toya thought uncertainly. But what washing—there's no bath here.

"Take off the rings too," she showed Toya her ears.

"Mistr..."

She sharply covered Toya's mouth with her hand.

"Quiet. You are in myein. Do not say a word. I forbid. Do it."

The rings wouldn't come off: like with Mauna's silver ring of sisterhood, Toya hadn't removed them for moons. The thing is, they have to be pried open, and doing this oneself is very difficult; Mauna herself helped, and somehow they managed. One-two-three. Then: four-five-six.

There it was, they stood thus before each other.

"Toya, listen very carefully," Mauna spoke quietly, looking her eye to eye. "You must transform into me. You will now put on all my vestments, I will show you what and how. You are Messenger Vaalu-Mauna, you are in myein, this means you have taken a vow of silence. You speak to no one until Myri tells you that you may. And you may when far from the fortress," she tapped her leg on the floor. "Understood?"

Toya nodded. Well, sort of yes. And no.

"You must do everything well. This is very important for... me. If you make a mistake, you will disappoint me greatly. Understood?"

Yes.

"It's like when we traveled to Helsia. Then you simply rode in the coach. Now you will ride in it again, only completely as me. Don't be afraid, there will be no Halsids."

Yes.

"You must go downstairs. Get in the carriage, with Arzis, Tai and Myri. And travel. Behave as I do. Whatever happens, behave as I do. And strictly observe myein. Do you understand what that is?"

Yes.

"Good, Mauna," Mauna said, "we dress. Take my chemise. Like this. Now come here, to the mirror. Aha. Sit."

Toya sat, Mauna took a jar of tentush and brushes.

"When you dress as a Messenger, and take all the decorum, as a Messenger, then this..." Mauna began carefully moving the brush across Toya's muzzle. "Then this is called distance. Now I... will... make part of distance for you: patterns on the muzzle. We'll make many for you," she dipped the brush.

Watching in the mirror as black patterns were born on her appearance, Toya glanced at Mauna, breathing excitedly. Mauna looked calm, serious, attentive. She looked at Toya this way, that way, not in the eyes.

She terribly wanted to ask. She very-very terribly wanted to. But the Mistress said—myein.

"Close your eyes."

They managed this too.

"Lift your head a little."

Chin, part of the neck—everything became black. Toya still very much wanted to say that tomorrow she and Arzis had wanted to go to the Ashai-Keetrah to get married, and she had wanted to ask her permission; she knew that Arzis had already spoken with her and that 'all is well with the Mistress'; but probably tomorrow this wouldn't happen, because... this.

She looked at herself in the mirror. Oh, you wouldn't even recognize who this is. Mauna blew on her a little, and set aside the tentush. She stood with her back to her, her insignia almost under her nose; something came over Toya, though since the rescue she had (as she could) observed the rule 'do not touch a Messenger without permission,' and she placed her palm on it. Mauna stopped doing what she was doing, turned halfway around, Toya quickly withdrew her palm and looked down. Her gaze wandered over the patterns of the carpet on the stone floor. Mauna turned back and continued doing what she considered necessary.

"Good. You tried on plasis once before, didn't you. Troublemaker."

Toya involuntarily giggled. Mauna spoke everything quietly.

"So, come on. Look, there are sleeves here, on them—binding cords. Oh, no, wait, put on the tail ring too... Like this. The cords hide here, in the pocket at the back. Don't pull them out, don't fidget with them. There. This red plasis of mine should look good on you. A bit too big. I'll be thicker... fat foxy. That's what Amaya would have said. Pity she can't see how we're misbehaving, she would have liked it. Turn around."

Toya turned around.

"No, not like that. Turn like me, Mauna," Mauna said. "Watch."

The Messenger (?) spun around naked, the dhaar (Messenger?) clothed in plasis.

"Hand like this. This one at the belt, this one—up. Ah, yes, the belt."

The Ashai belt was taken, put on.

"Tighten it on yourself, but not too tight. So it's worksome."

Toya smiled again, though she didn't want to smile.

"On the belt there's a pouch. There's nothing in it. Though..." Mauna rummaged in it. "There's poison, for the neck. You don't need it," she set it aside on the table. "First stick the sirna in it, you see, on the left. Here there's such a thing, a hole. Shove it in here. There. Draw the sirna, look at it. Hold the sheath with your left. There."

Toya drew it out, looked at the sirna. Something was written on it, but this would need reading, and that would be slow.

"Hide it. Now the Stamp. It's worn behind the sirna, as a rule. It must be tied to the belt. Don't ask why, it's tradition. I'll tie it for you myself, just don't touch it. You won't be stamping any deals today."

This was probably a joke from the Mistress, and Toya felt very sorry that she didn't understand it.

"The mirror. There, it's in its guard. This case, it's called a guard. Take it out. Oh, not like that. Hold by this... well, this little thing. Pull."

Toya took it and even looked into it, Mauna stood behind her shoulder, and now they were both in it. True, everything was very discordant in its reflection—the mirror proved to be cracked.

"On it is written: 'Vaal's will: she who sees herself sees everything.' You can remember it, if you want."

Toya showed both herself and Mauna, moving it closer to her.

"All right, hide it in the guard. It's hidden behind the belt on the right, sometimes at the back. And the sirna can go at the back too, there's just no hole there. Let's go with the right."

They looked in the large room mirror. Well now. Toya, honestly, no longer recognized herself.

"Now Vaal's amulet," Mauna put the amulet on her. "You can stroke it, fidget with it. If you fidget with the chain like this, harder, to the sides—it means you're irritated. Walk around tugging at it, so they don't bother you. There. On the plasis there's such a collar there... here... the amulet will sit... well," Mauna kept adjusting everything.

Mauna rubbed her eye, tugged at her ear, evaluating the work. Continuing to bustle about naked, here and there, she took the chaindrops.

"They look heavy, but actually it's alright."

Into the dhaar ears, with such large holes from the iron rings, the rings of the Messenger's chaindrops went simply, no issues.

"Spread them over your shoulders. So. Now the covering. It's like a khinastra, but thinner, here... well prick up your ears... there. Oh, wait, the circlet. Stop."

They removed it, put on the circlet, corrected the mistake. Put on the covering too. Toya was already less shy and helped with everything.

"So. Now the symbol of myein—the black veil. You are silent. You are silent. You think something to yourself. You plot dangerous plots... Let's spread it out, more. Don't remove it under any circumstances, or I'll find and shoot you in Naheim."

This was probably another joke from the Mistress, and Toya felt even more sorry that she didn't understand it.

"Now how to be a Messenger. It's simple. We'll only take the exoterics, there's no time for esoterics, and no need. The world sees only the exo. Walk like me. You've seen. Turn like me. Take out the mirror. There, walk with it. Hold it either straight down, or at your chest, reflection toward yourself. Point at what you don't like. Point at me."

Toya pointed, and not badly.

"Very good. You see, Flawless Vaalu-Mauna," Mauna said, "everything works out. Look at everyone like... like shit. Or a chicken you want to slaughter. There. Walk around some more."

Toya walked around more, pointed at Mauna, at the window. Mauna took a pitcher for herself, drank water from it, leaned her backside

against the table, watched. *Well, I look pretty good from the outside*, she thought and set aside the pitcher, wiping herself.

Toya remembered it all just like that: the Mistress, naked, watching from the side, arms crossed, tail at her legs, drinking from the pitcher and watching.

"My Vaal, I almost forgot—the silver ring," Mauna began painfully pulling the ring from her palm. "Give me your finger, left palm. Well, we've been through this before," good idea, but Mauna again couldn't get it off. "There it is... Do you have that kiri salve?"

No, Toya shook her head: she had given it to Myri. But some was found, though it was such shame—she pointed with the mirror under the bed. Mauna looked at the gesture, approved it with her own gesture, and crawled under it, and pulled out a bottle of oleamor. Toya had bought it in Lvan, when she could still go out. Arzis had told and shown her what it was. Embarrassing.

"Just what's needed," and now the ring came off without difficulty, and the ring went onto Toya's palm. "So... The palms give you away a bit. Gloves would help. On the other hand, I never wear gloves in decorum," Mauna frowned. "You'll hide your palms in the sleeves."

Well, that's all.

"So, you're ready now. But now I need to be turned into a dhaari. This will probably be harder."

Toya very much wanted to tell her: 'No, Mistress, being a dhaar is very simple.' But she couldn't, so she simply waved the mirror, and this was amusing; for neither Mauna, nor even Toya herself, could understand what she wanted to say.

Mauna pulled on Toya's chemise, and it was okay. With the dress it proved more difficult, because Toya is slender.

"Little fat foxy," Mauna kept trying, and somehow it worked out.

She put on the sign of Ahey too, right with the ring on it. Discovering such inconsistency, she took it off again and tried to untie the cord, to give it to Toya. But she pointed the mirror at her.

"What? I'll give it to you, and you'll give it to Arzis."

Toya-Mauna furiously waved the mirror, it seemed she might actually smack Mauna-Toya across the muzzle.

"All right then."

Some difficulties with the Mramri belt, it's not so easy to fasten it again. The dhaar rings came into play, and they went tightly into the Messenger's ears, Mauna grimaced and snarled. Toya found a solution—simply smeared them with oleamor.

Mauna didn't forget one more thing—the fox mask, and pulled it on. And looked at herself in the mirror, hands on her hips.

"This I'll keep for myself, forgive me. Well, Mauna, go. Myri knows everything, she'll guide you. Remember it all. May Vaal protect you."

Toya pointed at her with her palm: at the rings, at everything. As if to say, why this? Mauna waved her off, looking at her sideways.

"It must be so. Go Toya, go. There's no time."

Toya sobbed, something became clear and understood to her.

"Don't you dare! Distance! You'll smear it, blur it!" Mauna hissed. Toya-Mauna went to embrace her, Mauna-Toya-fox resisted: "Keep distance, don't, don't, go..."

Toya shook her head. Nope, won't do.

"Don't talk! There are four of you here, and I'm alone. Come on! That's it, you've become Mauna, go. Don't let me down."

Toya grabbed her by the hand, nearly dropping the mirror, but understood that a kiss was impossible—the veil wouldn't allow it, the distance would smear. And so she froze with her at her chin.

Mauna pushed her away, and suddenly Toya straightened and left; but before she turned, looking at the Mistress, but she had already turned her back, toward the window, paws spread wide (again only a whip was missing from her hands), and fox ears.

Everything became lonely, Mauna walked around the room. And what to do now? Probably anything. She could sit on the bed. She thought about what dhaar-Mramri do. Yes, that's it, they pray to Ahey. They have interesting relations with him, less comprehensible than Suungs with Vaal; Vaal is a fairly simple and clear egregore, you can see him in dreams, no problem. However it may be, now this probably befits her.

Mauna knows that dhaars pray on their knees (Suungs don't pray to Vaal, there's no such thing at all, it's meaningless), but she knows almost no Mramri words, except "*Ja*" (yes) and "*Ahey, vergib mir meine Schuld*" (Toya said this when everything was especially terrible; something like an engram for banishing fear, probably).

Very well, let's stand, even facing the mirror, where she can see herself as a fox.

"So then, Ahey, there is a request. Who calls upon you: Vaalu-Mauna, Ashai of Messaging of the Suungs."

She scratched her nose under the mask.

"I have no connection with your egregore, only with ours, with Vaal."

She thought.

"And I have not seen you there, in dreams. But this is nothing; I suppose our personal acquaintance is of no consequence. Yes, by the way, I cannot ask Vaal: Vaal will do nothing, because it is we who all together lead him, Suungs—our will is primary."

She touched herself by the high fox ears.

"With you and the Mramri, I presume, everything is different, I am not learned in how exactly, I admit. I note that Toya is still under your egregore. If Arzis does not deceive her and takes her in marriage, then she will soon be under Vaal. Arzis, he is honest, though a criminal and murderer."

She raised a finger.

"You help her transform, she will save Arzis, and Tai, and Myri. Have you received the Message? Thank you."

Myri silently escorted Toya-Mauna down the corridor. They descended the steps. Someone important nodded to her. Standing there

was not a coach at all, but a light open carriage, Tai was driving, and Arzis was also sitting. Two more horses were tied to the carriage. Some guards.

"What, Mistress, we're not taking Toya or what?" Arzis asked when they set off.

Not knowing what to do, Toya-Mauna pointed the mirror at him.

"You'll see her very soon," Myri said for her.

Arzis shrugged, stared at the fortress, then at Toya-Mauna. They crossed the moat.

"Listen, when will I see her? Eh, Myri?"

"Very soon."

"Hey, I'm serious. Come on, Mistress, tell me. Otherwise, you know, I was planning to get married tomorrow."

"Arzis, I swear to you by the blood of my ancestors that you'll see her in a couple of moments," Myri leaned toward him.

"Well I'll be, such mysteries. And where are we going, Myri? Do you know?"

"North. You better watch the sides. When we pass the first bridge—tell me if the Chamber guards stopped on it."

"But you'll see that too, right?"

"You watch too."

They passed the bridge, the Chamber guards—their bodyguards—didn't cross it.

"Passed it, they stayed behind."

Myri didn't trust this, turned back, checked everything herself.

"Toya, you can speak."

Arzis turned around. What?

"Arzis, it's me-me."

He grabbed Toya-Mauna's knees.

"I was thinking something was wrong with you! With Mauna! That is... with Toya. Toya?"

Tai turned around, but Myri told him:

"Tai, don't you dare stop, this is mortally dangerous!"

"Where's the Mistress?" Tai demanded, not stopping.

"Her order: go north, save yourselves, get lost in the Empire. You, me, Arzis and Toya. Under no circumstances return—this is mortally dangerous."

"Shit," Tai said, but didn't stop driving.

"The Mistress dressed me as herself," Toya said, not removing anything, not even the veil, "told me to get in and go-go, but nothing more. She stayed there, Arzis. She dressed as a dhaar."

"What? Why? Tai, do you understand something?"

Tai was silent.

"Tai?"

"No. Let me think."

Only now did Arzis think to lift the veil and look. Yes, Toya, all in tush—but Toya. He touched her cheek.

"What do we do?" Arzis asked Tai.

"We'll drive away. Turn off in the forest. Or... Turn off somewhere, so we can't be seen. Then we'll decide."

"Myri, what else did she say?"

"Nothing more. There, in the chests, there are various things, money. They can be sorted through, we change clothes, take these horses. And go away from here, as fast as possible, anywhere."

"So everything's right... There was this whole meeting. And they wanted to off us after all this... She arranged an escape. But why make it all so complicated?" he pointed at Toya-Messenger. "Eh, Tai? Why's it all so complicated?"

"Don't know. But Mauna stayed there. And it seems she's fucked."

"I told her, the bitch!" Arzis snarled. He yanked out the spear lodged vertically behind the backrest, but didn't know what to do with it. "I told her, I told her we should do it this way right away!"

"Arzis, shut it, don't yell. Quiet."

They turned off simply near the edge of a small forest, at a fork. No one around, already approaching dusk. Beautiful: the road goes down, everything visible into the distance. Here Arzis found use for the spear: he began beating it against the ground like a stick.

"Fuck you, stupid!" he snarled toward the south. "What am I now, what are we supposed to do now?! I told her," spear against the ground, "that they," spear against the ground, "want to off her, her own dear friends, and all of us too! Mauna!" he hurled it forward, though it wasn't meant for throwing. Making a beautiful arc, it stuck in the earth, swaying.

"Arziss, don't-don't," Toya wasn't afraid of him like this and rushed to embrace him. A risky, dangerous action; strangely, he didn't rage even more. "Don't," she kissed him. "Don't scold the Mistress."

"Toi, the Mistress is fucked, there's no one left to scold," he simply sat on the grass, burying his head in his hands, and Toya sat with him.

"She told me like that, Arzis, forgive-forgive, she ordered me like that... I didn't want to go, but she... said..."

"Wonderful, great! If you hadn't gone, I'd have strangled you myself," he roughly gathered her to him.

Tai got down, Myri got down.

"Shouldn't have taken you to Verin. Should have taken you and just left... somewhere..."

Toya stroked him, her sleeves and palms became completely black from tentush. Tai went and retrieved the spear from the grass, silently handed it to Arzis. He didn't take it right away—spent a long time wiping something on his muzzle. Then took it.

"What are we gonna do?" he asked Tai; a strange question from him. Everyone asks him that, and now here—he does.

"Take the carriage, take the lionesses and get out of here. Just all of you change clothes, let's see what's in the chests. Toya, listen, Toya. Come here."

"Yes, sir Tai?"

"Where was she, where did you leave her, how?"

"She was in mine and Arzis's room. There she dressed me, and dressed herself as a dhaar, and stayed there. She even put on dhaar rings, put on Ahey. With Arzis's ring... Arzis, I left the Mistress your ring."

"She didn't say why she dressed as a dhaar?" Tai demanded attention, an answer.

"No," Toya answered.

"You left her the ring. You left the ring. Good," Arzis said.

They looked at what was in the chests. Changed clothes, right there, by the road. Arzis stuffed himself with money (there turned out to be an abnormal amount of it).

"Earned it. Made some coin," he kept saying. "Made bank, fuck. Just made bank on all this money. Just a gift, dream job," he banged the carriage, the horses got scared.

"We won't get her out. There's a fortress there," Tai said.

"No. Forget it. I think it's a miracle we got out. Our Mistress pulled some kind of scheme. Maybe paid off the Chamber guards. Just why did she stay herself?"

"Don't know," Tai looked south.

"Because she's stupid. Smart, but stupid. The best fool in the world," and Arzis looked south. "Maybe they won't kill her, eh? She's a Messenger, Tai."

Tai shrugged and untied his horse from the carriage. He jumped on it.

"All right, I'll go separately. Let's scatter. Take the lionesses and get going."

"Well... this... Vaal give you strength," Arzis shook his hand.

"Good luck."

"Hey, Toya, tell sir Tai 'goodbye'!"

"Goodbye, sir Tai!" Toya, now ordinary but all darkened from smeared tentush, peered out from behind the carriage seat, only her eyes gleaming. Myri sat beside her, not turning toward the farewelling males, palm under her muzzle; she was entirely elsewhere.

Tai rode east, while they were supposed to go north. Arzis climbed onto the carriage, stood on the seat with his paws and looked toward where the fortress was; Toya looked there too. He took up his spear again, but Toya grabbed his leg so he wouldn't think of anything, because he might.

He just raised the spear upward.

Fire of Vaal

She obviously couldn't go out herself—the longer she sat here, the more time they had.

Mauna had lost all sense of time, not knowing what to do with herself. She simply lay on the bed and stared at the wall covered with fabric; with the ears of the fox mask she tapped against that very wall. She worried about the future, but she had absolutely no idea what might be in it. Perhaps everyone would understand and forgive—almost all Messengers are eccentric, and she especially has the right to be such; well, she dressed as a dhaar, sent her Family to the four winds, alright, things happen. Perhaps they wouldn't forgive and would mock such a fall in Ashai-Keetrah dignity, and would request Disvestment, perhaps—they would perform Exile^{102,103}. The thing is, Messengers have no Disvestment and no Exile—you're either in the Inner Empire, or dead.

The room grew dark, because it's evening. No one came to see her, no one showed interest, but she heard and knew that she (dhaar Mauna-Toya) was being guarded, already two of them, at the entrance. Several times some commotion occurred, running about—perhaps they were trying to find Mauna herself, or something; though what's the point—the entire fortress saw that Messenger had gone somewhere with the Chamber pseudo-bodyguards, on important business, and this very guard had returned—she observed this from the window, with relief. So Myri and Toya had done everything correctly.

Toya. Here's what, she thought. In all this time, practically these whole two years, she still hadn't learned: what happened then, at the very beginning, with her, with Bastiana and with Selestina? Was someone really stealing something? Knowing everyone, Mauna knew this was practically impossible. Curious, had Toya really put on Amaya's plasis, out of foolishness, to look at herself in the mirror? Hard to say: there Toya had left something unsaid, hadn't told everything, she remembers her half-truthful account. *My Vaal, how much time has passed, and I never once asked*; this secret began to torment her somehow.

¹⁰² S., is it true that Exile includes extremely indecent actions against the already-former Ashai-Keetrah? I have heard it involves violence, but I have found no specific directives in the Codex.—Z.

¹⁰³ *Ceremonies of Farewell, Disvestment, Exile. Farewell is almost a family event—it's how one becomes an Approached One. Disvestment preserves your dignity to a degree. Forget about dignity during Exile. It includes ritual rape—that's what you wanted to know but were afraid to ask. The reason you don't find anything about it in the Codex, Z., is because the Codex considers it beneath its dignity to elaborate on such matters. Everything is left to the internal traditions of the Chamber, according to the Eternal Concord.*—S.

On the small table before the mirror lay the poison she had taken from the plasis pouch, and it beckoned with simplicity and horror. She stood, put it around her neck—fears must be kept close. And lay back down, sighed.

Suddenly at the door—a familiar voice, she pricked up her ears.

"The dhaar still in there?"

Tai! she thought with sweet horror.

"In there."

"It's ordered to resolve the matter."

And someone entered, closed the door. Mauna-dhaar sharply sat up on the bed. This is how he met her: Mauna—frightened, disheveled, sad.

"Tai?" she hissed angrily, trying to stand. "What are you doing he..."

No one let her stand. Mauna was heavily pressed down onto the bed. He bit her chin, missing. Everything hurt, metal pieces of armor dug into her chest and belly, sharp edges. She tried to correct her such difficult position (her tail hurt, legs were squeezed), but only banged against the headboard. She was heavily, hotly licked, they both kissed clumsily, biting each other. She embraced him by the mane, dug her claws into iron and hard leather and didn't let go, mane climbed into her nose, mouth, eyes.

"*Vtai*, did you come back to cut off my head?" she asked into his ear, then bit and licked him.

"We need to leave," he closed her mouth, pulling back and lying on her, just like that, in his glove, without ceremony. He listened to what was happening out there in the world. And only removed his hand, wanted to say something else reasonable, but Mauna licked him.

He stood and lifted her from the bed like a toy, by the shoulder; squeezed her waist so hard she exhaled. But no luck: females always bring surprises into any plans, projects, environments—sometimes foolish, sometimes absurd, sometimes very unusual, sometimes bright, sometimes difficult; or like this—prickly and demanding. And yes, not later (as would be more sensible, but where is sense, and where are lionesses, really), but right now precisely. There had already been that 'later,' been through it, we know it, nope. Mauna struck him a couple times, raked his muzzle with her claws—fighting, while her other hand simply clung to him. Apparently she was hissing. Definitely snarling.

The only thing Tai removed from himself was his gloves. He didn't remove anything from her, not even the Mramri belt—no need. Mauna threw herself back on the bed, her legs were raised up, so it hurt; she thought with great horror that now he'd fuck her like the lowliest dhaar. Lucky dhaars, she thought. He entered her hard and heavy, without preambles or care. You can bury your claws in his mane, she thought. Moaning, breathing, everything forbidden—complete myein from his palm. Mauna gnawed his fingers, eyes closed. Her legs on his shoulders, and something uncomfortable, sharp digs into them again, but where would you run; and besides one shouldn't complain about fate when one simply and straightforwardly came to take off your head.

Behind the door the two guards listened, one even put his ear to the door.

"Is he fucking her?"

"Seems like it."

"This is how he's resolving the matter?"

"Seems like it."

"I'm thinking... Wait, we could do that?"

"We're ordered to guard her, so she doesn't leave the floor."

"I'm thinking... If you're fucking her, she won't run away."

"Hey, don't overthink. The Messenger's dhaar, and this is the Messenger's Family cat, let'em fuck," the second reasonably judged.

Tai seemed to stop being interested in anything, even her, only in himself. He removed his hand from her mouth. Fine, and she smiled; such a smile on her could be seen only a couple times: once—when she breathed too much arra (out of curiosity), the second—took too strong soma. He had already squeezed her so fiercely, everything so tight and painful, that she nearly snarled, but forbade herself, closing her mouth. Inside it was wet and warm (for it is the wet, lunar, dark world of the female), but suddenly in waves it became differently wet and warmer, in waves, sweeter and better. And Tai all melted, went so relaxed, and ceased everything, all. And fine, and let it be, and good. With the Sacrifice it wasn't like this, with the Sacrifice it was different—she was entirely occupied with concentration of will, ritual, she didn't even remember much really. But here—no will, complete surrender, nothing to do, nothing at all...

"Much blood, more blood," the Messenger, she certainly won't forget anything here; rituals and words—that's for them.

Mauna now madly, strongly wanted to embrace, to lie around, so that he would lie on her, and she would embrace him; if he also licked her, anywhere, it doesn't matter, then that would be perfect. She would too, honestly-honestly, let him touch her, wherever he wants, honestly-honestly. She wouldn't even scratch, I swear.

But Tai stood, tousled his mane, busy and thoroughly put on his gloves. He took her from here, from the bed, she took hold reluctantly, hung on him.

"Let's go, Muni. Come," he was pulling something out, and she wouldn't let him do this properly, still embracing him. "Come on," he pulled a small bag over her head (the very one that Toya had used for wool in spinning). "You're a dhaar, I'm taking you to execution. By the Mistress's order."

"Anything you say," Mauna answered from inside the bag. "Just give me the sirna, it's on the table."

"Here," he pressed it in her hand.

"Shove it in my bosom," she wanted him to shove it in himself. "And the ribbon, it's in the casket. And the letter too. Mask, ribbon, letter."

"Why, Mauna?"

"Don't talk! Shove it in!"

"The casket's locked."

"Vaal, Tai, break it."

He broke it with his sword, got everything out.

"Here," he did everything, shoved it all in for her. "Let's go."

He also wound her hands in front with a cord, but didn't tie them.

"Hold the cord so it doesn't unwind itself," he said in her ear. And she just licked him.

They went out.

"Where are you taking her?"

Tai pointed down, then pointed at his neck, as if to say, that's it, the dhaar fucked around and found out.

"Need to confirm, wait."

"Nothing to confirm here, Va-Mauna ordered it. She's returning right now actually, if not already. She," he pointed at Mauna, "is Family, not under your ordination."

This worked. Vaal, it worked. He led her down the corridor, then down the steps. My Vaal, they even went outside. He led her carelessly, deliberately.

A couple times they were asked:

"Who's this?"

"Our dhaar. Mistress's order."

He sat her on something, Mauna couldn't really see: either a two-wheeler, or something. That's it, off they went. No, they stopped.

"What is this?" they asked at the gates, and the gates were closed. Evening, already dark, torches.

"Our dhaar. Mistress's order."

"Order is to close the fortress, let no one out, until further notice," the gatekeeper said with pleasure.

"But our Mistress hasn't returned yet," Tai protested.

"When she returns—we'll open."

"She's not under your ordination," he pointed at Mauna, smiling.

"None of my problem. Take the bag off her," the chief gatekeeper, naturally, really couldn't know anything. Told to close it—he closed it.

"But I need to, you know," Tai pointed at his neck, "need to take a ride with her. Take her to the Mistress," he winked, made the Legate gesture with fist down: 'kill, slaughter, remove, off, send to tophet, send to Naheim, waste.'

"Why go then? Throw her in the cellar."

Mauna wasn't afraid. At all. With Tai she wasn't afraid at all. With Arzis there had even been fear sometimes. But with him—whatever happens.

"Take it off her."

Tai sighed, calmly and slowly removed the bag from her. Mauna squinted from the torch. Tai tapped her ears with his finger, as if to say, here are the rings, here's the dhaar. The gatekeeper, and another one beside him, looked at all this with something like either suspicion or distrust; quite a dhaar, weird somehow. If you look throughout life at the

most varied lionkind, then you can say, you develop a sense: this is a dhaar (and even, possibly, determine the breed); this is a Yunian (pretty ones, bitches); this is a northerner, Suungkomnaasa (you should have seen); this is a Hustrian (there are no decent lionesses from Hustru); this is a Naysagri (kind and reliable, but if you don't like broad muzzles, then it won't do); this is an Andarian.

"Right, drag her to the cellar, and..."

"Halt! Don't let them out!" someone ran out from the fortress.

Tai dragged her from the cart by her clothes, and undertook the only possible, but actually—so impossible—thing: he dragged Mauna toward the fortress gates. He had a tiny hope—perhaps in this fortress there's a small door, which he back in his time, together with other manes, called a 'cat door,' or 'kitty.' If very lucky, it would be there. If very-very lucky, he could manage to slide the bolt off it. If very-very-very lucky, it would simply be open, just push it with your shoulder and run (on your own two paws, and this with an aching leg after the 'Helsian incident,' yes). But there's no door, and they both simply pressed themselves into the corner of the gates.

Mauna even threw off the cord from her hands, and even managed to draw the sirna in this corner. She decided to hide behind Tai, embraced him, well practically holding him hostage; but not from fear, but so he wouldn't dare—under no circumstances!—to push her away from himself, or, Vaal forbid, give her to them, bargaining for her life or some other nonsense.

"Don't say Tai, say no, am I, them don't tell," she tangled her words in their corner, so impermissible for a Messenger.

All that Tai has is his sword. He's excellent with it, but here it's rather useless. First, about four poleaxes are aimed at them. Now five. Already six. We need not continue, but fine, second, he has no shield. Also he has Mauna. That's all.

"Drop your weapon, whatcha doing!"

"Take them alive!" someone important shouted, a voice even familiar to Mauna. "Only alive!..."

"Bring a net!" someone sensibly suggested.

Tai reasoned in his own way how to free himself from Mauna's embrace, which might also lead to her death. The female's sense of fear wouldn't let her throw herself at sharp, pointed, small, iron things, and the calculation proved correct—when he very quickly, very suddenly rushed forward, Mauna didn't follow him; and the fortress guards crowded in too tight a line, not all of whom thought to cover themselves with shields, couldn't properly respond, he closed the distance and beautifully drove his sword into someone. Naturally, the one who took the blow instantly became incapacitated; naturally, Tai was surrounded and immediately hooked by one poleaxe, a second drove into his armor (didn't penetrate); third (penetrated); fourth (penetrated); fifth (in the head, done).

Mauna also rushed forward—she didn't want to be left alone, she needed to follow Tai. But a lioness with a dagger—that's not very fright-

ening, that's almost not frightening. No one began stabbing her with poleaxes, the chief gatekeeper himself simply grabbed her by the hand, and all the sirna did was slide across armor, scratch the leather of a vambrace. He grabbed her by the right hand, hit her in the teeth with his glove, knocked her to the ground, and on that the lioness's fight was, practically, finished. She didn't release the sirna even on the ground, though no one had ever beaten her like this, and she couldn't even imagine it can be like this (Arzis is always right: 'You've never been punched in the snout'). Sitting on her, the gatekeeper very simply twisted her wrist and took the weapon.

"Quite a scrappy bitch," he even noted good-naturedly.

"Why did you killed him! Disperse!"

"Is this a dhaar, or what?" the gatekeeper asked distrustfully, peering closer; his subordinate held a torch. He even saw part of the insignia on her neck.

But someone else leaned over Mauna. She didn't see who—she could barely think at all.

"This is Vaalu-Mauna's dhaar," they told him very confidently, and pushed him away. "Everyone leave, disperse! Bring a bag, quickly!"

The bag was put on her head again, a different one (different smell, Mauna could smell). She was led blindly again, but differently than with Tai. He had led her seemingly roughly, but actually—so carefully. Here they led her truly: her paws tangled, she couldn't walk straight, but they simply and strongly dragged her, without ceremony. Some steps. Somewhere down. More. And more...

Then they threw her on cold stone. Her hands were bound under her knees, and she sat like that a bit, then fell on her side. Bad idea—she struck the stone floor. Doors slammed, they'd locked her in.

So she lay a little, with the bag on her head.

She'd just stood up, barely-barely, when suddenly behind the door someone was quietly conversing:

"...a heap of questions will arise..."

"...everyone thinks she left..."

"...sure it's her?"

"...it's her."

Someone entered again. They didn't remove the bag, but instead pulled apart her dress. Tapped the insignia. Turned her over, bared the insignia at her tail. Also tapped it. She heard uneven breathing.

They left, and she lay again without getting up. An animated argument was going on, a discussion, but she heard nothing, no matter how she tried to prick up her ears. It was difficult, impossible—they wouldn't stand up under the bag, it wouldn't let them. Then they dragged her somewhere again, and Mauna thought—deeper, farther, not up. They threw her down again. She asked nothing, they told her nothing.

Here she had to lie. She managed to sit up—had to sit. She figured out that she could crawl like this, on her backside, with bound legs, to the

wall, to make it easier. The wall was damp, ugh. Her mouth tasted salty, her nose and jaw hurt badly, a tooth was loose or completely broken.

Someone came again, and Mauna now felt fear; very strong terror, like the first times dreamwalking, only worse. They took the bag off her, there was torchlight, and here, in her new... hmm... residence... room... cell—there was even a Bowl of Vaal, it also gave light. A Silent One removed the bag from her, she immediately recognized the garb. There was one more; they without words, without anything, simply untied her, then tied her to a pillar. She didn't resist. They tied her legs below, began tying her hands behind the pillar too.

"Not like that. Spread her arms to the sides, not behind. There, there," a voice sounded from the left, and this was the first voice she reliably recognized—Vaal-Ifana. "Good, go."

The Silent Ones left without a single word and carefully closed the door behind them.

Vaal-Ifana indeed stood before her. Most surprisingly, she held a mug in her hand from which steam rose, and Mauna even recognized the smell—it was coffee (strictly forbidden to Messengers, like many teas—it ruins sleep badly). Coffee is often and widely served among patricians, and not only them, so she knows the smell, but the taste—alas.

"My Vaal, they woke me up. Urgent, this and that," she sipped from the mug. She looked into her eyes, glancingly, and so, at all of her. Taking herself a small wooden stool, she sat on it, swirled her coffee and drank. She's in plasis, but such a simple one. She has an amulet, sirna, Stamp, everything as proper. Moreover, she has another sirna in her hands.

She drank and set both the mug and sirna on a table, on which sat also a beautiful coffee pot, no comparison to the crude mug, and various instruments, well like those of blacksmiths or carpenters. On it—unlit torches, many. There was also a closed book. She yawned, licked herself, wiped her mouth with her palm. Freeing the binding cords of her plasis, she rolled up the sleeves higher and instantly tied them across her chest, a movement honed over years. Mauna remembered how she'd struggled with this when she'd needed to wash and wrap Amaya in cloth. A poor ordinary Ashai-Keetrah would have come from her. Perhaps she was never meant to be more than this—good Ashai don't find themselves bound to pillars in cellar darkness.

Ifana approached, cut her dress, this way and that, freeing her from clothing. The Mramri belt gave her trouble for a long time, she wanted to simply remove it, but couldn't manage its clasp (it's tricky somehow, Mauna had also struggled with it). She decided to solve the problem simply, and also cut it. It worked, but she cut herself; sucking her finger, but not cursing, she threw it aside.

Cold. Actually, very cold, ugh. Right now she'd like to be in the bath with Toya.

Only the copper symbol of Ahey and Arzis's ring remained on her neck, and some other things. All this interested her, Ifana took and with-

out any difficulty ignited ignimara on her left hand, without any engrams or preparations, and lit things up for herself.

"Trust not words," she read on the ring. "Well, that's not about me. I trust—nobody lies to me," and she extinguished the ignimara, clenching her fist.

She cut the cord, removed it, also threw everything on the floor. She didn't pick up the sign of Ahey, wasn't interested. But she bent down for the ring, tried to pull it onto her finger.

"For a lion," she determined, and carried it to the table.

Next—the poison on her neck.

"You don't need this," she took it and also set it on the table.

She stood before Mauna, hands on hips, surveying her proprietarily.

"It's been a while since I worked with dhaars. Tell me, where did Vaalu-Mauna go?"

Mauna was silent.

"She left this afternoon, and no one knows where. Everyone's worried. Her bodyguard was just killed, with you. You're her dhaar, very valuable, as far as I know. Where did the Mistress go?"

Mauna was silent. She wanted to try taking her with empathy, but she skillfully avoided her gaze, everything only glancing. This was rather strange, because one must know that the opponent has empathy, and take this sliding gaze as a shield; but what empathy could a dhaar have? She didn't want to say 'I don't know'—because Ifana would recognize her voice, that's certain. Strange that she doesn't see the insignia on her neck. Strange that she doesn't notice that the lioness before her resembles a Mramri scarcely, but an Andarian very much—so very much.

Ifana ignited ignimara on her right hand, now right before her nose, then pressed her palm directly *there*.

If you burn yourself with ordinary fire, it burns. If you burn yourself with ignimara, Mauna knows, it buuuuurns, and agonizing, prickly waves, like when your leg falls asleep, only many times worse. Mauna immediately understood she would go mad; she would surrender right now.

"I don't know!"

Ifana took away her hand, extinguished the ignimara. She scooped water from a bucket with a ladle, doused her.

"Let's try again."

"Don't! It's me, Mauna, it's me, Ifana! Look at me!"

She chuckled in laughter, and ignited ignimara again:

"My Vaal, Mauna. I understand it all."

But she extinguished it, having noticed on the floor, among the clothes, many various artifacts.

"So... What do we have here."

First she took up the fox mask. Ifana examined it for a long time, trying to grasp what it was and why. She even looked from inside it, pulling it onto herself.

"What do you need this for?"

"Why are you tormenting me, sister? You're Ashai-Keetrah, you know I'm Ashai-Keetrah. Who ordered you?"

"What kind of Ashai are you..." she waved her hand hopelessly. "What kind of sister am I to you—dressed as a dhaar. Why the mask?"

Since Mauna didn't answer immediately, Ifana convincingly ignited ignimara for a moment, and Mauna thought much faster:

"Amaya gave it to me. A similar one. Exactly the same," she answered quickly.

"Who is Amaya?" Ifana held the mask by its strap, suspended.

"Vaal-~~Amaya~~, my mentor."

"Your mentor did poorly," Ifana chuckled. "Her acolyte walks around in dhaar clothes."

Ifana turned the mask over in her hands.

Actually, she was simply mad with joy; she didn't show it, no-no, all controlled. Never once in her life had she gotten her hands on an Ashai; and here—please, they allowed, even ordered—do what you want, to the very end. From ordinary lionkind what can you burn out with ignimara, small yield; but with a Messenger, a real one, surely, you can milk so much power until she dies, it's simply a feast. Such things, of course, they don't teach in disciplariums, but she's clever—figured it all out herself.

Her strong ignimara isn't just like that. Someone must pay for this feast.

"Come on, give me your head. Lower," she put it on the Messenger. "There. Now really, you could paint a portrait."

Mauna remembered how sister-portraits were painted of her, and how she'd had to sit (hated it).

Next came the ribbon.

"What's this?" she looked expressively.

"A ribbon. Also from Amaya. Listen, Ifana..."

"Hush, hush. Don't," she waved her off. She examined it under the light of Vaal's Bowl: "Luana. 'M.' Solar. 'A.' Sixtima. An engram, or something... A gift?"

"Yes. A great one."

"A small one," she threw it into Vaal's Bowl, into the fire. "So... And this we have... A letter. Let's read it."

Mauna was silent.

"Burn when you read... don't leave traces... burn... Mmm. Ahem. Mun-isha," Ifana read ceremoniously, glancing at her small audience, "we drew the sea. But only I will drown in it. You must live in the house. And also. Don't..." she squinted. "Ah yes. Don't break oaths. Don't break oaths. And..." she tried to read, but everything there was crossed out, Mauna would have given much to know what Amaya had crossed out there. "Eternally yours. Amaya. Terrible handwriting."

She looked at Mauna.

"You didn't even respect your mentor here, didn't burn it. I'll respect her," and she threw the letter into Vaal's fire. "Why did you dress as a dhaar and where did yours go?"

"She was ordered killed, and this couldn't be allowed."

Ifana also took Amaya's sirna from the table, examined it better, read the engraving; the gatekeepers had given it to her, and no wonder—sirnas are supposed to be given to Ashai, they're not for secular females or males. It had fallen. She took it up again.

"You even stole your mentor's sirna. Vaal, what is this. Where is this entire Suung Empire rolling to... Tell me, why couldn't the dhaar be killed?"

"Because of the Sworn-Bond."

"Sworn-Bond?..." Ifana pondered, and understood nothing. "Who ordered her killed?"

"Imperial secret," and indeed, this is Imperial secret.

"Fire-clear," Ifana ignited ignimara.

Mauna didn't know that some, whom Ifana had tortured for days, went mad from the single word 'fire-clearly,' already knowing what would follow.

"Ifana, sister, don't, it's very painful," Mauna begged. She didn't try to break free, but shrank back.

Useless, fire passed in a wave through her body. She wanted to die. Ifana doused her with water, useless. Still wanted to die.

"Who ordered it?" Ifana, actually, doesn't care what to ask. She'll ask plenty of things, the night is long, and she'll write it down in her book, there it is, lying on the table; the most curious confessions can be extracted from lionkind. And here—a whole treasure trove. Tonight she'll learn so much that her hand will tire from writing.

Amaya, the Inner Empire. Hunting Grounds. Want to go there, want to leave here. There you can hunt, there you can shoot Messages, there you can eat arrows of others' Messages or bite other Messengers. This torture, it's like with the Sacrifice, there too it burned in the moment, but incomparably-incomparably-incomparably less. Sacrifice. Huntress. The huntress's hatred is eternal, and reliable as the sun. Sacrifice. To devour Messages, drive them into yourself. Tai opened me, it's like with the Sacrifice. Sacrifice.

"Fire-clearly," ignimara again, and the palm again—there.

The Huntress, as Amaya taught. Sacrifice. Must surrender to everything, absorb everything, gather all intent there. Second: when the Sacrifice releases, mustn't miss the moment, recite the engram: 'Sacrifice—me, Tiamat—you.' You can whisper, at this time lions pay no attention to anything, so Khirana taught. Let him lie on you, don't release him, recite, embrace him, recite; he'll think you feel so good, that you're so lost you're whispering nonsense, love, connection, passion. Mauna did just that, Mauna is diligent, she didn't release that Sacrifice, the lion Manu, he lay on her almost an eternity. Yes, Ifana, very good, hold it, hold it more, the ignimara became not insanely hot, but cool, then warm, like golden water, hold it more. Where are you going! She became puzzled, angry, shook off the ignimara from her right hand, flared up the left, more, what a clever

one you are, Ifana, you do everything so diligently, just like me, hold it more, more and more.

"Sacrifice—me, Tiamat—you," Mauna didn't notice she was saying this aloud now.

Ifana's ignimara ran out on one palm, then on the second; the longest of all she'd ever produced. Her hands were terribly pricked with needles, which hadn't happened for a very long time, many-many years. By habit she doused the prisoner with water, then herself thrust her hands into the bucket, because it was impossible to endure these needles.

"I'll roast you through, bitch," she threatened weakly. "You dare to... endure..."

The last thing she thought—why are there no burns there, her fur should already be blazing. And she collapsed, right by the bucket, over-turning it.

None of this concerned Mauna, all these fainting feats and overturned buckets. Her ears were ringing, her head was spinning, ecstasy of golden water everywhere and all around, very much. Simply bliss. She could hang here like this, tied by the legs, arms to the sides, for all eternity. She very much wanted to sneeze, and did so, and her jaw ached—the loosened tooth reminded her of itself. She looked around. Tied with ropes—hmm, well that should be simple now.

Mauna was that case when a Messenger felt hlamai toward her directly, and took her immediately to herself. Therefore she basically didn't practiced ignimara, and knew almost nothing about it; just as with empathy at the time, but there you go, she figured it out. So here too, she recited only a little:

"Ias, ias."

Her right hand ignited, completely without effort. Bah, not very pleasant, how do ordinary Ashai endure this. She knows one must burn briefly, five heartbeats, and then—enough. But Vaal's fire is very hot, everything burns from it just great—the ropes flared up, burned through. They released, she hung awkwardly; her wrists burned, but a little. She blew on them, waited a bit, burned through and grabbed behind the pillar, as she could, or else you'll fall forward now and wrench your legs. She thought (well as always, Mauna thinks first, then does, although... it depends how you look at it). Carefully slid down the pillar, somehow crawled forward, in jerks slightly dragged Ifana toward herself (heavy!). Barely-barely. She took the sirna from her belt, cut everything at her legs, freed herself. Lay a bit on the cold floor—everything had gone numb. Oh, the fox ears are in the way of lying, she's a fox again. Well nothing, let them be in the way.

Running around naked again, well what can you do. It's chilly here, despite the torches, and she put on her rags; they now resemble a robe, because everything was cut down the middle by Ifana. She belted herself with cord, of which there's as much as you want here, unhurriedly so, proprietarily measured herself the needed length, worked with the sirna (an Ashai must have a belt). Ah yes, Ifana. She stood over her, lifted her

head from the floor by the chin, with her sirna in hand. Nope, still unconscious.

She thought. Ashai-Keetrah cannot kill another Ashai-Keetrah, this is forbidden by the Codex, save in extraordinary cases: self-defense and 'witnessing insane crimes.' In this case—'not approved.' If someone is lying unconscious, then you can neither defend yourself from her nor witness her crimes. So, it's forbidden, therefore we won't. Though Ifana's already not long for this world anyway, a Sacrifice is a Sacrifice, there's no escaping it; she has two to four days left.

Here's another bucket of water, everything with reserve for her, for Mauna. She washed her hands in it, sat at the table in her rags, crossed one leg over the other; occupied herself with returning the sign of Ahey and Arzis's ring to the cord, put everything back, sniffing and rubbing her jaw. Oh, here you are, there's the coffee pot and coffee here, still quite warm. Well why not, let's try it, Messaging probably won't work out today anyway. She poured herself into Ifana's mug, swirled it, smelled it. Tried.

"Bitter," she experienced the new drink. "Middling."

What do they even find in it?

She examined Ifana's sirna: 'Sisterhood of Krimmau-Ammau.' Old, worn, years of history since Coming of Age. And there she was: Ifana stirred, tried to come to and understand what where how. Rising on her hands, she saw Mauna, who was drinking coffee at the table and swinging her paw. She rubbed her eyes with her right hand—maybe it will help? Is she sleeping, dreamwalking, or what?

"Point your finger at me, and toss upward. If I fly away—then it's a dream, not warmblood," Mauna advised.

"What?"

"Point your finger at me. Indicate. Like this. And now—toss upward. Did I fly away?"

"Where... you fly... away?"

"Didn't fly away. So you're home," Mauna determined. "Take the bucket, sit down."

Ifana stood, like a drunk. She looked at the exit from the cell—heavy oak doors, a small grate at the top. Again at Mauna—she sits, strokes the sirna, taps it on the table. Yes, the sirna! She caught herself—it's not there. And another one—on Mauna's belt; well, not on a belt—on a cord. A whole two of them.

Instead of the sirna she took the bucket, and, again glancing at the door, fulfilled Mauna's demand, and sat on it near the table. The bucket was low, so Ifana became small.

"I'm drinking coffee for the first time in my life. It's so bitter. You put sugar in it, right?"

"There," Ifana pointed.

Indeed, behind the coffee pot was hidden a plate, but not with sugar, with honeycombs—even better. What a conditions in this prison! Mauna broke off a piece for herself, and tossed it in the mug. Nothing to stir

with, so she stirred with Ifana's sirna; inconvenient, but it is what it is. She tried it.

"Mmm. Better now. Thank you."

"What do you want?" Ifana asked, hunching, she became even smaller.

"Need another mug, you should drink with me. Drinking alone—it's off-putting, there are two of us. Tell them to bring another one," Mauna ordered.

"What... call the guards? Or I... I'll go get one, okay?"

"As you like, it's your ordination here."

Ifana began to walk slowly, but she was afraid to walk near Mauna. And her paws were incredibly pricked with needles, try walking anywhere like that.

"Um... eh. Guards. Guards!" Ifana tried to shout.

For quite a while, relatively long, nothing happened. Finally, someone tramped down the long corridor.

"Yes, Excellent?" someone entered. Mauna looked, turned her head—just a guard.

"Why so long?" Ifana asked him pleadingly.

"Excellent asked to step away, not to disturb," the guard was surprised. "As usual."

"Um..." she glanced sidelong at Mauna, her (her own) sirna, hidden in reverse grip from view. "Bring a mug."

He looked at everything, nodded, and left.

"And, and don't go far!" she wheezed-shouted after him, and slowly returned to the bucket.

The mug was brought. Still, a very unusual interrogation today at Ifana's: the prisoner lioness sits here at the table, drinks coffee, and Ifana sits on a bucket. Just like a conversation between them.

"Everything in order, Excellent? The interrogation proceeding?"

"Interrogation," Ifana echoed.

"Thank you," Mauna took the mug and poured coffee into it.

The guard scratched his mane and left again.

"Please," Mauna pushed the mug across the table. "Honey?"

"I drink it plain," Ifana accepted, and sipped.

Thinking herself unnoticed by Mauna, she tried to summon ignimara. Left palm, right—no, nothing; she got angry, even recited the engram—nope.

"What did you do?"

"Vows forbid the answer," Mauna frowned, elbow on the table, looking at the wall.

"You won't get out of here," Ifana found the flaw in all this.

"I don't want to," the Messenger shrugged, tapping Ifana's sirna on the table. "Where would I go?"

"Well, where to... Try to escape."

"Where?"

"Hide in the Empire. Or... go to other Messengers."

"I cannot hide in the Empire," Mauna turned the dagger around its axis. "It's impossible: one can become a Messenger, but not cease to be one, I have no right to disappear like that—it's forbidden," Mauna gestured with her palm before herself, like this, and like that. "I won't go to Imperial authorities either—they, sooner or later, will throw me back here again, the circle is closed. And to other Messengers... what am I to tell them? That I dressed as a dhaar," she pointed at herself, well simply beautiful, "and tried to escape from an Imperial fortress, and violated... violated much of everything?" Mauna didn't mention the Emperor's Decree. It's an Imperial secret after all.

Mauna reached for more coffee, Ifana flinched—why is she reaching toward her? Ah, the coffee pot, well okay then.

"Why did you do this, why dress as a dhaar?"

"So she could leave from here, clothed as me," Mauna stated the obvious. "The Empire wanted to kill her, and I could not permit this."

"But why?"

"The Sworn-Bond."

"What about the Bond?" Ifana asked irritably. "Your servants swear to serve you, right?"

"Just so."

"Well... well and..." Ifana spread her hands. Emboldened, she even sipped her coffee.

"The Bond obliges the Messenger to protect the life of those who swear themselves," Mauna looked at her, tilting her head. Then—at the wall again.

"Fine, Suungs, but what do dhaars have to do with it?"

Oh, a good question.

"I made a mistake and bound this dhaar as a Suung. A mistake during the Sworn-Bond."

"But that's a mistake... why didn't you correct it? Some nonsense."

"How would you correct it? It's impossible. The Sworn-Bond went through—and that's it."

Reasoning about all she'd heard, Ifana delivered the inevitable verdict:

"Mauna, this is so stupid. Don't take me for a fool."

"You know, sometimes I think so too. But here it doesn't matter what you and I believe."

"Yes? If the Empire wished to kill her, then that means it's in the Empire's interests, right?"

"Indeed, such dilemmas also gnaw at me. What can you do."

"It seems to me," Ifana said carefully, "you've lost your mind. I heard you were attacked in Helsia. You need to rest."

Mauna, hearing this, couldn't help herself; she'd never in her life done this, not in her life, such terrible manners, but here she snorted coffee, it spilled down her chin.

"Excuse me..." she wiped herself, lacking a handkerchief, so be it—with her palm. "That's right. I was sitting in the wagon for dhaars, and the dhaar was sitting in my coach. And they attacked."

"Hmm. It seems to me it should have been the opposite," Ifana not so much relaxed, but was regaining everyday confidence. She even pointed her finger at Mauna, and even poured herself the coffee remains from the pot.

"You're right. It should be the opposite: me—in my place, the dhaar—in hers. I would have simply died immediately, fulfilling..." she couldn't say 'the Emperor's Will,' because that's an Imperial secret, "...fulfilling what was appointed to me. And none of this would have happened. Arzis would have simply taken Toya for himself, and there would have been no Shadowrocks... no Verins. This is what happens when you lack the courage to bear your appointment, and you try to..." Mauna didn't finish.

"Will you kill me?"

"No, that's forbidden by the Codex. However, there's sad news: you killed yourself."

Ifana felt relief. The madlioness won't kill her. She seems calm. And if she wanted to kill—she would have. Well, the ethical reproach about 'you killed yourself'—that can be borne. Ifana knows she has the necessary flexibility, everything will be fine.

Again pawsteps in the corridor, and without preamble, quite calmly, the deputy head of the Imperial Secret Service entered, well that same one, the Secret. And he froze, froze for a long time.

Ifana decided—it's time. Sidling-sidling, past Mauna, and then—as quickly as possible scurried behind him, on her soft-prickly-disobedient paws.

Mauna sighed, hid her sirna in its sheath and tossed it to him-her. Secret didn't try to catch it, Ifana tried—it didn't work, it fell on the floor. She bent down to pick up the sirna, but Secret didn't let her—grabbed her, forcibly threw outside, jumped back himself, and slammed-sealed the door.

"What the... How did she get free?" he held the door, as if Mauna would try to break-tear it from the other side.

"She's... How to say... Cunning," was all Ifana found.

"This bitch is somehow immortal, how much longer can this go on!" Secret was amazed by all this, and amazed by the (still) living Ifana.

Not without some hysteria, the guards were called, Mauna was hastily locked up, like a rabid firrasa. Mauna tried to rub her eye, and here again—as before—discovered that she was sitting in a mask, and had been sitting before, and had done everything, Ifana had seen her as a fox-lioness, and Secret, and the guard, well what can you do; she took the poison from the table, put it back on her neck; now there, on her neck, was a whole host of everything: poison, ring, Ahey, everything needed. Amaya's sirna kept sliding down on her Ashai belt, which was currently ruled by an ordinary cord. Deciding she could lose it like that, she simply took the sheath in her left hand. Ah, pity, the coffee ran out.

Life seethed behind the door, movements and repositions were underway. The fortress guards were driven from the corridor, seven Silent Ones came running.

"She needs to be eliminated," Secret pointed at the door.

"Who 'she'? Who's in there?" Karris's deputy asked politely, deputy of that same one, of the earl of the Silent Ones. Karris himself is already done, not with us anymore.

"The target. There," Secret pointed at the door again.

"She left this afternoon."

"She didn't go anywhere. She's there. Execute."

Eh, no. The deputy informed him:

"We need an order. The operation is already closed, we cannot."

"Whose?" Secret asked, though he knew whose.

"The Conductor's. The Emperor's Will only through him."

"We need to wake him up, let him give the order!"

Which they did. He'd only recently gone to sleep; fell asleep with difficulty, for the prison of Lvan fortress had produced oppressive impressions on him, he'd been uncomfortable and disgusted there; he'd seen Mauna with the bag on her head, looked at her insignias, and in the end quite agreed with the deputy head of the Secret Service that this outcome of events was even better than all the previous better (no Mauna, Mauna will disappear, that's all). He wanted to forget all this as quickly as possible, and to get to Marna as soon as possible.

But Marna—a bit later, and now back to this thrice-damned prison in the middle of the night, where, it turns out, Mauna is more alive than all the living, and even seems to have taken some local Ashai-Keetrah hostage (my Vaal, how?). *Idiots*, he thought, descending the steps.

He glanced into the grate of the door, recoiled from it.

"Remove her."

"I request clarification: kill?" the chief of the Silent Ones asked.

"Yes, kill."

The doors opened again, four Silent Ones entered inside, and Secret. Three remained in the corridor, just in case—necessary backup. Ifana hastily picked up her sirna from the floor, and also squeezed in among all this company. The Conductor didn't enter, waited in the corridor for everything to resolve. He'd recently quit smoking, and really wanted one now.

The Silent Ones drew their swords, but somehow couldn't decide who and how should advance on the enemy, waited for orders from their new earl.

Mauna stood by the wall opposite everyone, behind the torture pillar. But, as always, Mauna—not like all lionesses. An ordinary lioness is supposed to: dig claws into the wall, shrink back, tuck her tail and look with big eyes. As Arzis knows, Mauna doesn't know how to do this: she stood by the wall straight, legs not together, holds the sirna in a relaxed hand. The Silent Ones weren't fooled by the Messenger's unusual tonight's

decorum, consisting of fox, rags, dhaar rings, whatever on her neck and cord instead of a belt—yes, it's her.

"Jumped too high, bitch," Secret described the spectacle.

"Shut your mouth," the earl told him.

"What are yo..."

Silent Ones are lions who don't talk much. Therefore Secret received the pommel of a sword in his stomach. He doubled over, slid down.

"Please, come forward, and we'll do everything quickly."

Ifana, to avoid getting something similar from a sword or anything else herself, jumped out of the torture chamber. She stood opposite the Conductor, who was propping up the cold wall, looking upward. Lacking a pipe, he was chewing an expensive stylus. He looked down at how Ifana, unashamed, tried to summon ignimara, horrified by its complete absence, not even a sign:

"Ias-ias-ias," she looked at her palms alternately, shook them, rubbed them. "Ias."

She raised her gaze to him, like a guilty dog. He laughed soundlessly, and then heard:

"Imperium—serve, Vaal—Message, glory—preserve!"

Mauna had already drunk the poison, just now; it was real—and therefore, disgustingly bitter, so the words came with difficulty, hoarsely, no triumph. She'd been taught that with a sirna it's best to stab yourself in the neck, but Mauna is terribly afraid of all pointy things, all sharp things, so she couldn't. In the heart is better, if it's mutual killing, if there are two of you, and two sirnas, two daggers, but she has no sister for this. But in disgrace one is supposed to stab, so she—with her mentor's sirna—pierced below the rib with both palms. Into the heart, of course, she didn't hit—it's not that simple. But it's not necessary—strophant cuts down quickly. *Should have done this in the garden, Amaya, it's simple...* was the last thing she thought.

The chief Silent One here ran to her. Threw his sword on the floor, lifted and embraced her. Removed the fox from her, stroked her, pulled out the sirna (Mauna still stirred slightly, and—it seemed—even looked at him meaningfully, a dreamwalker's eyes, he would see them for a long time after), gave it to her palm.

They carried her out in their arms.

"We'll tophet her ourselves," they told the Conductor, pushing Secret aside along the way.

Chapter Without a Title

Vaalu-Mauna, Messenger of Mastr-Fein mengir, disappeared in an unknown direction for unknown reasons. Everyone saw this, the entire fortress of Lvan. The Emperor's Conductor saw this, and all the others. Evidently, she lost her mind.

On the same day, a bodyguard of Vaalu-Mauna's Family returned to the fortress and made an attempt to abduct Vaalu-Mauna's dhaar (designated for death according to the secret Emperor's Decree concerning the Helsian incident). Unknown whether by Mauna's order or by personal motives, because the fortress guard killed him (they overdid it). Vaalu-Mauna's dhaar was interrogated in the fortress prison; the interrogation was conducted by the mistress of ignimara Vaalu-Ifana, with extensive interrogation experience, a distinguished Ashai, noted by the Secret Service, the Regulate of Law and Order (prosecutors, investigation), as well as the Chamber of Prisons and Hard Labor; given the importance of the matter, all necessary measures were applied, but the dhaar knew nothing, regrettably, and died (without regret), unable to withstand the intensity of measures.

The day after, Vaalu-Vesta Out-Messaged this to all mengirs, right from here, from the fortress.

"She lost her mind," she decided for herself about Mauna. The main thing is that she doesn't surface anywhere in the Empire now, and cause some disturbance.

Vaalu-Naamzira became concerned. She waited apprehensively for when Mauna would appear in the Hunting Grounds of the Inner Empire, but she didn't appear. But a week later the deputy head of the Imperial Secret Service arrived to Marna and came to her, and she completely stopped worrying.

"She lost it, and we conducted a brilliant operation," Secret boasted to Naamzira, let her know, we'll be better friends. "The dhaar left, dressed up as her. And we dressed her as a dhaar—I'm telling you, she went mad; even staged a fake escape, for appearance and noise, and—into the little cellar. And everyone thinks she disappeared in an unknown direction. We work."

"Is it settled with her? Done?" Naamzira clarified with relief, she wasn't interested in all these lovely details.

"Settled. Saw it myself."

"Praise Vaal. Everything resolved so well."

"I'm telling you."

Naamzira was very glad that only four huntresses remained. Ideally—one; but the ideal condemns everyone—it cannot be reached.^{104,105}

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2021–2025
mso

¹⁰⁴ *I should get smashed.*
¹⁰⁵ I shall join you in this descent.