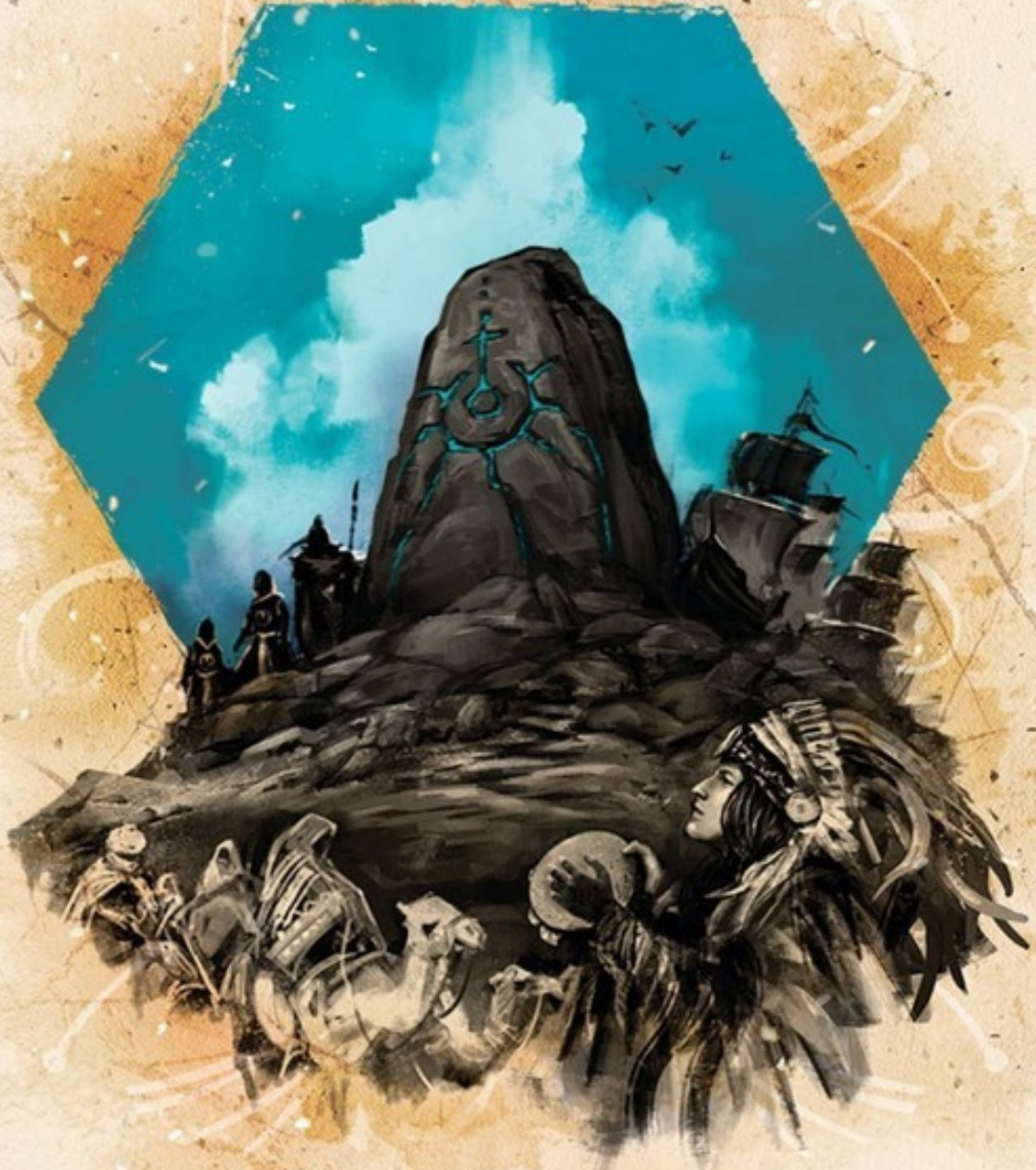


Mikhail Shelkov

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Book 1

# • ELINOR •

The Deserted Valley

Mikhail Shelkov

**Elinor. The Deserted Valley. Book 1**

«Издательские решения»

**Shelkov M.**

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Elinor... a huge continent, situated in the middle of a boundless ocean. The nature of this world is rich and diverse — high mountains, deep forests, endless prairies, severe snows of the North and arid deserts of the South. Eight nations, originated from the Valley of the Ancestors, created their own governments in different parts of the continent: wise Djunits, reckless Guawars, fearless Itoshins, elucidated Ulutau, discreet Vedichs, mighty Taurus, inventive Tausmatus, careless Chekatta.

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## **Book 1**

**Mikhail Shelkov**

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**The Deserted Valley**

**Author: Mikhail Shelkov**



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## PROLOGUE

*A wise man, whose name unfortunately has been forgotten, said that the journey of a thousand leagues begins with a single step.*

*My journey started well over a month ago, and nobody knows when it will end – not a single person. Perhaps it is only the sublime stars on the canvas of the night sky that know – those stars which I wholeheartedly love. But even if they do know, they will hardly reveal it.*

*I left my family, my home... and my heart tells me that this time, I'll be gone for a long time, perhaps forever.*

*Great Asters! What nonsense, indeed... I keep telling myself. I am no longer that same impressionable girl who admired the wide and many-faced world. The world that carries the name Elinor. Now I am a teacher and mentor to such girls. But for some reason (it might be that my hunch is awakening, a hunch that has never lied to me; or that old childhood dreams never died, but only subsided), I believe that my journey will not just be long, but great. And... yes, I'll write it. It will end at the Edge of the World.*

*Oh, sandy depths! At last, I admitted it to myself...*

*Well, it is likely that in half a century, this diary will be read by my grandchildren who will smile to themselves, although not in the open – for it is indecent – about the erstwhile dream of their grandmother, who at the time will be quietly rocking in her chair, trying to embroider patterns on their robes with a large needle in her shaking hands.*

*What am I talking about? As though I don't regret wasting neither ink, nor paper, nor my time! It is better to get to the point!*

*Today turned out to be a day off. The owner of the caravan is unwell – he probably overate again in the heat. Therefore, everyone – merchants, warriors, and my students – are spending the day under the shelter of the tents, set up in a small oasis.*

*There are a few trees here, but there is a stream and a rocky ridge, so the heat is not felt, and the break is truly enjoyable. It is strange that no one has built an outpost next to the oasis with a camel yard and teahouse yet.*

*As though we are not following the main tract!*

*But according to an astronomer's calculations (a real astronomer!), in a couple of weeks we will reach our final destination.*

*I will finally contemplate the Valley of the Ancestors – the heart of Elinor!*

*The Valley of the Ancestors or, as many say, the Valley, is where life began. It was from the Valley of the Ancestors that the new people of the Third Race dispersed throughout the lands of Elinor and settled there. It was then that a man named Toshō, who became emperor and subsequently acquired immortality, led likeminded people to the north; it was then that the Valley's migrants went into the deep forests where they met the Ved tribe and founded the Vedich nation; it was then that the father-founder of our glorious Djunitian people, the great Marawie, led people into the endless desert.*

*And now the people of the desert are returning to the Valley. It is like a time rotation.*

*Emperor Toshō founded the Itoshinian nation, from which came two more races, the Ulutau and the Tuasmatus. The Taurs evolved from the Vedichs, and the Guawars evolved from the Djunits. Only the carefree Chekatta remained in the prairies near the Valley of the Ancestors.*

*The Valley itself and its Great Cities of Dalaal, Konolwar, Eavette, and Mata-Mata were fragrant with life in the heart of the Elinor, at the crossroads of trade routes, at the junction of customs and cultures of people who had become so different from each other, so unique. Though the Valley had always been a separate state, it would nonetheless welcome any visitors from distant lands. Every inhabitant of the Valley now associated him/herself with some nation, still primarily remaining*

*a resident of the Valley, a sort of representative of the Ninth nation, a collective image of all the people of Elinor.*

*Perhaps this is the essence of existence? Parents raise their children, care for them, protect them... but they eventually lose their power, become senile, and then the grown-up and established children must take care of their parents.*

*Similarly, the Valley gave birth to and brought up eight nations. But at a certain point, it died. The Valley had become deserted. And now the children of the Valley, the representatives of the eight nations, have hit the road to resurrect their mother – to fill her with life. Our caravan is heading north to bring to the Great Cities the necessity – people. Many caravans took off several months ahead of us and many will follow.*

*From distant lands, from the remaining seven nations, other envoys head to the Valley. Soon, I will meet again the Taurus, Guawars, Itoshins, and Mechanicum, who I haven't seen for a long time. I look forward to getting to know the Ulutau and Chekatta, who I have never seen in my life, and so much more! And the Vedichs! The Vedichs themselves! The people who can shape-shift into the beasts of the forest! However, none of the venerable scientists have confirmed this, and those sources that even the most distinguished historians have relied upon seem quite dubious. But that's how the legends go, and I myself am not sure if I'm inclined to believe them or not.*

*Here I write about what I am waiting for, what will happen in the future. I write about the future, as it is meaningless at present to write about the present.*

*Tomorrow, if Khatum Tangut wins over his indigestion, a procession of camels, which belong to him, will once more stretch towards the horizon through the yellow sands carrying with them, warriors, merchants, and myself with my students.*

*In the desert, interesting things rarely happen; all the days are alike. To come across an oasis is great luck, but hardly can such a meeting be equated with an extraordinary event. Now, meeting the scorpio-angler or a school of sand dragons – that is a whole different story! Every night I pray to the stars for these meetings not to happen on our way. The soldiers guarding the caravan are arrogant and conceited, and the desert does not forgive such attitudes. It is unlikely that their strong bodies hold as strong a spirit.*

*Fortunately, both the anglers and dragons have long ago ceased to dwell near the trade routes. People, though slowly, are beginning to prevail in this war that has lasted for many centuries.*

*I do not know what else I should write about.*

*As I said before, writing about soldiers, merchants, and cameleers is silly.*

*About my disciples? They are ordinary children. Sometimes they bring me joy; sometimes, sorrow. Sometimes they delight in things, other times they upset themselves. They try to endure the hardships of camp life in the Great Desert. To some, it comes easy, to others it is difficult. Almost an adult, Calif constantly helps me and Lamis. It's so good that he is near. He is no longer a boy, almost a man. The other students can be left to his care for a while. The girls have to be soothed every day and be told about the beautiful life in the Valley. Then they cease to moan and require so much attention. I understand them, although I have never been like them myself. They are the girls of noble families, used to houses with light walls and green gardens nearby, and not to the eternal heat and fiery air of the day and tangy cool of the night. In this regard, the boys are simpler, but with them there are other problems. One runs around all day long with a miniature sword, killing scorpions; another picks up all the prickles on the road to investigate them; and someone tries to start a fight with a peer... But I'm used to them. And I love them; I love them as their mentor.*

*Maybe I can become a good teacher. Mother is sure to approve the idea of school education becoming the main profession of my life. But then I'll go mad from boredom. My path is different.*

*Then what else should I write about?*

*I've said enough about myself in the preceding pages.*

*I am trying to keep a diary the way it should be done by any Djunitian researcher who has self-respect. So I was taught by my father.*

*Father, Father...*

~~*You would've been proud of me...*~~

*I know that you are proud of me!*

*I believe in our impending meeting!*

*I am definitely not in the mood to write more. That is all for today!*

***Jumanna Inaiya Khaniya Amatt***

***J. I. Kh. A., 4th day of the Elephant month, the year 531, era IV..."***

*This History of Elinor is an appendix to the book. Both the author of the book, and compiler of this diary strongly recommend that you read it before reading the main body of this book to learn more about the history, geography, life, and culture of states in Elinor and people inhabiting the continent.*

## Part 1. THE WAYS AND THE PATHS

### CHAPTER 1. Lion constellation

*Our way lies among high dunes, and worse  
That under scorching Eternal Aster flying,  
But leads us forward with his rabid force  
He who is always young, the Sandy Lion!*  
*From odes by Samir Korzun "Sand and Wind"*

#### 1

Lamis finished writing. A sharp gust of dry wind broke in, throwing a handful of fine sand on the pages of the diary. The young woman shook off the sand, blew on the manuscript, and shut the diary. She closed the jar of ink and hid the writing feather. Tired from writing, she stretched her beautiful long bronze fingers as Moualdar, a gloomy boy of twelve years, ran into the tent. He came up close, hanging his head.

"I'm bored," he grumbled.

"You can go feed the camels. The caravanners are always happy to be helped."

"I don't want to... I'm scared of camels," his voice squeaked, reminding the young caretaker that the apprentice, despite his visage, was still just a boy.

*His facial features are of an adult, yet he asks for attention enough for three kids to share.*

By then Calif had also appeared under the canopy of the tent.

Calif was tall and stately. From the first glance, it was obvious he was a future warrior. Something in him was reminiscent of the young caretaker's brother, only her brother's hair was short and straight, while Calif's was long and curly. Moreover, Calif's eyes were not as stern. His figure was still one of a strong young man, but not yet a weather-beaten warrior.

*It would be great if one day Calif came to learn the art of war from her brother!*

But now Calif was headed to the Valley with her. And it was with him that the caretaker was pleased the most. As the eldest, he was always ready to help; he respected her and helped to monitor the disciples.

"Honorable Tangut Khatum said that he is better, so tomorrow at dawn, we are advancing!" said Lamis.

"Do you need any help?" Calif immediately blurted out.

"Yes!" All the minor problems were solved at once. "Collect the totes!" she said to Calif, then looked at Moualdar. "And you go help!"

The boy snorted discontentedly. Obviously, this was not how he wanted to dispel his boredom.

During the encampment, the disciples were allowed to devote the day to the classes of their choice, and completely unpack their hiking knapsacks. Yet the sun was already swiftly rolling towards the horizon; its rays no longer carried as much of the sizzling heat. Evening was approaching. It was time to get ready for the journey, so as not to bustle about during the morning gathering, but rather, after having leisurely broken their fast, to pack up the caravan and set off without delay.

Lamis, the faithful assistant, withdrew, dragging with her the disgruntled Moualdar. The well-mannered Calif turned to his caretaker and just before leaving made a traditional courteous bow. The canopy of the tent swung closed.

A smile lit up the young woman's face.

*He's an absolute miracle!*

Now it was necessary to bring all the disciples together, announce that the encampment would not be prolonged, and remind everyone to fill their waterskin bags to the brim with water.

*Though I'll still have to check before we set off... these are children. They see the world differently. Some still don't understand what a dangerous place it is, they don't understand there are no parents here who will blow the sand off them, or that though their caretaker is strong and brave, she is not unlimitedly sturdy – I will not be able to carry a separate bota bag for each of them. It will be useful if, from this passage through the Great Desert, everyone learned a certain lesson for themselves. The lesson that no school can give, the lesson that only life teaches.*

It was also necessary to get everyone to bed early. Even a short respite is a knockout from the working rhythm. Hence, tomorrow's wakening would be that much harder.

*Therefore, for today, the essential thing was sleep! Sleep... a dream!*

The young woman remembered last night's dream. In it, she saw the Valley of the Ancestors in all its glory, and it was exactly the way she had pictured it from her father's stories.

The four great cities of Dalaal, Konolwar, Eavette, and Mata-Mata were located on the shores of the Lake of the Ancestors and the Huma River. A burgomaster ruled each city. The Valley had always been considered a separate state, but it would be more correct to see it as an association of the four Great Cities.

The Great Desert of the Djunits did not fall under the single authority of a particular ruler. To be perfectly precise, that was how it was before, at the beginning of the Fourth Epoch. Over time, rulers realized that every city-oasis in the midst of endless sands lived its own life, and if self-government was granted to these settlements, the entire trading system would benefit. Since then, the cities of the Djunits were governed by the izirs. The clan of Djunitian kings, originating from the Marawie Sandy Lion, became part of the clan of the izirs of Kay-Samiluf, the largest and most powerful city in the Great Desert. This family was later overthrown, and nobody knows in whose veins the blood of the founder-father of the Djunits now flows. Nonetheless, all the cities of the Djunits are subject of the will of the council of the Kay-Samiluf Academy, which retains the right to interfere in the affairs of the izirs. Hence, in a way, the Great Desert can still call itself a state.

In the Valley, everything is done differently. In extreme cases, the Council of Four convened, where the burgomaster conjointly solved economic and political issues. If no agreement was reached, the popular assembly entered the disputes, where absolutely every inhabitant of the Valley could defend his point of view.

Clans were factions united by a common idea and were an important social force in the Valley on which burgomasters and other officials relied. Most often, clans were economic or political conjunctions. The famous Justice Clan long stood on the side of law and order. Clans of scientists and researchers rarely participated in the machinations of officials; however, they were always revered and even received money from the treasury of each city.

Extending both over the inhabitants themselves and the representatives of all eight nations, there was a single law in the Valley of the Ancestors, regardless of the laws proclaimed in their lands. All trade routes converged in the Valley. There was even trade with the severe Ito Empire in the north. The valley supplied provisions, ore, and even fabrics for the emperor Tosho, and he, having only bare stones and dank fogs in his lands, paid with the best that he could offer – a military force to ensure order.

Trade was not the only thing that supported the Valley of the Ancestors. The praise for its fairs, theaters, circuses, and tiltyards never stopped. The works of the writers and poets of the Valley were dispersed throughout Elinor. The Valley gave the people a Common Language, which foreigners used to communicate amongst themselves. As a result, the Guawars, the first sea merchants, were the first to completely switch to the Common Language, soon followed by the Djunits, who retained their language only for historians and scribes.

The Valley was also a den for charlatans, thieves, and other rascals. Some great adventurers also found themselves in it, those who, from vagrants, became burgomasters.

The Valley was the heart of Elinor, and the heart of the Valley was the Stone of the Ancestors – a mighty relic, probably preserved from the First Race. The Stone of Ancestors emitted Power. The Djunits called it special energy, the other nations called it magic, but its nature was inaccessible to understanding. The Stone of the Ancestors could predict the future, could heal illnesses, and could confer a part of its power on the pilgrim. But not always. Not for all... The Stone of the Ancestors lived its own life and used its magic at its own will. It could even defend itself. A gang of vandals who wanted to break it into pieces, thus intimidating the Valley, was simply incinerated alive by the Stone.

The Valley! The eight nations!

The colorful cities, the markets, the performances, the sounds of music and foul market language from the motley crowds, the beautiful house chambers and the stench of dirty taverns filled with both military clashes and peaceful human life, the green forests and prairies surrounding the Great Cities, the sky-blue water of the Lake of the Ancestors, and the Stone itself – all this happened last night in a dream, as though it were all truly there!

And then... this multicolored mess was at once covered by a black cloud.

This was the end of the dream...

The young caretaker shuddered. She realized she had dozed off, remembering the dream. She shook her head and looked around. The tent was still empty, only the air was not as stuffy as before – it meant that sunset was coming.

But instead of hurrying to her students, the maiden paused briefly. She opened a diary, which she had kept in her hands all this time.

She started flipping from the first page. She made these records a little more than a month ago in her parents' house in Kay-Samiluf, the night before the caravan left. That night she could not manage to fall asleep.

## 2

***“Midnight. The beginning of the sixteenth day of the month of the Wolf, the year 531, era IV...”***

*As an ancestral researcher, I start the diary before the beginning of my journey. I would like to write “the Great Journey,” but can’t know in advance how it will turn out. I can only know how I feel about myself.*

*About myself.*

*My name is Jumanna Inaiya Khaniya Amatt. I am a descendant of an ancient and noble family.*

*The Amatt clan became famous throughout Elinor during the construction of the cities of Min-Mirif and Til-Mirif. The construction was supervised by one of my glorious ancestors, a great engineer and thinker, Mirif Amatt. Built at the very end of the Third Era, Min-Mirif became the southernmost city of the Valley, denoting its southern boundary. Further away, the endless desert of the Djunitian began. The riches of the mines near where my ancestor built the cities were truly inexhaustible. Gold, silver, semi-precious stones, iron ore for the best, most solid steel... Soft metals, meanwhile, were useful on farms, and clean flint could be taken from the earth with bare hands.*

*The cities were quickly populated by people, and on the outskirts of Min-Mirif, in the shadows of majestic palms and sycamores, on the shores of ponds with water of extraordinary blueness, grew the Amatt estate.*

*When I was six, I visited my family estate. As soon as I was old enough to leave home, my father took me on my very first trip. My birthday was celebrated on a grand scale, but the day itself I cannot remember – I remember only that I yearned to begin the journey! Despite my age, the road was my strongest passion, and there was nothing I could do about it.*

*My dear mother, the noble Khaniya Haliya Mufa, by marriage an Amatt, the granddaughter of the izir Doyno-Kash Kharun Mufa, was distinguished by her strict views, moral purity, and undoubtful placement of the family above all else. She believed I could leave home, though only to go to school at the Academy of Kay-Samiluf; and this school was but two blocks away from our house! I did not want this... I wanted to see the desert, the endless expanse. I wanted to see caravans, people of other nations, other cities and faraway lands... Mum tried to hold me back until the very end, but I knew she would give in eventually.*

*Despite her strictness, her weakness was my father, Umar Amatt, who had recently become the leader of the Old Pages Clan. Mother's love for Father knew no bounds; she could not oppose him. And my father could not refuse me, as he saw my passionate interest in everything new and everything unusual. I was growing up much too like him... dreamy, windy, and thirsty for discovery.*

*So, my first trip was to Min-Mirif. At the end of the day, the Great Desert impressed me, but much less than the ancestral estate. What is the desert? Delight is present only at first, when you realize that there is only you and your caravan surrounded by the sand, the sky, and the horizon line between them. I watched this landscape one day, then another, and it didn't change. Yellow-reddish barchans, endless dunes, plain blue sky without a single cloud and the white circle of the scorching sun. My interest quickly died away as I sat in a small armchair on the hump of a huge camel under a velvet canopy, drinking cool water and fanning myself.*

*And then one night I could not sleep. I left the tent once I thought my father was asleep (as it turned out, he did not sleep and had seen everything), and found myself under the black dome of the night sky, dotted with countless glowing stars. It was the most beautiful thing I had seen in my life! Many years have passed, but I still can't forget how, even though I was a clever, albeit young, child, I stood right before the cosmic abyss, as the distant, delightful stars seemed to wink at me.*

*And the Amatt estate... Oh! It seemed to me a city within a city! Of course, Min-Mirif itself seemed boring to me after Kay-Samiluf. But the ancestral nest Mirif Amatt had clearly been built with great enthusiasm and inspiration, with greenhouses full of flowers and fruit trees from all over the continent, fountains spurting beyond the roof of the mansion, halls with statues and columns. The underground part of the estate turned out to be several times larger than the mansion itself. There was everything – cabinets, a library, an alchemy laboratory, even a secret passageway to the mine. The underground halls were entirely decorated with precious metals and gems found in the local mines... I squealed with delight when night fell on Min-Mirif and my father guided me into the observatory tower and taught me to position myself on the map of the starry sky.*

*I had many teachers in my life. My father hired the best ones so I would receive a good education. But he taught me astronomy himself because he didn't entrust it to anyone else. It was a little strange... Umar Amatt had gained fame as an explorer and writer. Other learned scholars taught me literature and history... But astronomy – only my father!*

*Yes, obviously, he saw me that night when I left the sleeping tent, so small and defenseless before the whole universe.*

*I did enroll into the high school of the Kay-Samiluf Academy and graduate with honors. My enrollment happened when I was twelve. Before that, I spent six years on a family estate. The best sages of the Valley came to teach me the basics of science. But the best teacher remained my father... I am grateful to him for his lessons on astronomy, but the most valuable lessons were those about life, which, maybe, my father gave me without even knowing it.*

*The Old Pages Clan had its own museum in the mansion of Amatt. There was a collection of rare peculiar things, which were brought from different corners of Elinor, that I hadn't even seen in the Kay-Samiluf Academy museum. Many relics emitted special energy; I felt it. My father didn't, but he believed me. He said that people react to special energy and magic differently.*

*Indeed, our scientists agree on the idea that this energy exists, but none of them can explain its origin. Even if some of the alchemists managed to equip objects with magical abilities, it only happened*

*by the experimental method or by the long arm of coincidence. There is no scientific theory about obtaining this special energy. The Mechanicum (Tuasmatus) do not reveal their secrets to anyone. But our scientists aren't sure that the force with which many of their mechanisms work is the same magic that, say, the Ancestral Stone and other antiquities emit. I believe that special energy, controlled by the Mechanicum, is more explicable by science than the special energy of the First Race.*

*Azir Amunjadee wrote in his works that the secret of special energy was mastered by the Ulutau – mastered through self-knowledge and self-improvement. But is this the same inexplicable energy that I'm talking about? The whole world still questions the role of special energy (magic) in the bodily transformations of the Vedichs. If, of course, those transformations are true...*

*But I do feel magic! I know it...*

*I constantly asked my father to take me to The Stone of the Ancestors in the Valley. But he always flatly refused... Father, who had only ever encouraged my curiosity, refused me! He said that I wasn't old enough for the Valley.*

*It seems he considered traveling through the desert, where there was a small, but still existing probability of meeting a scorio-angler or dragon, less dangerous than living in the Valley. My father had always spoken of the Valley reverently and thus had only aroused my imagination further, but at the same time refused! Perhaps that's why I still think about the Valley with some apprehension, but nonetheless with admiration also.*

*I traveled a lot, indeed! After all, I already mentioned this is the greatest passion of my life, and it is impossible to satisfy a great passion! I visited the Golden Ruins twice... I visited the outskirts of the Nanol-Mo forest. I saw the powerful Taurs and their settlements made of logs in the middle of forest glades. And for my twelfth birthday, before entering high school, my father gave me a gift – he took me to Bandabaze! Yes, to the largest city of the Guawars!*

*From the port of Chail, on the light and high-speed ship "Lightning", we arrived in Bandabaze in four days! Four days! A caravan of camels from Kay-Samiluf to Min-Mirif sometimes takes up to two months. And here – four days! And then we spent another week on a ship from Bandabaze to Doyno-Kash. Incredible! To this day, my mother doesn't know that I've been to Bandabaze... My father and I agreed not to tell her. If she knew, then probably in a fit of anger she would have killed both of us. I'm exaggerating, of course. Mother is kind. It's just that the Guawars are looked upon as dirty robbers and pirates.*

*My father still preferred a trip to Bandabaze to a journey to Valley. Why? I don't believe the Valley markets are more dangerous than Bandabaze!*

*By the way, the Guawars do seem wild and scary at first. Especially for those brought up in the noble Djunits families. But I had traveled enough to understand the beauty of these sea people. And I fell in love with the sea! It was then that I decided that, one day, I would sail away on the Guawarian ship to the east... To the Edge of the World!*

*I thought Kay-Samiluf was a noisy city, and no other will surpass it. I was mistaken! The buzz of commercial areas, complemented by music from taverns and street chants, cannot be drowned out, even if you stuff your ears with Ayno-Sufic cotton wool. Your nostrils are always tickled with the sugary smells of fruit and hot spices, which are mixed with the aromas of fried fish and the stink of foul fish. To the rhythm of the Guawarian gulps, tamed beasts tingle from all-around – screeching monkeys, small fluffy tics, and huge talking parrots shimmering with all the colors of the rainbow.*

*In the middle of the city, opposite the Royal Bay, towers the palace of the Governor of Bandabaze. The palace of our izir is a yellow-golden hue like the sandy djunes. On the contrary, the Guawarian Governor's one is snow white! A snow white palace, with azure sea and evergreen forests all around.*

*Thank you, Father! I will never forget that journey! It was the best birthday of my life!*

*My father and I returned to Kay-Samiluf from the port of Doyno-Kash. And since then, I haven't seen him... Father went to the Valley. Later he visited the caravan in the Shohan, the capital of the Ito*

*Empire, and the kingdom of Reyro, a Tuasmatus abode. He was going to visit the Vedichian.. Oh, he would have definitely discerned their secrets.*

*He wrote and wrote about his travels... About the fact that he visited the reception of the Emperor himself, that he saw the golems in the Mechanicum (and, by the way, didn't feel any magic) and rode mammoths, the huge shaggy elephants of the north. Meanwhile I dissolved into melancholy in the stuffy walls of my school in Kay-Samiluf. I dreamed that one day, I would go on a new fascinating journey.*

*My father didn't make an appearance in Kay-Samiluf. At first, this upset mother greatly, and then she became angry with him. Day and night, all she did was berate him. I was sad too, but I didn't reproach my father. I was melancholic, lonely without him, but I knew that if he hadn't returned in so long, it meant he was on the path of a very important discovery. I was eager to graduate from school and join my father as quickly as possible; I could not wait to join the Old Pages Clan myself.*

*I have an older brother, Khasim Umar Amatt. His full patrimonial name includes the first name of father; mine is from mother... Perhaps this is a mistake – whilst I'm exactly like father in everything, Khasim is a copy of our mother. Home means the world to him!*

*Khasim is a sand dragon hunter. A fine hunter! Though he is young, he already has a high rank. Khasim is a noble man and a mighty warrior. He has a harsh temper, same as mother's, but I know that he loves me. Now I know.*

*Hunting dragons is an ancient and honorable craft. It emerged in the time of the first Djunits, and it was the Marawie Sand Lion himself who proclaimed dragon hunting as part of the military doctrine. In ancient times, it was difficult to even call it hunting; rather, it was a struggle for survival. Having arrived in the desert, the settlers faced a great misfortune in the form of these vile, treacherous creatures. And even Marawie fell in battle against the sand dragons. But his people stood firm. Scorpio-anglers and dragons have not attacked the city for a long time. And, thanks to such hunters as Khasim, these creatures are less and less likely to attack commercial caravans. On large paths, at least, they haven't been seen in a long time.*

*I turned eighteen the day after I graduated from high school. On my birthday, I was waiting for a message from my father... not such a gift as a trip to Bandabaze, of course, but at least some note. I entered the age of maturity and now I could go anywhere by myself, on any trip. But I wanted to see my father.*

*The year passed by and there was no news from him.*

*My birthday was coming to an end, and I was sitting alone in my room, crying. I was more alone than ever. My mum and brother... I felt their love, but I couldn't trust them as I trusted my father.*

*Khasim entered the room. He asked why I was crying. I stayed quiet. After all, it was so obvious! He was silent for a long time. Then asked one more question, "What can I do for you? I don't want you to cry..."*

*"What can you do for me, brother... " I replied with a sigh.*

*He stood above me, very still for a long time, which irritated me. I wanted to snap at him, scream. I'm glad I restrained myself. Now I can imagine what inner conflict he was going through!*

*"Get ready!" he finally told me. It was an order. "We are leaving at dawn!"*

*"Where to?" I was a little taken aback.*

*"I'll show you how they hunt sand dragons..."*

*Oh, Khasim! How could I ever have expected such a thing from him? I jumped off my bed, rushed to him, and hugged him tightly. Throughout my eighteen years, I had never been close to my brother. And he, as it turns out, had always understood me. For some reason, he hadn't shown it. Is it that stiffness is a sign of noble families?*

*It turned out that Khasim wasn't a total copy of our mother after all. Father's adventurism flowed in his veins, even though it manifested in a very peculiar way.*

*"And not a word to mother!" Khasim added. But it was needless, I understood everything perfectly myself.*

*When, in childhood, my brother made comments like, “Do not go there!”, “Stop fidgeting!”, “Be modest!”, “Speak quietly!” I was very annoyed. I did the exact opposite just to spite him. But that day, I listened to every single word of his.*

*He left me on the furthest barchan. Two tall warriors were assigned by him to protect me. What if a lonely dragon flew in our direction?*

*My brother divided his troop into three groups: left flank, center, and right flank. Naturally, he himself stood in the center. Behind him stood archers and spear throwers. These were the tactics of fighting monsters used for centuries, I knew that from history lessons.*

*Khasim led the soldiers to a sandy hill, where he expected a dragon’s lair. The soldiers carefully moved their feet along the sandy surface, almost gliding.*

*At any time, the flock could break out from under the ground, and then the solid surface would turn into a deadly funnel. That was how Marawie sunk into oblivion, having fallen through the quicksand into the dragon’s cave, and that is how hundreds of thousands of soldiers ended their lives...*

*A long spear whistled through the air and buried itself in the hillside. The sand began to fall off the slopes at once and soon a hole of the size of a human formed in the hill. Khasim was not mistaken – it was a lair!*

*Literally in the same moment, a scary head appeared out of the black hole, and then an ugly dragon’s body. A small spear dart, thrown by a warrior from the rear rows, pierced the dragon in the mouth. The first one had been dealt with!*

*Khasim suddenly gave the command to retreat, pointing his hand back. Again, the experienced commander predicted the situation. The hill quickly began to sink into the depths of the desert, the sand began to pour into the empty space, and new dragons came out from the smaller sandy mounds.*

*The first to close the formation were the warriors of the left flank. They shielded themselves, pointing forward long spears, and pressing the monsters back.*

*I could already count forty dragons in the pack.*

*First, they looked puzzled, but then, all of a sudden, in a wave, they rushed toward the soldiers. All three groups were attacked. The warriors covered their heads with shields and sat on one knee.*

*I knew that my brother was waiting, luring the dragons into a trap, trying to convince them of their own victory. But I stood still, on top of the barchan, dumb with fear. It was only in that moment that I understood what a great danger my brother had been exposing himself to all these years. For a night, a brother with whom I had never been able to find a Common Language, became so close and dear to me.*

*Two of my guards continued to stand quietly, all this time remaining unperturbed, as though watching an auction in a square, and not a deadly battle.*

*Suddenly, Khasim and two loyal fighters broke out of formation. With a sharp twist, they rolled under a flock of dragons hovering over the troop and rushed towards the biggest. This one was almost black in color, while the rest ranged in shades from muddy-green to the color of beige sand. The leader, I realized. One fighter clung to the tail of the dragon, the second pulled on a clawed rear paw. At that moment, Khasim jumped as high as he could, and struck the shell of the leader with the tip of his sword. After a wild yelp, it collapsed into the sand. My brother jumped to him and severed his head with one swift stroke.*

*It is difficult to convey into words what happened next, as wild confusion arose in the pack. The soldiers began spearing the dragons with their lances. The creatures didn’t even try to rise higher into the air, as though they had immediately agreed to the carnage. Their dead carcasses kept falling and falling. The fighters only had to dodge them.*

*In a few minutes the flight of dragons was killed off...*

*I ran from the barchan, stumbling over the motionless sand waves, my feet tangling. I wanted to hug my brother as quickly as possible.*

*Never again did I ask him to take me on a hunt. I longed for adventure, but that day I realized I could not stand and watch someone dear fight between life and death. I just couldn't. Perhaps my mother still thinks that hunting for sand dragons is just a hunt, akin to hunting a deer or antelope... Let her continue to think so! She does not need to know the truth!*

*Since then, I've become different... quieter, calmer. How the life of a little girl could be changed by one sleepless night in the desert!*

*Khasim got married and moved to Ayno-Suf with his family. Now he teaches young fighters and rarely goes hunting himself.*

*In the meantime, I turned twenty-four. Mum began incessantly talking about how I should have a husband and a family. I listened to her calmly, protesting silently...*

*And, suddenly, a letter! From father!*

*My father spent several years with the Vedichs and was now returning with a "heap of discoveries", he wrote.*

*Mum was angry. She already resigned herself to the fact that father was not around; considered him not as someone deceased, but gone forever. She learned to live without him. I understood that she was so angry only because she loved him... I also loved him madly, but it was a different kind of love, without demanding anything in return. I was jumping with happiness! The separation, which had lasted thirteen years, was about to end.*

*My father wrote from the Valley. He had to run several errands within his clan. This meant that in two months he should be in Kay-Samiluf... and if he boarded a ship through Doyno-Kash, then it would be even sooner!*

*A happy month of waiting had passed. I already imagined how I would join the Old Pages Clan, how I would again begin to travel with my father, being not a burden to him, but an astronomer! Again, I would see Bandabaze and Nanol-Mo. I might visit Reyro and the prairies of Chekatta. And finally, I would see the Valley with the Ancestral Stone.*

*On one truly dreary, rainy day, an envoy from the north arrived to Kay-Samiluf. The man was incredibly weak from the long road, but even more so he was frightened.*

*"The Valley is deserted!" He declared.*

*"What do you mean deserted? Completely?" The questions poured in.*

*"Completely" was the answer.*

*Whether it happened in an instant or in a week, no one knew. The fact is that the newly arrived caravanners found no one in the Valley. Empty houses, untouched belongings, markets full of goods, shops, and taverns – everything stood completely abandoned. The people disappeared!*

*In Kay-Samiluf, the council of the Academy and the izirs of free cities was held. It was decided to send numerous caravans to settle the Valley again. I told my mother that the Academy appointed me as an astronomer in a large caravan and that I couldn't refuse. I lied,... it's easier for a woman astronomer to join a Guawarian naval crew. In the desert, a woman astronomer, especially such a young one, isn't welcome!*

*But there was no way for me not to go to the Valley. I knew that if I just sat in Kay-Samiluf and waited for news from my father or about my father, I'd go mad. Besides, it's hard for me to write about this, but a premonition arose in my chest that he would not be coming back. For thirteen years, I knew he was somewhere on the road, on his eternal search. But suddenly I felt that he was no longer... it's hard to explain.*

*My intuition had never let me down before; it is why I was so anxious.*

*I met with Khasim and asked him to return to Kay-Samiluf with his whole family to look after our mother. He is a man, so duty called on him to help his people. Going to the Valley was both an adventure and a life gamble, and Khasim treasured his home. Adventures, as I wrote before, were somewhat different in his understanding. War with the dragons was his duty. I, on the other hand, eagerly awaited this hour. Everyone should get what one aspires to. Khasim understood me. We parted very emotionally*

*as I promised to write him regularly; to him and mother. To mum – what was necessary to say, to him – only the truth.*

*I'll keep my promise.*

*Mum, if you ever read my diary, then... please forgive me. I've always despised lies. And even more so I think that it is lowly lying to such a dear person. But telling you the truth would have made you suffer... And I didn't want that.*

*Once again, the road was calling!*

*I didn't join the caravan as an astronomer, but I was taken in as a teacher instead; more accurately, as a caretaker. I would accompany a group of students of the Academy's high school to Konolwar's school.*

*This was their first caravan journey – their first way through the sands. Mainly these were the children of merchants and shopkeepers. There were also the children of scientists and representatives of the academy. Their parents traveled to the Valley with the first caravans, each motivated by their own goal. All of them were surely well-off, or they had risked everything for the sake of a new life in the Valley, for not everyone could pay for a well-equipped caravan with security.*

*And then there was the protection of the Academy! In truth, the Academy shifted its protective duties onto my shoulders. But it was my duty. Nobody forced me to do this. That meant I was responsible for my students with my head and with my heart – Not just for their parents, first and foremost, for my own conscience!*

*If I had any authority at all, I would forbid children from going to the Valley. No one knew why it emptied and where its people disappeared to.*

*Lamis helps me, although she is from a poor family and still almost a child at the age of eighteen. She recently graduated from the high school and entered the Medical Faculty of the Academy so for her, accompanying these students is a chance to earn money for her further education.*

*For me, crossing the desert had long since become equivalent to a walk. True, I had not travelled with caravans in a long time, but once committed to this journey, I felt good again.*

*With only the longing to see my father eating at my heart, all I knew was I had twenty-two students to take care of and bring to the school of Konolwar in good health and good spirits.*

*I will help the children of the Academy to endure the burdens of camp life. In two months, we will be at Konolwar!*

*And after that I will go to Min-Mirif... to the Amatt Estate..."*

### 3

The next morning was incredibly hot.

For a month, the caravan travelled under a sparing sun, which is quite common for spring. Now dawn rays burned mercilessly since morning, immediately announcing the approaching summer! Were it Jumanna's will, she would lead the caravan in the morning and evening hours, breaking sleep into day and night stages. But who was she to say? Here, experienced caravanners made the decisions.

The luggage was tied onto the camels' backs, and the students, flasks full, unanimously declared they were ready for a new transition. All that remained was taking down the tent.

Jumanna was passing the bustling merchants when the fat owner of the Khatum Tangut caravan, only last night so affected by stomach pains, hurried towards her. Tangut's skin glistened with moisture, sweat dripping down his forehead from under the heavy turban. Despite this, the owner of the caravan seemed sure that if he shared a couple words with the young Djunitian lady before the caravan's departure, he would make an impression on her.

Jumanna was irritated by this. When she was a little girl traveling with her father, no one hovered around her. Now they frustrated her with their cunning courtesy. What a turn of events! She asked to join the caravan as a caretaker for the Academy's students, and usually the Academy sent decrepit

old people as caretakers, but she was young and beautiful. With bronze skin, typically a little lighter than the Djunits, piercing brown eyes and dark chestnut, but not black, slightly curly hair.

She wanted to be perceived first of all as a caretaker of the Academy. However, the increased attention to her person was something different.

“How did the noble Jumanna Inaiya sleep? How does she endure the hardships of the trip?” enquired caravanner in a misleading pleasant tone.

“Thank you, Tangut, I slept beautifully. I do not feel the burdens, I’m used to them. Look! I did not even sweat!” Jumanna liked the way she spited Tangut, whose face was already hot with streams, his rich clothes dampened. “On a side note, allow me to ask as to why you are primarily interested in me, the caretaker, and not my students?”

“Hmph! The caretaker!” Tangut smirked. He turned and hobbled in the direction of his elephant, nothing more to say.

*What a wonderful way to start the morning!*

Jumanna was sure that a similar conversation would take place in the evening, and the next morning, and throughout all the subsequent days. It had been this way for a month, ever since the launch of the caravan from Kay-Samiluf. It was as clear as day to Jumanna that Tangut would, until the end, hope that she would say it was hard for her, that she was tired, and then offer her patronage...

*Well, never in her lifetime!*

The caravan consisted of camels alone, and only fat Tangut rode a desert elephant. These animals were half the size of ordinary gray elephants, but, like camels, they could go without water for two weeks at a time. The desert elephant’s skin was light beige, covered by a multitude of cracks, resembling the scales of a sand dragon.

No sooner had Jumanna come to her senses than the huge figure of Khallan, the commander of the military detachment accompanying the caravan, appeared before her.

*Another one!*

Khallan was simply huge, with impressive muscles easily discerned under his robe and thin mail. But something unnatural could be read in his movements. Khallan walked slowly, like a lion in a menagerie that growls only to amuse the crowd.

Jumanna knew what real warriors looked like. Inconspicuous, quiet, silent. But as soon as there was danger, their spears flew with the speed of lightning. She doubted the swords and spears of Khallan and his companions were as fast.

“Well, is it difficult?” Khallan inquired with a grin that resembled a scowl.

*How tired I am of this!*

“No,” she cut him off, and turned around defiantly.

“I wanted to help,” the warrior spoke to her retreating figure, evidently displeased.

“How?” Jumanna turned her head.

Khallan pondered. The young woman, meanwhile, set off once again to where her students were already taking down the tent.

“Jumanna! Jumanna! I killed a huge scorpion!” Makacash, one of the youngest boys, but incredibly lively and agile, told her joyfully. His favorite toy was the sword. Of course, one big enough only for child’s play, but rather weighty for a boy his age. As soon as he grew up, the sand dragons would face a great threat.

“Have you not tired of your great feats yet?” Jumanna patted his head gently.

“Oh, this isn’t a poisonous scorpion!” the inquisitive Astramed was already squatting beside the scorpion, cut by the sword. The scorpion, it must be noted, was really big, the length of three palms.

Astramed could be distinguished by his scientific, childishly funny, inquisitiveness. Upon encountering a plant or animal in the desert, he would immediately begin discussing it, much more rarely enquiring about it, if he did not know something. Jumanna herself had learned many new and interesting things from him.

Calif, who had employed several younger students to help him, was completing the work on the folding of the tent.

“Do you not wish to help?” Jumanna addressed Mulaf, who was lying in the shade of the barchan, looking at the sky. He stood up reluctantly and went to Calif.

*I say, some people are lazy by nature!*

Half an hour later, the long string of hunchbacked animals, set off, burned by the cruel sun of the Great Desert.

Jumanna did not want to mount, and led her camel by the reins. She was caught up to by a mounted astronomer, Umal Al-Dassay. At first, he rode a little further, then easily dismounted his camel and began leading him.

“I see that you do not feel very comfortable here?” the astronomer began with an inquisitive tone.

He was an old man. An old man by years. Wrinkled, with a snow white beard and same colored hair, which peeped out from under his turbot. His purple robe with silver stars sewn onto it fluttered in the wind. It was unlikely this outfit was intended for a journey through the desert.

*He’s going there too!*

“I feel exceptionally well on this journey!” Jumanna looked into his eyes.

“I’m not talking about this... ” the astronomer continued apologetically. “I’m sure that you will easily cross the Great Desert on your own... I’m speaking in regards to the increased attention you are receiving from the men accompanying the caravan... it annoys you!”

“It does annoy me!” agreed Jumanna.

“Understand, you are young and beautiful”

“I’ve been on many different journeys since I was a child!”

“Hear me out and do not interrupt!” the astronomer chastised, raising his voice a little. “You accompany the children. And no one even cares about how they are handling the journey. Certainly, no one was interested in you when you traveled as a child. But you are a caretaker. Do you remember a time when caravans were ever accompanied by women? No, most definitely not. There exist male crafts and there exist female ones, it is not necessary to mix the two. Do agree with me? The world would look ridiculous if men begin to weave carpets, while women hunted scorpio-anglers.”

*Do you think your purple robe does not look ridiculous in the sand?*

“I do not want to offend you or your age... ” Jumanna began cautiously. “You are cheerful and strong in spirit; you sit perfectly in the saddle. But have you seen whom the Academy usually sends as caretakers? These are elderly people who struggle with the journey. Would I not be more useful? I do not want to dragon hunt... It is truly a man’s craft... But why should a woman not be a caretaker? An astronomer?”

“An a-stro-no-mer!” the old man stretched each syllable. “Never have I in my time ever met a woman astronomer!”

“Then look at me carefully!” Jumanna could not restrain herself.

“You?”

“I’ve done more than a dozen voyages as an on-board astronomer!” the young woman appeared to be trying to justify herself.

Al-Dassay only shook his head.

“What do you want from me? For me to turn around and leave the caravan?”

“You have already chosen your path,” the old man said calmly. “You are full of enthusiasm and determination. However, you should be more attentive and understand that this is not accepted. Yes, you are more useful in the journey than the decrepit old men of the Academy, but this cannot be explained to the other members of the caravan who see a woman caretaker for the first time! Since you agreed to this journey, be ready for such unhealthy attention!”

With the same ease, Al-Dassay jumped onto his camel and nudged it on towards the front of the caravan.

The mood for the day was completely ruined, making the walk difficult as the sun scorched them mercilessly.

For some reason, the sun felt gentle in any city, as if it were soothing, sending kindness with its every ray. In the desert, it simply scorched everything in its path, filling its beams with all the anger and malice it had accumulated against people. Now, it punished them.

*What did the inhabitants of the deserts do wrong?*

In the south of the Djunitian land, there is even a small port – the Bay of the Evil Sun. It was necessary to build a port near Darif, a mining town with fine iron ore, and the shore was completely unsuitable for this. It was decided to lay the settlement on the only somewhat suitable location, a small streamlet near a small cove. During the construction of the port, heat and dehydration killed more than a thousand people. That was how the port got its name. Although the port was a necessity for traders, she wondered, *had the merchants ever dwelled on the price paid to create this harbor?*

The sand was ready to melt beneath the hooves of the camels. Tangut's elephant trailed at the back of the caravan and its owner was barely breathing, yet remained in the saddle. Jumanna knew if the caravan arrived a few days late, money would be lost, and Tangut would rather die on the road than lose his profit.

*He is not at all fit for camp life, but dares to offer me help! If someone here cannot cope with the hardships of this journey, it is him. I hope he is lonely!*

The fleeting thought of Tangut once again being affected by a series of stomach problems, or something else, amused her. Jumanna had never harbored any malice, but desired justice for his treatment of her.

On the way, we saw the skeleton of a huge lizard, probably the size of a camel. Giant lizards were not predators, but they were incredibly dangerous. If frightened, they could knock you down from an elephant or camel and trample you to death. The smaller lizards scurried along the sand in the morning, then in the afternoon, life in the desert simply disappeared. They were only djunas that went to the horizon, and the same blue sky and white sun.

Jumanna rode on, still unable to find a place for her ire. Only by the end of the day did all her anger go away, leaving the desire for a cool drink to quench her thirst in its place.

As the white sun became yellow, and then bright red, and swiftly rolled over the horizon, the whole caravan rejoiced.

The caretaker, together with Lamis, Calif, and tireless Makacash, unloaded the mattresses from the camels and set up the tent. The rest of the students were so exhausted they fell to the ground as if they had been knocked down. While they were putting up the tent, Jumanna felt the gaze of Khallans' warriors, but pride prevented her from asking them for help.

They ate supper and went to bed. Some did not have the strength for dinner.

Jumanna thought that sleep would instantly come to her because the day had been incredibly tiring. But she could not fall asleep. Overcome with anger and annoyance, thoughts kept creeping into her head. She even thought that she should not have asked to join this trip, that it had not been worth lying to her mother. Then she remembered that if her brother had approved of her decision, she was right to go. She imagined how Khasims' powerful blow to the jaw would overturn Khallan; how he would come to her to apologize for the indecent behavior on the journey.

And then suddenly her heart seized with fear, filling Jumanna with a familiar emotion. She not only acutely felt magic, but could predict the terrible events of the future. The last time she felt uneasy at night, the next morning a messenger arrived in Kay – Samiluf, announcing the Valley was empty.

*What will happen tomorrow?*

Jumanna left the tent and looked upward at Jumann Khayat (Pearl Deposit), a star cluster after which she had been named. With her fingers, she felt the chain on her neck that carried her talismans –

a big pearl bought by her father at the market of Bandabaze on her memorable birthday, and a golden key that unlocked secret locks in the Amatt Estate.

In the Common Language, Jumanna meant “pearl” and Inaiya meant “golden.”

The big pearl and the golden key were all that remained of her father.

“Help me, oh stars,” whispered Jumanna, looking at the night sky, “Take the troubles away from me. Help me, Father.”

## 4

A sleepless night was making itself known, as morning turned out torturous and getting up had been a feat. Lamis rose first and went to get some water. When she drew back the canopy, stuffy air swept in as though the tent had been mistakenly put into a giant oven overnight and now burned ferociously. Jumanna quickly realized that today would be even hotter than yesterday.

The rest of the caravan’s population was coming around even slower than the children. The feeling was that there was no need to go anywhere today and a two-hour passage (probably at the peak of heat) would be far enough.

Breakfast passed in silence. Despite the sluggish actions of the caravanners, everyone understood they faced a tedious passage ahead of them. There was not a single person inside the tent who looked pleased at the prospect.

After breakfast was finished, some of the children parted. As usual, Makacash, typically the most energetic, ran away to kill scorpions, Astramed went to explore nature, and Calif took three strong boys with him to teach them fencing.

*It is only he that brings me joy!*

Looking around the tent, Mulaf collapsed onto the blankets and continued his morning sleep. Another younger pupil, looking at his older and lazier comrade, followed his example. Jumanna didn’t say anything. Several girls whispered quietly in a corner. Lamis took a book and began to read. It was meaningless to send them all out of the tent and pack it up without the command of the caravan.

Jumanna opened her diary. She took a feather and opened a jar of ink. Having dipped the sharp tip, she brought it over the paper and froze.

*What should I write about?*

She did not wish to talk about the fact that the caravanners, the warriors, and even an astronomer believed that a woman did not belong on such a journey.

*What else can I write about? My sleepless night? About the responsible Calif? The lively Makacash? The inquisitive Astramed?*

Jumanna was sinking into a reverie when suddenly the earth shook beneath her. A thick drop of ink fell onto the page and spread over it, distracting her thoughts.

*What is happening?*

The answer came in an instant.

“A scorio – angler!” The air was filled with a piercing shriek.

Dropping the feather, Jumanna raced out of the tent as chaos ensued the camp. Camels bleated and floundered wildly as the ground shook. Sand flew in different directions, and beneath it the black body of a scorio – angler had already emerged. It was absolutely enormous!

Once before Jumanna had seen a scorio – angler, when she was young, and even that was from afar. Father, who would always protect her, had been nearby and quickly led her away. Although Jumanna had not seen the battle with the filthy creature, she knew what a small and a big scorio – angler could look like from the stories told by her brother and old campaigners. This one was probably the largest that could exist in the world.

*I thought scorio – anglers aren’t found in the north of Kay – Samiluf.*

But he appeared before Jumanna’s caravan! Her premonition had not deceived her.

Her brother's stories hadn't been told in vain. Jumanna knew that when a scorio – angler attacked, you had to urgently look for elevation, or even better, a stone ridge. These monsters didn't have eyes and felt the movements made on the sand. But if you found firm ground, you were saved! She looked around and to her joy, she saw one some two hundred steps away! Everything developed rapidly after that.

“Quick, get out!” She pulled the tent's canopy aside, but quick-thinking Lamis was already pushing Mulaf, his companion, and the girls towards the exit. “To those stones! Run for all you're worth!” Jumanna ordered, pointing at the ridge with her finger.

The boys ran fast by themselves, while Lamis literally dragged the girls along with her.

Jumanna's eyes found Calif, who was driving about a dozen more kids toward the tent. She pointed him towards the stones. The young man understood her from first glance and nodded.

The scorio – angler was now fully emerged, smashing people and camels with its deadly sting. Its terrible weapon circumscribed the arc and pierced Khatum Tangut. Jumanna immediately felt a lump in her throat as just yesterday she wished for some malicious incident to happen to him. Though she wished for something, she could never have imagined such a thing.

*I must pull myself together! I can grieve for Tangut and reproach myself for damnation against him at some other time, not now!*

In the chaos of the panic-stricken caravanners, Jumanna saw the young Makacash holding his childish sword forward, frozen in a fighting posture. Her heart sank. She believed he was about to charge at the scorio – angler with the same rapidness he lashed out at its younger brother – scorpions. But fortunately, at that exact moment, the student turned toward her.

“Run! There, where the stones are!” Jumanna shouted at the top of her voice. Her cry merged with the roar that reigned around her. However, the boy understood his caretaker and with his usual speed, rushed to the other students.

Jumanna looked again at the ridge and quickly counted the people.

*Twenty – two with Lamis... one is missing! Who? Astramed! Of course, Astramed!*

For a long time, her eyes searched the surroundings where fear and panic triumphed, resting on a pile of white bales. Astramed was bent down under them, his head clasped in his hands. It was impossible to reach him with a cry so Jumanna rushed to the bales with full force. Two strong men, the soldiers of Khallan, fled towards her, nearly knocking her over. The warriors rushed away from imminent death while she ran directly toward it; to where a deadly sting was dissecting the air. Jumanna grabbed the child's hand as he instantly recovered from his petrifying fear. She pulled him to the grey ridge of rocks with all her might, as an inner voice prompted her to duck. Jumanna pushed the boy forward and then fell to the ground herself. The tail of the scorio – angler whistled right above her head and met the body of a fat camel. The animal roared with pain and immediately fell silent. The torment didn't last long. Holding Astramed's hand, Jumanna rushed forward to the lifesaving stones. She had a stitch in her side, her breathing was uneven, and hot air burned her lungs. Astramed breathed even more heavily as the scorio-angler was finishing off the caravan amidst the sounds of retreating battle.

Jumanna gave the student a leg up and then climbed onto the rocks herself as Calif's strong hands grabbed and lifted her without a problem. After that, she fell limply onto her back, inhaling several deep breaths.

She closed her eyes and sank into a trance. Maybe she lost consciousness. But not for long.

The young woman shuddered and woke up. After a while she was able to raise herself on her elbows and see what had become of the caravan. The commotion had subsided, but Jumanna could not see a living thing.

*Where are the people who had wanted to escape by fleeing?*

No one could be seen... only the corpses of caravanners and camels. The scorio-angler himself had also fallen to his side. Near his jaws lay the carcass of a desert elephant. Lamis said that the animal

had either become mad with fear or, on the contrary, having gained courage, simply took off and rammed itself into the scorpio-angler's head. The elephant was dead, but whether the scorpio-angler was actually dead was a big question. Jumanna knew that these monsters were incredibly tenacious. Perhaps it was just tired and resting. Perhaps it had decided to postpone its planned meal for the evening.

Silently, they sat on the rocks under the scorching sun and when it seemed safe, moved into the shadow which roamed around the ridge. A malodorous stink whiffed from recent battle scene.

Finally, dusk had fallen. Dew fell on the boulders, which had saved the lives of the Academy's students. Jumanna showed everyone how to collect moisture from the rocks using one's lips, just as Father taught her. If it hadn't been for him, with all probability, Jumanna and her students were destined to have died of thirst that very night.

Darkness fell. The stars were luminous in the sky. Darkness reigned near the gigantic silhouette of the scorpio-angler. The monster did not ignite the deadly light on its tail. This meant only one thing – the scorpio-angler was dead!

Jumanna descended from the rocks and overcoming her fear, went around the terrible place. Her head was spinning, and she felt a lump rising in throat. But she had to hold on. Dead camels... Dead people... And then Jumanna heard a hoarse voice! She rushed to the sound. The astronomer Umal Al-Dassay lay crushed under the corpse of a camel. The young woman tried to get him out, to no avail. She thought of calling Calif and a couple more of the boys, but the old man stopped her.

"Leave it, it is needless... I don't have long..." Jumanna was silent. She didn't know what to say.

"Forgive me... Forgive all of us!" Al-Dassay continued. "We were wrong. Experienced caravanners have been killed... Warriors... And you survived and saved the lives of your students. You... You are a wonderful caretaker."

"What should I do now?" Jumanna asked almost inaudibly. "You are in charge now, so you must decide..." the old man croaked and rolled his eyes upward. "Look!" His tone changed dramatically. "The constellation of the Lion!"

Jumanna lifted her head upward. Indeed, just above her shone the constellation of the Lion.

*The constellation of the Lion. The Marawie Star, which pointed the way to the migrants from the north during their dangerous passage from the Valley. But what did the astronomer mean?*

And then it dawned on Jumanna! How could she? She was so proud of her knowledge of astronomy, yet she hadn't noticed the elementary changes in the sky! Even yesterday, when she had been fascinated by Jumann Khayat.

Perhaps the increased attention from the male-caravanners and the reminders that this journey had no place for a woman had confused her and forced her to forget the basics of astronomy for a while.

*Of course. After all, there was another astronomer... a real astronomer!*

But he had been mistaken!

The month of the Camel has already come and, relative to the road from Kay-Samiluf to Ayno-Suf, the constellation of the Lion should have been significantly more towards to the east!

"Have we gone off the track?" though it sounded like a question, it was actually a statement.

"Forgive me... forgive me once more," The astronomer's voice began to weaken again. "Ah, anility... I confused the cards. I killed everyone! On the road to Ayno-Suf there are no scorpio-anglers, and I took you into the depths of the desert..."

*Damn it! That's all there is to life experience! All the wisdom!*

Jumanna was no longer worried about the fatal error of the scattered astronomer. She ran her finger along the starry sky, measured the way to the north of the constellation of the Lion, where the Star of the Marawie, the brightest in the constellation, sent its rays.

"But if we go to the northeast we can reach Muo. We'd find ourselves in the Valley by coming out onto the Dalaal path!"

“You are a good astronomer. You will manage to lead a caravan better than I have.” It was the last thing Umal Al-Dassay said.

## 5

Jumanna returned to her students about half an hour later. Everyone was asleep, even Lamis. Only Calif had waited up for her. Jumanna handed him a few flasks of water and a saber.

She had unbuckled the flasks from the belts of the dead. It was terribly disgusting, but she had to restrain her feelings, for one cannot survive in the rough desert otherwise.

Jumanna had taken the saber from the belt of Khallan. He hadn't even had time to take the weapon in his hands. A sting had pierced him from the back as he was trying to flee. Even touching his stuff felt nasty! What a truly unworthy person! But the steel of the blade was painfully good, and a weapon was a necessity.

Jumanna's father hired a fencing master for her in Min-Mirif. Later, while studying at the Observatory, she took lessons herself. But that had been more for the sake of interest. She never imagined that one day she would take the handle of a saber in traveling conditions.

*It will be a blessing if on the road to the Valley I won't need to use Khallan's blade!*

Jumanna counted the corpses. Khallan, ten of his warriors, fifteen caravanners, and seven merchants, including Khatum Tangut and Umal Al-Dassay. No one else had survived. She found the two warriors who fled and nearly knocked her over a little farther from the place of slaughter. They had managed to distance themselves from the deadly sting, but, like the astronomer, were crushed by the body of a camel that collapsed on top of them.

By now she no longer felt any disgust while retrieving their weapons. *It is necessary!* Jumanna thought, searching the lifeless bodies.

After returning to the rocks, she immediately fell asleep. Surprisingly, this time, dreams struck her in an instant; no nightmares haunted her. Everyone awoke at sunrise. The sun began to bear down, or, to be more precise, burn up the air.

Jumanna, along with Lamis and Calif, returned to the place of slaughter. They began to search the surviving trunks. Calif found a saber for himself and parted with his harmless training weapon. Jumanna decided it was too early for the other children to look at such scenery. However, a few minutes later, Makacash could no longer resist the temptation and rushed to help them. The sight of the corpses of people and animals did not frighten him at all. Nothing was left of their tent. However, on the spot where it had stood, Jumanna found her diary and the only surviving book – the first volume of “Travel to the Skies” by Azir Amunjadee.

They managed to save a solid piece of dense fabric, from which the boys made a canopy on the stones to hide from the sun. Without any superfluous conversations, everyone got busy working; even Mulaf did not shirk. By noon, all the useful belongings were transferred to the stones. Their food supplies would last them a week or two, but their water supply was not sufficient. Jumanna counted the empty flasks and gave the students the task of collecting dew from the stones in the evening, so they could fill everything.

“Try to squeeze the stones, because we need full flasks!” she commanded in such an imperious voice that she surprised even herself.

Of course, she knew that with evening dew, you could hardly fill a sixth of a small wineskin. But to tell the children this would bring them into a state of despair.

*It's better for them to be motivated!*

Then there was a short conversation with Lamis. It was necessary to understand where to next lead the group. Not that Lamis was any good at this, but Jumanna needed someone mature to talk to. The fact that the decision had to be made by her alone was unavoidable.

Jumanna was on the brink of turning back. However, after delving into the maps, she realized it would be easier to reach Muo, a city in the southeast of the Valley, than return to Kay-Samiluf or to try to return to the Ayno-Suf path.

Their salvation lay in the north!

*Salvation in the north...hmm... The book of Azir Amunjadee. Only the first volume survived. In it, the text speaks about the Ito Empire. The Ito Empire! The north! It's probably silly to think in this way... it's just a coincidence. But, again, my foreboding! It tells me this is no accident. It's as though an unknown powerful force is leading me in the right direction.*

The sun had passed the zenith and the children fit under the tiny shadow of the handmade awning. They kept close together as there wasn't much room. A couple of girls cried quietly, desperately wanting to return to their mothers. The older girl tried in vain to cheer them up. Moualdar also babbled something parent-related to himself, but it seemed more out of habit than from fear. Jumanna noticed that the other students seemed to be glaring avidly into her eyes and waiting for her decisions. Loyalty, devotion, and readiness followed wherever she commanded – that was what she read in those eyes. Only at that moment did Jumanna understand *what exactly* she had done for her students.

“In the evening, we are setting off to Muo!” she announced, now no longer just the caretaker, but also the head of the caravan, the astronomer, and the commander of the warriors.

The warriors, as such, were absent, really. It was only Calif and the restless Makacash, but what were such warriors against the scorpio-anglers and sand dragons? And what is a caravan in the desert without camels?

*A doomed caravan.*

But Jumanna pulled herself together and immediately drove away the black thoughts.

## 6

They slept until evening. As soon as the sun set, they filled the flasks with water and set off towards the northeast, in the direction of the rays of the Star of the Marawie in the constellation of the Lion.

Jumanna was strict: the procession would walk only at night! Firstly, it was easier for her to navigate the stars, secondly, a longer distance could be covered. Crossing the desert with children during the day could end very badly. And, thirdly, it would be easier to distinguish scorpio-anglers at night! With the onset of twilight, the scorpio-anglers got out of the sand, and the light the monsters lit on their sting was visible from afar. On the other hand, at night it was easier to fall into the underground cave of a sand dragon.

Jumanna led the procession. Behind her trotted the deft boys, encouraged by Makacash. Calif walked in the middle, holding his new sword on his shoulder, ready for battle. Lamis and the other girls closed the procession. They constantly lagged behind. As a result, Calif had to take the baby Munu-Aiya on his shoulders and with that, the group went a little faster.

At night, the desert filled with sounds. Insects came out of their hidden holes and filled the boundless space with their buzzing. Astramed, with an intelligent look on his face, distinguished each sound and identified each insect: a cicada, a rattler, a desert mosquito, a blowfly, a sand eater.

The caretaker moved progressively at a controlled pace, but at a certain moment she was overcome with turmoil. She felt pressure on her shoulders, pressure that grew stronger and stronger with every step. This inner voice that had tanged yesterday about their impending doom now got louder. It was as though the inner voice was dampening the other voice, the one commanding to fight until the end and move towards their goal. At some point, the voice of doom filled her whole consciousness, and she was ready to surrender, powerlessly collapse into the sand and accept fate. But when she turned to look back, in the flickering starlight she caught a glimpse of the faces of twenty-

three people. For each of them, even for Calif, this passage was even harder than for her. For them, she, who was ahead, remained the only hope.

“If you give up, you will ruin them and ruin yourself!” a more confident voice now sounded in her head, opposing the voice of despair. It reminded Jumanna of her father’s voice.

The dawn’s rays highlighted the outline of a new stone ridge. Fortune favored the travelers!

They collected the morning dew, put up their makeshift cover, ate, drank water, and went to bed before the sun began to scorch the Great Desert. Jumanna looked at the students as everyone fell asleep. Then she sat on a rock, clasped her hands on her knees, leaned her head against them and sobbed violently.

The last time she had cried was when she turned eighteen years old.

## 7

That night there was another march. It was becoming harder. The moisture from the dew was negligible and the flasks were empty. The water had to be saved.

The girls began to be more erratic; the boys mumbled under their breath. The pupils perked up when Jumanna reprimanded them angrily.

“We’re in the desert! In the desert, do you understand? If you barely drag your feet, you face death! You can cry, but it won’t help! Walk on! Walk as quickly as possible – this is our only salvation!”

It was dawn, but this time there was no rocky shelter. A rag canopy had to be established right on the sand. Sleep was torturous! Everyone was thirsty, but their water supply was decreasing further and further.

When the evening twilight came, the students who had nervously tossed about in the afternoon finally fell asleep together. Even Calif succumbed to it. His strength, bravery, and height helped Jumanna forget that he was only sixteen.

She left the canopy and climbed to the high barchans to contemplate the endless expanse, and as she had done eighteen years ago, plunged into the black abyss. Feeling alone in the universe as the bright Star of Marawie infused hope inside of her, Jumanna took hold of the chain with the pearl and golden key.

“Father,” she whispered. “Where are you now? I feel that that place is somewhere far away... not with Itoshins, not with Vedichs, but there, among the distant stars. Help me! Help me, oh stars! Give me and my students the strength we need. Help us, Star of the Marawie, the brightest star of the south! Help me, the ancient hero of the legends! Help, Sand Lion! Once you brought our people out of the Valley, and now help us return there! I, your descendant, Jumanna Inaiya Khaniya Amatt, I beg you of this!”

And it seemed that the star winked at her, for a moment flashing many times brighter.

*A trick of the senses, or not?*

She had gotten too carried away and was daydreaming, as a fatigue like none before manifested itself in her body.

Jumanna did not remember how she returned to the students and fell asleep.

She woke up with the first rays of dawn, these rays outlining a new stone ridge in the distance. It was a bit off their route, but it was necessary to get to the ridge by evening to fill the flasks with dew.

## 8

They made it. And there they waited, in a drowse, for the evening. That night they made quite a big transition, and by morning came upon a giant boulder, which served well as a shelter. At twilight, droplets of water appeared on it.

*We are lucky! But we can't always be so fortunate... or can we? Maybe my prayers have been heard? In any case, thank you, my starry patrons!*

## 9

About seven days passed. Jumanna couldn't say for sure. She had lost count because she wasn't thinking about that. Rather, she dwelled on how to survive and how to save the lives of the students. The map of the starry sky changed and she knew they had definitely walked north. But it was difficult to say how far.

One night they once again slept on the sand. In the morning, they noticed new lifesaving stones, or something similar to them, on the horizon. At first, Jumanna decided to go to them in the afternoon, but her mind resisted. Her inner voice, which she had learned to trust without hesitation, said that it was necessary to advance right this second!

The start was cheerful and the goal was clear. But after about an hour the enthusiasm faded. The daytime sun incandesced the air and the sand, but cooled the travelers' enthusiasm.

Jumanna, with jaws set hard, continued to hurry her students. Sometimes with cheers, sometimes with gentle persuasions, and sometimes resorting to scolding similar to what rude caravanners used towards their most stupid camels. Jumanna herself was surprised that she knew so many curses. She never imagined she would ever use them, especially addressing children.

*The most important thing is that they don't use them in Konolwar's school and don't tell anyone who taught them. Or whatever. Is it really all that important? No! The primary goal now is to get to Konolwar! The most important thing now is to stay alive!*

The new ridge was already close, but it did look really strange. A confident voice inside grew quiet, and the bad premonition returned. Jumanna took a step forward, but her foot immediately fell knee-deep into the sand. The young woman felt herself start to sink underground. She squealed from the suddenness. It was clear that it was a burrow of a sand dragon!

The ridge, as it turns out, had covered this burrow.

*How could I have been so mistaken! What kind of delusion dragged me forward?*

Several hands caught her from behind and managed to keep hold of her. Calif arrived almost immediately and pulled the caretaker out of the deadly funnel.

Jumanna looked around. Two hundred steps away was a high barchan, ahead – a treacherous ridge. The sand finally fell into a black abyss and the huge predatory face of a dragon appeared from the sandy depths.

“Take the children away!” she managed to shout to Lamis as she pointed to the barchan.

She pulled Khallan's blade out from her belt and thrust it forward. She did everything the way Khasim instructed her to before leaving, in case the caravan was attacked by a dragon. But Jumanna couldn't have ever imagined that she would actually have to encounter it like this, face to face. The dragon was already hovering over her. It was enormous! One and a half times the size of its relatives.

*An outcast!*

In a way, this could be considered luck. Dragon-outcasts always lived alone, outside the pack. However, they were the most cunning, the strongest, the most insidious representatives of the dragon family.

Suddenly, Calif and Makacash appeared on either side of Jumanna, and took up a similar fighting stance, swords forward.

Jumanna turned around. The others, even the girls, stood behind, with Lamis spreading her hands, if only to say, “What could I do?”

“What?” Jumanna literally yelled at them. “To face a dragon without weapons? To the barchan, immediately!” This had an effect. They obeyed, turning and running away immediately.

“And you,” Jumanna quickly glanced at Calif and Makacash. “Move closer to me! Bring your swords to my saber! As a triangle! And aim for the dragon’s throat!”

But the outcast was even more cunning than Jumanna had imagined. Instead of attacking them with his jaws, his tail swept the feet of the trinity, scattering Jumanna, Calif, and Makacash in different directions.

Jumanna fell on her back, and the dragon rose above her, opened its jaws and plunged down sharply. The only thing that Jumanna thought at that instance was, “Forgive me, Father! Forgive me, beloved brother! Forgive me, my dear Mother!”

As the dragon nose-dived at Jumanna, something powerful and heavy struck, pushing it away, allowing her time to jump to her feet. She couldn’t believe her eyes! Next to the dragon stood an enormous lion, baring its teeth. It appeared out of nowhere and knocked down the winged creature in one leap!

“Sandy Lion,” whispered Jumanna.

The dragon rose from the ground and tried to fly up. But Jumanna, driven by instinct (she wasn’t the sister of Khasim Amatt, a skillful dragon hunter, for nothing) rushed towards the monster and slashed its throat with the saber. She couldn’t have thought the dragon’s head would fly off so easily. The body collapsed to the ground, having never fully risen into the air, conjuring a great pillar of dust around it.

The lion looked Jumanna in the eye. She had never met an animal with such a piercing stare! No, there could be no coincidence. That night she had appealed to the constellation of the Lion, the ancient hero and the star of the same name... and the Marawie Sand Lion himself had come to her aid!

*It was he who ordered me to advance immediately this morning!*

And how after this could one refuse to believe that the Chekatta could speak to the dead, and that Vedichs turned into animals?

The lion let out a growl, not an angry one but rather a calling one, and rushed off to the north, making several mighty jumps. After a while he stopped and turned back to look at Jumanna.

“He’s calling me to go with him,” she said out loud and turned to the barchan. “Hey you! C’mon! Follow me!” Jumanna lifted her saber again as if she was leading her pupils to battle.

Calif and Makacash had already caught up to her.

Jumanna just ran. She ran after the lion until he disappeared on the horizon. With her last ounce of strength, she screamed, turning to the children behind her, screaming only one word, “Faster!” She shrieked until dryness finally scorched her throat into silence.

The lion disappeared, but she kept running after him. The lion left no marks on the sand, but Jumanna knew exactly where he had run to. Sometimes she wondered if she made it all up. But then who, if not the lion, had saved her from the dragon?

Due to dehydration, perspiration no longer dripped down her face; her feet were petrified, but continued to mechanically measure the footsteps; her swollen tongue had stopped obeying. Jumanna didn’t turn around; she just knew the students must be following. Lagging behind, but following. They had to believe in her! After all, she believed!

She began to climb up the hill. Scattering sand entangled her legs. But Jumanna didn’t give up. She climbed.

What kind of power led her? It was impossible to understand. Perhaps it was The Power, the nature of which could not be explained.

As the sun was rolling towards sunset, another night in the open sand meant death! But Jumanna didn’t think about it. She climbed to the top of the hill, and there the beautiful green valley unraveled before her gaze! It was not an oasis! Not a mirage. The desert just ended abruptly. The blue river, beginning to glisten with reddish shades, separating life from death. Death in the guise of golden sand lost its power where the river bank began.

And only now, understanding that she had won, Jumanna gleefully turned around. Makacash had already crawled up to her. Much further, Moualdar, Astramed and a few more boys began to climb the hill. Slightly lower than them, the other brisk boys could be seen. Lamis followed, holding the hands of the two girls, while the lazy Mulaf and others followed. And quite a bit further in the distance waddled Calif with small Munu and her herdmate, Inaya, in his arms.

“Faster! Faster!” cried Jumanna, no longer strictly, but joyfully. “We made it!”

Even from afar Calif accurately grasped the change in her mood and quickened his pace.

Everyone literally rolled head over heels down the slope, dipped their heads into the river and drank like animals.

In the last rays of the sunset, they crossed the river and fell into the canopy of green trees, rare, but with thick buxom crowns.

Jumanna leaned her elbows on the tree trunk. Lamis sat down beside her.

“Thank you,” she said in a weak voice. “You’ve saved us all! You brought us to the Valley!”

“It’s all thanks to the lion,” Jumanna sighed.

“What lion?” Lamis asked in an amazed tone, but immediately drifted off.

## 10

Jumanna opened her eyes and looked at the sun. Noon had long since been and gone. Yesterday she used up too much of her strength. When she got up, she realized that the students had long since woken. The caretaker had no time to wipe her eyes when twenty-two students, led by Calif, approached her, each one dropping to one knee. Lamis joined in.

“Thank you, our caretaker and teacher, Jumanna Inaiya Khaniya Amatt!” the eldest boy began. “Yesterday we were too tired and couldn’t tell you this! Forgive us! We must thank you endlessly! You saved us many times! And now you have brought us to the Valley.”

“Thank you!”

Sincerely and fervently, the phrase “Thank you” was repeated by the childish voices.

Jumanna only smiled in return.

She bathed her face in the water, and then realized that it was worth swimming. Stepping aside, she got undressed, and with obvious pleasure entered the cool waters of the river. After spending almost half an hour there, she went back to the camp and began to collect fruit from the trees. The juicy peaches and oranges became a wonderful breakfast.

Jumanna announced that they would spend the day in the fruit grove to restore their strength.

In his ear, Calif was instructed to take all the boys to the river and properly wash them. Lamis was already going to the other side to bathe the girls. Jumanna halted her friend.

“Did you really not see the lion?” she asked, looking into Lamis’s eyes.

“What lion? Please explain!” She was obviously surprised.

“Who killed the dragon?”

“You!” Lamis said, even more surprised.

“And no one helped me?”

“Calif and Makacash,” The tone of her younger friend filled with bewilderment. “But the dragon quickly scattered them in different directions. And you rushed straight at him and blew his head, and then rushed forward and led us, running like an antelope! I was afraid we would collapse, but you... you instilled confidence in us! And we reached the Valley! Do you not remember?”

“I remember,” said Jumanna, “It just seemed to me that I saw a lion... do not pay attention to me! It’s the emotions.”

“Thanks again!” Lamis enveloped Jumanna in her arms.

## 11

The day was calm. Evening came, then the night. Jumanna did not want to sleep. She sat and thought. There were so many questions...

*Was the lion a phantom? Or not?*

*And how did we come to the Valley in just a few treks? We should have walked for at least fifteen days. Did the astronomer Al-Dassay lead the caravan so far to the northeast? Or was it that after the caravan's death I lost count?*

She decided she didn't want to think on it further, instead allowing joyous emotions to overwhelm her. After all, the students had survived the ruthless desert! She, Jumanna Amatt, had succeeded in leading them to the borders of the Valley!

*Everyone would've been proud of me! Father... Brother. I must write to him! He will be bug-eyed with surprise! And my mother will be proud... but my mother shouldn't know about our adventures!*

And then Jumanna felt a hunch.

*The diary!*

Of course, it was necessary to add new records to it. In the desert, there had been no time for it, and now it was worth making a few notes while their recent experiences were still ripe. But the impulse quickly dried up. Jumanna remembered she had no ink.

She dug into her hiking bag to make sure of this, and along with the diary, she took out the "Journey to Sky."

*Volume One – The Ito Empire...*

Once again, her memory filled with images – Father, the Universe, a starry sky, the Lion constellation and the ghost of a lion in the desert, the Star of the Marawie, the scorpio-angler, the dragon, the experienced astronomer who had lost his way, as well as those strange voices, forebodings, visions and dreams and... this book.

All the incredible events that had taken place in the last few days in no way looked like a series of accidents. On the contrary, they were more like parts of one chain.

*Strange, very strange..." Be afraid of your desires," the wise say. I wanted my journey to be Great, and the stars, as if they had heard me, had reshaped themselves, plotting my route.*

Jumanna took the book and opened it. In the bright light, all the symbols and sentences were perfectly readable. And now, it seemed a sort of magic arose from the moonlit glow of the ink-filled pages! Again, Jumanna felt something. Yes, yes, something related to that special energy. Nothing like this had happened before.

*Maybe this is really due to emotions?*

Jumanna began to slowly turn over the pages, briefly re-reading the paragraphs that she knew almost by heart:

### **THE TRAVEL TO THE SKIES**

#### **Volume One – The Ito Empire**

*Sixth edition. A summary of the Grand Book*

*Author: Azir Amunjadee*

*Azir Amunjadee, also known as Azir the Wanderer, is a member of the Old Pages Clan and descendant of Demar Amunjadee, creator of the famous Adventure Book. Azir is the author of a number of works in which he describes in detail the history of the northern people. He is the only stranger who managed to see the closed lands of the Ulutau and visit the mysterious Tau schools. The manuscripts of Azir help to form a notion of the amazing northern philosophy. They have been translated into various languages and are part of a series of books describing all the people of Elinor.*

### ***The Ito Empire – General Information***

*In the north, is the Dead Land. Here everything is shrouded in a dense veil of fog. Not a single ray of sun penetrates it. From the fog emerge demons, the most dreadful creatures, and only one nation can resist them – the Itoshins. The main settlements of these amazing people are located on a plateau called the Life Border Plateau. It is a ridge of stony hills, covered with eternal mist and fog. Nothing grows here, except for dry thorns of different forms, and only yauls can eat them – these animals truly have iron stomachs. The cities of the Itoshins are united into an empire ruled by the immortal emperor Toshō and his eternally young daughter Tsvetsho. All the people of Elinor are surprised at how the Itoshins can live in such inhuman conditions. I, Azir Aniluir Anevandi Anademar Amunjadee, travelled from the city of Eavette up the Huma River until Kawa, then continued further along the misty hills to Moon Lake, saw the emperor Toshō and the portraits of his beautiful daughter, and fought with the demons of the Dead Lands. I'm the only Djunit who walked the Path of Horror to the Celestial Plateau and survived. I have traveled this way so that you, my dear reader, can learn more about the amazing northern people and love them, as I do.*

### ***The Ruler of the City of Eavette***

*Dear curious reader, before telling you about the northern people, I would like to share a story about how their formation began.*

*To tell you the truth, it's difficult to reliably explain what happened during the Great Exodus of the people from the Valley of the Ancestors, as it was so long ago. I studied myths and legends of local residents, wrote down old songs, and visited ancient libraries. Based on this knowledge, I can roughly restore the events of those old years.*

*The Itoshinian ancestors lived in the heart of Elinor – the Valley of the Ancestors – in the city of Eavette and its suburbs. When the lands in the Valley became scarce, tribes from other cities began to wander in search of better lands, and as you, of course, know, wise reader, this was how the Great Exodus began. Yes, it was also then that our great people emerged, when Marawie the Sand Lion, our father and leader, led experienced farmers to the south, into an endless desert.*

*About the formation of our people, you, my deeply versed reader, of course, know. However, about the formation of other nations, you, most likely, do not.*

*The inhabitants of the city of Eavette occupied the fertile northern part of the Valley, and did not intend to leave it.*

*But one day Toshō, the ruler of the city of Eavette, had a traveler for a visitor, a traveler who had returned from the wild northern lands. Unfortunately, dear reader, I could not find out the name of this traveler. This is a great pity, as only thanks to this man was the terrible north uncovered. It was he who sold to the ruler Toshō ancient tomes, which he had found in the northern ruins. According to legends, these were the books of the Second Epoch. But no one will ever find out what was in them, since these tomes were later destroyed by Toshō himself.*

*After studying these books, the ruler gathered the most devoted comrades-in-arms, as well as six noble families, and set off on a journey to the north, thereby continuing the Exodus from the Valley of the Ancestors.*

### ***The Journey of the Seven Families to the North***

*It's hard to say for sure what exactly Toshō went to look for in the northern lands, but I guess there were some incredibly important artifacts left from the Second, and even from the First Race.*

*Initially, the way to the north did not cause any trouble, as evidenced by the ancient legends of the Itoshins. On the road, Toshō had a daughter, Tsvetsho. She was destined to play an important role in the emergence of the people of Ulutau, but I will tell you about it later, dear reader. When Toshō and the six families reached the Life Border Plateau, the first problems began. The plateau met them with dank dampness and thick fogs. For about five years, the ancestors of the Itoshins wandered this*

*labyrinth of hills and bare rocks. It was there they first encountered the procreations of Dead Earth – wicked creatures, unlike any animal of Elinor.*

*Many songs and legends are composed about the first meetings of the Itoshins with the demons. It all started when the people began to see shadows in the fog. Eerie visions haunted the travelers for months. They talked about nightmarish creatures, darting about in the fog, but no one could see them. Then people began to disappear. At first, they were either those who got separated from the main cart or hunters, but later the disappearances continued among the main detachment. No one knew where these people disappeared to. This led to the pathfinders' growing fear of hunting. They began to stay together as a dense group, and the expedition was on the verge of failure.*

*It was then there occurred a split. Two families – Maca and Yugie – decided to stop the search and leave Tosho. No persuasion could convince them to stay. The ruler cursed these families. Their representatives left Tosho, carrying away his curse. The further fate of the Maca and Yugie families is quite tragic. None of them came down from the plateau. They got lost in the eternal fogs, and one can only guess what their deaths were like. The Itoshins told me that sometimes they meet their wayward souls, mutely wandering in the darkness in their eternal search. This vision is called the curse of the Maca-Yugie, and to see it is considered a malicious sign.*

*The remaining four families – Unu, Wari, Saku, and Taki – and Tosho with his daughter, continued their journey. On the road, they lost another family – all the Wari went missing. Tosho's wife also died tragically; she fell off a slippery path and plummeted into a bottomless crevice.*

*But mighty was the will of Tosho, and the desire to find what he was looking for was great. To inspire his people, he took his sword and went alone, straight into the thickness of the fog. After a while he returned, dragging the body of an unknown creature. The sight of the monster was terrible – its jaws held huge, sharp teeth; five ridiculous extremities ended with razor sharp claws; the creature lacked eyes and ears. To the question regarding how Tosho had overcome this beast, he replied that he had not felt fear, only anger, and that the creature itself had rushed at his sword. This event is depicted on the frescoes covering the walls in the Emperor Tosho's palace. The carcass of the first murdered demon was turned into a scarecrow, which to this day adorns the throne of the Emperor. I happened to visit the throne room of Tosho, and the muzzle of the beast shocked me. Even now, after many centuries, it is terrifying. Tosho's heroic feat became the first stone in the foundation of the philosophy of the future Ito Empire.*

*Inspired by the example of their leader, the people moved on. Now that they knew they were being confronted by beings of flesh and blood, fear had left them. The expedition continued its journey.*

### ***Moon Lake and the Demons of the Misty Hills***

*Once, the travelers ascended a high hill, and from the summit they saw the sky for the first time in many years. It was late in the evening, and the full moon was shining. It was brightly reflected in the surface of a small lake. Strongly impressed by such a beautiful view, the newcomers called it Moon Lake. As it turned out, the fog never rose to such a height, and the sky above Moon Lake was always clear. Wearied by long wanderings, the travelers decided to establish their first settlement. They erected a city-fortress, Shohan, which later became the capital of the empire. Amazing animals lived in the vicinity of Moon Lake such as the yauls, who eventually were domesticated by the Itoshins. Moon Lake itself was filled with beautiful fish and other animals. This islet of light in the endless fogs was not the only one, and gradually the Itoshins settled all over the plateau. As it turned out, the demons of the fog did not like the light and in the daytime, life in the settlements was relatively calm. At night, houses were locked with tight shutters, and anyone who could hold a weapon led an endless defense against terrible enemies.*

### ***The Immortal Emperor***

*Here, my dear reader, I should share my reflections with you. I was not able to find out if the other families knew what Tosho was looking for, and if they didn't know, then what else could have made them embark on such a dangerous path? To this day, we foreigners don't know whether the ancestors of the Itoshins found anything on the plateau. I have an assumption that this is somehow connected with the immortality of Emperor Tosho and his daughter. But I have no evidence to support this conjecture, and scientists like me cannot rely solely on assumptions. I leave this unsolved mystery to you, my inquisitive reader. Perhaps you will be able to solve it.*

*Surely, you will immediately remember our founding father and want to compare him with Tosho. Both took away their people during the Exodus – one to the north, the other to the south. Both were charismatic and strong-willed leaders. Both are supposedly immortal. But here, my probably erring reader, I'll argue with you. Nothing is known about the life of the Marawie Sand Lion before the Exodus. Instead, since the journey to the south, there have been many chronicles and much documented evidence. Our ancestor truly did live a long life, and slowly grew old. He came out of the Forest, while the Vedichs and Taurus, as is known, live lives that are many times longer than those of other people. Therefore, the longevity of the Great Marawie's life is quite explainable. Moreover, there is evidence that over the years, he did grow old, slowly, dying at a fairly venerable age. The Emperor, on the contrary, grew old only up to a certain age, and after gaining immortality, retained his look for centuries. The same is true for his daughter, who is forever young and beautiful. I did not see her myself, as law prohibits it, but I saw her portrait. I would give about twenty years to this girl. From that, I can conclude that up to a certain age, the beautiful and unequivocally incredible Tsvetsho did grow, changing in appearance. So, as the north and south differ from each other, so do the people who inhabit them.*

### ***The Itoshinian Language***

*The language of the Itoshins is simple and understandable. It took after the Old Language of the Great Cities, which remotely resembles the language of the modern Chekatta. But the language of the empire has largely undergone phonetic changes. It has no cases and conjugations. Nouns, verbs, and adjectives are written and pronounced identically. The main words of the Itoshins contain short sounds. For example: In – the people, To – the father, Vet – mother, Ve – life, Do – sword, La – fog, Tsu – courage. Such brevity of language helps the Itoshins in battle. It's easier to give commands and explain the current situation. Rarely used words can consist of two syllables, quite rarely of three.*

### ***The Dotsu Code***

*Life in an eternal struggle dictates its own rules, which affect the whole culture and daily routine of the Itoshins. But it is not chaotic. All the inhabitants of the Ito Empire live by the code of Dotsu, written by Emperor Tosho himself. This is not just a tabula of laws or regulations. This is the philosophy of being. In the code, every Itoshin can find not only how he should live, but also what he must feel. Don't rush to wonder at the morals of the empire, nor judge them. As an outsider who understands the essence of Dotsu philosophy, I can say that this code is simply a necessity. After all, it gives the Itoshins not only a way of life mapped out as in a textbook, but also fearlessness and immortality. Immortality that is different from that of the Emperor – an immortality of the spirit! With their contempt for fear, the Itoshins reveal the true power and greatness of their people.*

### ***The Path of Horror***

*The most eerie place in all of Elinor!  
Jumanna quickly put down the book.  
The Path of Horror... of horror!*

The desire to read further had disappeared. Suddenly she was revisited by the very same prophetic fear! That familiar fear! The fear that had tormented her before receiving news from the Valley; the fear that had tortured her before the misadventures in the desert

It was as though this book now dragged her away from the present, from the southern deserts to the north, to the Path of Horror, as though something inevitable was going to happen there... something that would change the destiny of mankind forever. And somehow, she, Jumanna Amatt, was involved.

She remembered perfectly by heart what was described further in the book of Azir. The beauty of the Emperor's daughter Tsvetsho, the way Azir walked along the Path of Horror, how he found himself in the beautiful mountainous country of the Ulutau, how he followed the teachings of the mountain people. Azir described this nation in bright colors; he admired its way of living.

A voice, Jumanna's inner voice, woke up again and seemed to hint that her fate was closely intertwined with the fate of the representatives of the people of the north. But the main event would take place there, on the Path.

It was only a premonition. But how, after all that had passed, could she not trust it?

Jumanna raised her head, looking at the constellation of the Lion.

"I'll ask for your help again, great hero," she whispered.

## **12.**

The next day, Jumanna and her students entered the town of Muo.

## CHAPTER 2. The essence of the warrior

*Life is given to man for the sake of glory and fearlessness.  
From the Dotsu Code*

### 1

The dark contours of the fortress of Lauhan, the southernmost outpost of the Ito Empire, appeared out of the thick fog. With each step, everything grew lighter. Signal lights of fortress towers cut the dense white shroud with saving rays.

The group approached the defense ditch.

*Just in time!*

The bridge has not been raised yet. The Itoshins, unlike other people – Djunits or the traitor-Mechanicum – never used clocks, but the sharp eye of an experienced watchman could always identify the exact time according to the density of the fog. When the time of haze and darkness came, all the bridges rose, windows and shutters on the houses were tightly locked, and bonfires were built on the open areas of the roofs of houses. This was how the Ito Empire met the advent of the time of demons. The demons were scared of the fire, and the defenses of the Itoshins were becoming more effective every year.

*This war has lasted for many centuries, but sooner or later the Itoshins will win it!*

E'Do gestured Do' Ayve to come to the gate, while he himself turned to the illa.

“Thank you, our good guide! Once again, I propose you share dinner with us at Lauhan, and to go on the return journey in the morning.”

“Thank you, valiant udoğan E'Do,” the illa answered sedately, “but I already said that my duty is to return to Shohan as soon as possible. In seven days' time, I must conduct a new detachment. The night and demons do not frighten me, for the light that I carry in myself will be stronger than them.”

An illa was what the Itoshinian people called the guides in the fog. The illas were endowed with a special power. They did not become warriors, but at the same time, they possessed the great power of light. They could pass through the most impenetrable veil and not stumble once. Demons did not touch them, for they felt the light. Illas could not take up a sword – thus had their fate been determined!

When an illa was born in an Itoshinian family, there was a feast in the house. Yellow lanterns were hung out on the street, and happy parents gave out sweets to neighbors. The life of the Itoshins was severe, but sometimes there a place for joy to be found. And the birth of an illa was a great joy, for together with the illa, the light was born.

All the illas were white-haired, with thin light skin. All wore white clothes.

An illa named Kanu was one of the most skillful. The Emperor had personally instructed him to lead the detachments to the south, to Laukhan.

The weaker illas journeyed with caravans. But caravans moved along trade routes, where the fog was not as dense, and demons attacked much less often. The strongest illas went into the thickness of the fog under special orders of the glorious Tosho.

Now was just such a case.

The Valley had become deserted. Caravans had stopped coming to Shohan. The Emperor had commissioned the best udoğans to collect the troops and reach the Great Cities as soon as possible. Only the most skillful illas were to lead these detachments, those who found the most difficult and dangerous, but fastest routes.

Do' Ayve had already approached the gate of the fortress and knocked loudly.

“Who’s there?” came a hoarse voice.

“Let the immortal Emperor Toshō be glorious! My name is Do’Ayve. I am the assistant to the valiant udoğan E’Do. Our detachment heads off to the Valley and asks for permission to spend the night in the fortress.”

“May the Emperor be glorious!” the reply sounded from the gate. The heavy shutters creaked, the stretches shook.

“My name is Mitsu,” said a gray-haired guard as he emerged from the gateway toward Do’Ayve. He looked about fifty-five, but it was always considered a sign of cowardice to live until gray hairs. However, Do’Ayve paid attention to the fact that the duty man did not have a right hand. This immediately changed his opinion about the man. For a warrior, nothing was worse than losing the opportunity to fight! And a man who lost his right hand in battle was no longer a warrior. Therefore, only respect could be shown to the gray-haired Mitsu. He had not given up, he helped the soldiers’ cause as best he could, standing at the gate, to warn of danger, to let good people into the fortress and put up fortifications.

“Forgive me that it took so long,” Mitsu continued. “The demons are getting more cunning and sly. Now they sometimes come in the haze. You were lucky. It’s already time to lift the bridge!”

“There is nothing to ask forgiveness for, honored Mitsu. You are fulfilling your duty. We really were in a hurry! We left Shohan a week ago.”

“A week?” Mitsu was surprised. “You were led by a truly great illa!”

“It’s hard to argue with that!”

E’Do approached the gate, and the guard bowed low to him.

The detachment walked into the fortress. First the tall, experienced fighters entered, then the yauls, and, lastly, several young apprentices. Apprentices were forbidden from going into the mist before giving oath to the Dotsu Code and being initiated as soldiers of the Empire, but this was a special occasion. These young men and several girls were fluent in the Common Language, and the udoğan reasoned that in the Valley, such a weapon could sometimes be more useful than a loyal sword.

“Close the gate and lift the bridge!” E’Do ordered the guard. “No good guests will be coming today!” He then turned to his detachment, “Go straight to the keep of the udoğan Goro!”

The streets of Lauhan presented a gloomy scene. There weren’t many happy sights in the lives of the Itoshins. But still, nighttime Shohan was magnificent.

*The torches are reflected on the black surface of Moon Lake. Houses are flooded with a magical light. If you go out to the battlefield and draw your sword, the reflections of the moon and the stars will begin to walk along its sharpened edge. Could anything in the world be above this beauty?*

For a young and skillful warrior such as Do’Ayve, nothing could! Almost nothing.

Complete darkness fell over Lauhan. Only signaling fires burned on special sites of extension attachments to the roofs of houses. “If you didn’t light a fire, wait for the night guest” went the old Itoshinian wisdom.

The kindling was being lit in the houses. The windows glowed with faint radiances. It seemed the people of Lauhan had already gone to bed, but then awoke, disturbed by the roar of heavy steps and the clanking of metal. A few gawkers poked their heads out from behind the window shutters.

“May the Emperor Toshō be glorious!” one shouted out, apparently distinguishing in the fog the armor of udoğan E’Do.

“May the Emperor be glorious,” he replied calmly.

The houses in the city were simple: the foundations made of stone, the walls made of thick logs smeared with clay, the roofs covered with poisonous thorn. The roads were covered with polished stone – not for beauty, but for practicality. The fogs in Lauhan were particularly damp, and the roads quickly turned into mud. If the pavement was not laid with stones, soon a real mud marsh would start inside the fortress.

The keep of udoğan Goro towered among the low houses like a black cliff. The tower was built in the shape of a pyramid: a heavy monolith at the base, the next level a less massive block, the next even less, the uppermost a stone cone. Signal bonfires burned in every top corner of each tier, with the largest on the dais. The keep, like the whole city, was built of stones, wood, and clay.

The towers' wards called out to the detachment. Do'Ayve had already stepped forward to answer, but E'Do answered instead. Silence reigned on the tower for a while and then the answer followed, "The venerable udoğan Goro is expecting the valiant udoğan E'Do in his chambers!"

The inner gates swung open.

"Todo, you are in charge!" ordered E'Do. "Do'Ayve, you come with me!"

The detachment contained itself near the stone foundation of the keep. The yauls were driven into a group and guarded.

Do'Ayve followed the udoğan. The stairs leading up were incredibly uncomfortable, high, and slippery. Do'Ayve thought that an Itoshin should not complain about such inconvenience, but then he heard his commander swear about the layout of the tower.

"Mustn't a warrior get used to everything?" Do'Ayve asked with surprise.

"Yes," E'Do replied. "A warrior must know how to climb steep rocks, walk on mountain paths, move in a fog. But if we build a citadel, we must build it so that it helps the soldier and doesn't get in his way! These steps could have been made in a more convenient manner. Then a warrior would spend less effort on climbing them, investing more forces in his stroke in a fight with the demon instead!"

It was not for nothing that E'Do was the Emperor's favorite udoğan. Valor and strength were not his only distinctive features; so were wisdom and discretion. And, again, Do'Ayve couldn't disagree with his commander.

The reception hall of udoğan Goro was furnished in a simple and coarse manner, thus matching the whole fortress. The only decoration of the hall was the weapons hung on the walls, and stuffed demons – a personal collection of the defeated enemies of Goro. Each udoğan usually created a collection of the most terrible individuals. This tradition had started from the Emperor.

"May the omnipotent Emperor Tosho be glorious!" E'Do and Goro cried out at the same time, and afterwards enveloped each other into a strong, manly embrace.

Do'Ayve knelt down on one knee before the udoğan of Lauhan.

Goro was a man of mature age, in appearance about forty. He greeted his guests without armor, in a light canvas tunic laced with a rope belt. Apparently, he believed the regalia of an udoğan were unnecessary in this reception. The hands and face of Goro were entirely covered with scars. The demons had left many memorable marks with their claws. The udoğan stood straight and proud, his voice penetrated with steel.

E'Do and Do'Ayve were offered rough wooden chairs to sit on. Goro himself settled in a broader armchair, carved from stone and covered with yauls' skin. He looked inquiringly at Do'Ayve. The young warrior felt a little uneasy.

"This is my assistant!" E'Do explained. "I keep no secrets from him."

"He's too young!" Goro noted, but Do'Ayve was used to such remarks in his address by now.

"At eighteen, he has killed as many demons as the common Itoshin doesn't kill in his entire life!" E'Do answered in his assistant's defense. Do'Ayve was flattered by such an intercession.

"It's commendable," said Goro, and paused for a moment. "So, to the Valley?"

"To the Valley!" E'Do confirmed. "That's why I wanted to ask for a piece of advice from a worldly-wise udoğan."

"Advice on what?"

"Advice on what should I do. I know how to fight demons, and I'm good at it. My warriors do it just as well. But there are no demons in the Valley."

"Ye-e-ah," Goro drawled, "There's something worse than the demons in the Valley. You know, brave E'Do, I'm glad that I've returned to the lands of the Empire. I am glad the Emperor leaves me

to be the udoğan of Lauhan and does not send me to the south. I find it easier here. I'm just like you – I know how to fight demons and do it just as well. This is my occupation, my essence, the essence of the warrior – and I like it. Wars must be carried out by the sword, and in the Valley, that is not always so. But I'm glad that it is you who is heading there! You are young, brave, and devoted to the Emperor! And your fighters are devoted to you. What else is needed?"

"Tell me about the clans!"

"About the clans? Why such an interest?"

"The Emperor allowed me and my warriors to join clans," E'Do replied.

"Is that so?" Goro fell deep into thought.

For several centuries, the Itoshins had sent military detachments to the Valley to patrol the cities and retain order. The single duty of an Itoshin was always to serve the Emperor. And if the Emperor sent the Itoshins to the Valley, then the Itoshins had to obey the rulers of the Valley, as they did the Emperor. However, at first, the udoğans faced the fact that the burgomaster of one city could give an order that differed from the order of the burgomaster of another city. Therefore, Emperor Tosho sent a messenger to the Valley with a demand to work out a single law the Itoshins would obey. Since then, the burgomasters had become powerless over the warriors of the Empire. Only the Council of Four could give special orders. The Itoshins had also cut at the root all theft, robbery, smuggling, counterfeiting, fights with arms, vagrancy, and begging. For such violations, they denounced those guilty of the crime to a city prison, where it was the local court that passed decisions. Moreover, the Itoshins could sentence individuals with death for murder, necromania, and human trafficking on the spot, but such an order had to be given personally by the udoğan, and only in the case of an emergency.

The Itoshins never joined the clans. However, now the Emperor had lifted the ban due to special circumstances.

Udoğan E'Do led his troops not just to protect the order; he had received a personal task from the Emperor to find out what had happened in the Valley. Do'Ayve knew all this. E'Do had no secrets from his own warriors, and the command of the ruler was quoted word-for-word. E'Do's detachment continued to serve the Law of the Valley, but he had to act in his own interests as well. This is why the Emperor abolished the ban on joining the clans.

"The Emperor remembers your merit, faithful udoğan Goro," E'Do added. "That's why he advised me to ask you about the clans and life in the Valley, for you know more about it than anyone else!"

*More than the other udoğans still alive.*

It would perhaps have been more correct to speak so, but E'Do was choosing his words carefully. Indeed, Goro's age was already admired. But he commanded the fortress and obviously wasn't avoiding battles. The testimony of that was his scars, many of which were very fresh. At the same time, Goro had spent a long time in the Valley and knew a lot about it.

A modest smile spread over the stern face of the fortress owner. He obviously enjoyed the idea of gaining attention from the Emperor.

"Then I'll say this," Lauhanian udoğan began, "Of course you, valiant E'Do, have heard that it's all different in the Valley. I really love our people and culture for our simplicity. There is an Emperor, and no one above him. The will of the Emperor is the only truth. And it is the udoğans that carry out this will. If you are a warrior, listen to the udoğan, the detachment commander. If you are a city dweller, listen to the udoğan, the city administrator. If you are the udoğan, listen to the Emperor. That's it! The power lies in the simplicity.

"But that isn't how it is in the Great Cities. Each city has its own burgomaster, and there is no unitary power. Imagine, brave udoğan, that one burgomaster conceived one thing, for example, to put a trading post between the cities, and another one wants to create a stadium at the same place. And what's to be done? Whom to listen to? Yes, yes, to the Council of Four! There are still two burgomasters, and what if one supports a trading post and another the stadium? That's where the clans

play their part. The clans are a hidden power, and not the kind that *we* honor. It lies not in the speed of the stroke, but in the influence of the clan on other inhabitants of the Valley. Their beautiful words strike stronger than sharpened blades. Lies, cunningness, weaving intrigues, and endless machinations behind the back – these are the weapons of the clans! And as for the actual governance, the power of the burgomasters is emblematic. Any burgomaster in truth fulfills the will of the most influential clans.

“Even if it contradicts the Law,” E’Do offered not as a question, but rather an affirmation.

“That’s why the Emperor sends you,” Goro continued approvingly. “You are a man of insight, quick to grasp things. It took me years to realize that. At first, I believed the burgomasters were the noblest people who cared about the well-being of the inhabitants of their cities. But no, udoğan E’Do. Not all rulers are as honest and straightforward as our Emperor, let his name be praised for years and years!”

“Let it be so!” Do’Ayve replied at the same time as his commander.

“Even though you call me a man of insight, I still cannot understand how we can profit from the right to join the clans,” E’Do continued, looking into Goro’s face. “My detachment will still remain faithful to the Law, and the weaving of intrigues is alien and disgusting to me, even if it can serve a great goal. How should we act then?”

“You just answered this question yourself,” Goro chuckled.

“How?” the young udoğan frowned.

“Stay faithful to the Law!” The ruler of Lauhan got up from his chair and began to pace around the hall as his speech became more emotional. “You shouldn’t join the existing clans. Establish one of your own! Let it be ruled by someone you can fully trust. Oppose the dishonesty with your nobility, the lies – with the truth. Support the burgomasters, but rely only on the Law. The Valley is not yet populated. Even the old clans with their names and traditions will have to reinforce their positions anew. Don’t lose time – while others will be weak, strengthen your position with the power of the Law!”

E’Do became thoughtful, but in his eyes, a light flashed. He nodded slightly and thanked Goro for his kind advice. Do’Ayve had listened to him as if bewitched, thanking fate for allowing him to be present throughout the conversation of these remarkable people, the young and fair udoğan E’Do and the experienced, wise udoğan Goro.

“There is one more nuance that I want to inform you of, udoğan,” said E’Do after a short pause, “And I am sorry I did not tell you about it earlier. The emperor is in correspondence with the rulers of other nations: the Taurian konung, the Djunitian Head of The Academy’s Court, and the Governor of Bandabaze. The omnipotent Tosho insists the Great Cities unite under the rule of a single ruler until it becomes known why the Valley was emptied.”

Goro sat down in the armchair again, hands clasped at his face.

“May all of Elinor bless our Emperor for his wisdom. Living in the Valley is all I ever dreamed of. If only other people had enough sense to agree with this! You couldn’t imagine, oh fearless E’Do, how many problems could be solved at once, however,” he added intently, “if we entrust the Valley to the Taurs, they will establish the cult of their goddess in every corner. If to the Guawars, they will steamroll all the sea trade under the Bandabaze. Is it that?” Goro looked up at E’Do questioningly.

“I do not think so,” he retorted at once. “At least the divine Emperor did not say anything about that. But I’m sure he is more aware than any of us as to what’s happening and will be able to insist on the right choice of a worthy ruler.”

“Indeed,” agreed the ruler of Lauhan. “Goodness, we got carried away by this conversation, and your detachment needs some rest! You both can stay in my reception rooms.”

“We shall stay at the inn!” E’Do refused immediately. “I do not want to offend you, honored, mighty Goro, but I’m not used to having more than necessary.”

“I was informed there are children with you.”

“Apprentices!” Commander Do’Ayve corrected. “The youngest is already fourteen. Very soon they will become warriors of the Empire. There is no need to worry about them.”

“May I ask, why did you take them with you?”

“I took only those who speak the Common Language perfectly.”

“Once again, I admire your forethought! And stiffness and straightforwardness speak through you, but it is in them that the truth lies. You look very much like your father, valiant E’Do!” said Goro, concluding their conversation.

In response, E’Do bowed again and left silently, followed by Do’Ayve. He knew the difficult story of his commander and his family. Therefore, he admitted that, after such seemingly trivial words, even the unshakable E’Do’s heart would become restless.

## 2

The life of the Itoshins was a constant war against the demons. The Dotsu Code said that a person was born for fearlessness, for only fearlessness could help him in a severe war. The Code did not call to strive for death; humans must live. But they must live with dignity! Do’Ayve was trying to live with dignity, to live by the Code, and the example of the udoğan E’Do inspired him.

E’Do (Son of the Sword) was born in a small village north of the Empire, near the Path of Horror. His father Tsu’O-ne (Infinite Courage) went to the Valley, being the Law’s Detachment commander, when his wife was about to give birth to the firstborn. Tsu’O-ne left his wife his sword, Hanvet, and asked her to give it as a present from father to newborn child, for he did not know how long he would stay in the Valley.

And then one day, the village was attacked by demons. How many were there nobody knows, for there is no one left who could describe the heroic deeds of the local residents in the battle against the terrible creatures. No survivors remained after that attack, except one. When the soldiers of the Emperor entered the devastated village, a miracle appeared! Among the dead bodies of people and monsters lay a baby, tightly grasping the sword of Hanvet in his small hands. Next to him spread-eagled lay a dead demon, and there was no doubt that it was Hanvet which had made the deadly wound! The baby was so small the warriors realized he had been born during the battle. But was it possible that a child who had just come into the world could have picked up a sword and hit a demon? There was no answer! Two opinions existed: either the demon was killed by someone else, and the baby grabbed the sword that belonged to him by right afterwards, or the unexplored power condescended on the wonderful child and helped him perform an incredible feat!

The Emperor took the child to the court, gave him a nice name, and personally took up his education. There were even rumors he allowed his daughter, the beautiful Tsvetsho whom he was hiding from the eyes of other men, to spend time with the unusual boy.

E’Do grew up very quickly. He was singled out by reasonableness, strength, intelligence, and iron character. When he passed the initiation and began to fight with the demons, the inhabitants of the Ito Empire began to talk less and less about his miraculous appearance, discussing more often the feats of the young warrior. Broad in shoulders with long dark hair and a rough, manly face, he became a welcomed guest of any settlement of the foggy north. E’Do justified the Emperor’s trust by becoming a nightmare for demons and a role model for young soldiers of the Empire. By the age of nineteen, E’Do received the title of udoğan. Modern history knew no examples of someone getting such a responsible title at such a young age. Although the life of the Itoshins was short, the soldiers usually became commanders at around the age of thirty.

Unfortunately, E’Do never got to know the father who gave him that wondrous sword. In the Valley, the brave Tsu’O-ne and his detachment confronted the gang of a notorious pirate and bandit from the Guawarian people called Trouble. Whether this was a name or a nickname is still unknown. However, judging by the stories, his gang proved to be real *trouble* for the whole Valley. The pirates

plundered caravans and killed people while constantly escaping justice. Valiant Tsu'O-ne and his troop surrounded the lair of Trouble and destroyed the dangerous gang – but one Guawar managed to escape. A few days later, the corpse of Tsu'O-ne was found in the square of the city of Dalaal with a knife in its back.

This sad story was told many years later to the still young E'Do by the udoğan Goro, who once fought under the leadership of Tsu'O-ne. E'Do swore to take revenge on the murderer, sooner or later. He told Do'Ayve the story of his life one dark night by the fire when they were on a demon raid. A young Do'Ayve was so impressed by his commander that the next day he killed as many as a dozen creatures.

Do'Ayve also knew of E'Do's cherished dream: to find an ancient relic called the Demon's Flesh. It was with the help of this object, endowed with ancient magic, that the traveler from the south, Azir Amunjadee, once passed through the Path of Horror and got to the country of the Ulutau. E'Do, in turn, wished to cleanse the Path of Horror from terrible creatures forever, thereby ending the demons of the northwest and freeing the path to the allied nation.

In the life of Do'Ayve, it should be said, there was nothing that he himself considered truly heroic. He had been born into a simple family and he fought decently, like an ordinary warrior. But to fight with dignity is a duty, an obligation of any Itoshin, and it is improper to wait to be praised for a fulfilled debt.

Two years earlier, during the Battle of the Sharp-Toothed Gorge, Do'Ayve met E'Do, who appreciated his military skills and took him into his troop. Do'Ayve gladly accepted the offer. Besides, in that battle, his first udoğan had fallen, and the young man remained without a commander. Recently, E'Do made him his first assistant and began to prophesy Do'Ayve the title of udoğan. It began to embarrass the young warrior. He was only eighteen years old.

*Glorious E'Do became udoğan at nineteen! And to him, to Do'Ayve, there were still many more years of fighting until the title!*

But the young man tried to think less about the future. He did what he had to do – he served the Emperor, listened to his commander, and killed demons.

He had not expected to go to the Valley. But he was glad that it had all worked in this way.

He considered the Valley to be a place of merchants, not warriors, but everything had changed now. Uncertainty awaited them ahead. “To walk without fear and doubt into the unknown is the essence of the warrior,” said the Code.

Moreover, if Do'Ayve stayed to live in Shohan, he would have certainly been overwhelmed by his spiritual anguish.

It all started recently, when during one glorious evening he met the beautiful Reyve on the shore of Moon Lake. Do'Ayve was practicing with his sword. Do'Ayve could tell that she momentarily evaluated his swordplay as she walked by.

Not only the men of the Itoshins are able to handle weapons – both boys and girls take up steel at the age of six. And though there are fewer female warriors than male, it is believed that a woman should also be able to protect her home during a sudden attack of demons.

But that evening, Reyve was just strolling. She walked along the shore, a light wind ruffling her hair. Do'Ayve asked her name, she answered. He gave his, and she smiled and left. Do'Ayve tried to continue practicing, but realized his hands could no longer hold the sword. It embarrassed him. He returned to his house upset and couldn't fall asleep for a long time.

Since then, he saw Reyve several times on the streets of Shohan, and she would sweetly smile at him. He didn't know what to do with himself! Although his favorite spot to practice was on the lake shore, he knew he could no longer work there because if he saw her, he would clumsily drop the sword.

But he soon realized he it wasn't about Moon Lake! When he was thinking of her, he wasn't thinking about the battles and the Dotsu Code. His hands could not hold the sword even when training

in other places. Yes, the Itoshins are just people. They build their families, give birth to children... but these feelings prevented him from being a warrior! The body didn't obey, the head didn't work! Even E'Do noticed him changing. But Do'Ayve said nothing to the commander.

When E'Do announced that in a few days their detachment was heading south, Do'Ayve sighed with relief. At last he would get rid of the torments and temptations!

He also decided to tell E'Do about his experiences in the hope of receiving some sensible advice from the elder comrade.

### 3

They had breakfast in a large circle; the udoğan, soldiers, and apprentices – all together. E'Do appreciated the unity.

They ate vegetable stew, wheat scones, and boiled eggs. E'Do did not refuse the plentiful breakfast offered by the udoğan Goro. The awaiting path wasn't as difficult, but it was still a tiring pass through the foggy hills. And from now until the Valley, the main food of the Itoshins would be the yauls' jerky. Not the most pleasant prospect. You can endure anything, but a hearty meal both strengthens the spirit and gives new strength in battle.

The attendant of the inn was taking the yauls out from the stock stand as E'Do gave the command to load them with baggage.

When they were walking out of the gate, Do'Ayve cordially bid farewell to Mitsu and wished his fortress a long peace.

From Lauhan to the south lay a straight path, passing between the gray rocks. The danger of falling into the abyss was no longer there. The mighty mountains of the north gradually grew lower and lower until they turned into gently sloping stone elevations. On such roads, it was possible to walk unaccompanied by an illa. Of course, demons could attack. More precisely, within a couple of weeks they would attack at least once. But each Itoshin had to always be ready to repel a sudden attack.

They walked in silence.

According to the Code, any soldier on the crossing was obliged to remain silent, and speak only when the situation required it. If the enemy was near, if it was an unknown creature, a beast or a man, or maybe you hurt your foot on a sharp stone – speak then. And if you don't like that the fog is damp, that it's cool around, that you want to eat – keep quiet!

Do'Ayve would prefer to wade through dangerous mountain trails, as they had done over the previous seven days. As throughout all those days, he had been thinking about how to make the right step, how not to fall into the abyss, and how to catch up with the illa.

On an even path, the only thing left was to remember Shohan. Remember Moon Lake... remember Reyve!

Do'Ayve thought about her, and it frightened him. And what if the demons? And he suddenly wavered!

At last, the young man decided to discuss it with E'Do at the next night's stop, to not postpone such an essential conversation for a long time.

*I wonder what's going on in the heads of my comrades-in-arms now? We move forward, measuring steps through this dense fog. There is nothing to think about, therefore I remember the past, so I'm floundering between my temptations. What's E'Do thinking about, I wonder? What do the focused Todo and Ğan-Iolai think about? The hot-tempered Joe and Lado? Could it be that I'm the first warrior who was subjected to such tests? Most likely not! There were others. But they had overcome their passions! For the Code still exists, and we live by the Code!*

## 4

They sat by the fire. The image of Reyve did not leave Do'Ayve's head.

*Why did she attract me so much? What is so special about her?*

Do'Ayve looked closely at the faces of the twin sisters Leerie and Nainuk; both apprentices were still very young. He decided they were beautiful. Both were pretty, with light-golden hair. It was only possible to distinguish them by the hair: Leerie had short hair, and Nainuk had hair below the shoulders. But the sisters didn't awaken such emotions in Do'Ayve. He simply treated them as his sisters-in-arms, his comrades-in-arms.

*Why Reyve?*

Now Do'Ayve had a look at Biu, a field chronicler. She sat and wrote something down on a sheet of parchment. She noticed Do'Ayve was watching her and looked up.

"Did something happen? Is everything fine?"

"Yes!" Do'Ayve came to his senses. "What are you writing about?"

"About today's pass." Biu was a little surprised at the question.

"But nothing happened today, did it?"

"We left Lauhan, walked along the path for a long time, fixed a camp... all these are also events. They are important. The history of the people is written just like that."

Do'Ayve realized that now he might look stupid and decided to walk around the camping area for a bit.

Joe whacked his blunt sword across the huge stone. He chopped zealously and frantically.

*Those like Joe cannot live without battles.*

The a'jo'ğan are distinct Itoshinian warriors. The most violent are brought to the battles with demons on chains or in steel cages, and then released. Then a'jo'ğans take out all their wrath, their fury, their anger.

In Joe, a violent disposition had been noticed since birth. That's why they had given him such a name. He was destined to be an a'jo'ğan. He could often control himself, but not always. Should one make him angry – he became demonic. Who knew what would happen in six years? Perhaps Joe would also need a cage.

*Well, Lado, too, had a complicated temper, but he was unlikely to become an a'jo'ğan. Lado knew how to restrain himself. Joe did not.*

On the other side, sparks flew from the fire. Todo, appointed to be duty officer, was sharpening swords for himself and the novices.

All the soldiers sharpened their own swords. Those who didn't undergo initiation were not allowed to do so on the way. The Code said that competent sharpening was just as important as the strength and speed of a stroke. Those who didn't know how to sharpen the sword weren't taken to be soldiers. And if one received the title of a warrior, he was required to take care of his own sword!

E'Do, for example, never did it in public: either he walked away from the camping place, or waited for everyone to fall asleep, and then would take up the duty. And, it seems, that the time of this covenant rite was now approaching.

"Curfew!" E'Do commanded. "I'll go on watch first; once the brume ends, Lado; at dawn, Todo!"

The camp came to life. If E'Do gave an order, it had to be carried out. Five minutes later, everyone was lying on the ground, covered with yauls' skins.

E'Do tossed the thorns into the fire and only then noticed Do'Ayve nearby.

"What about you?" The udoğan was surprised. "I gave the order!"

"I do not want to," Do'Ayve replied, crouched by the fire.

"What do you mean 'I do not want to'? Today you must sleep! You'll be on duty tomorrow!"

“I won’t fall asleep,” Do’Ayve insisted, choosing his words carefully, “I wanted to ask you... to ask for help... advice. I’m distraught in my soul, and I cannot overcome it.”

“Well, well, well,” E’Do changed his tone. “Distraught is no good! Distraught is death for a warrior, for the warrior who is distraught ceases being a warrior. This feeling overrides the essence of the warrior!” The udoğan quoted lines from the Code, but then turned to his assistant. “Tell me!”

“I do not know... how should I start? Tell me, what is the most beautiful thing you’ve seen in your life?”

“Battle, Do’Ayve, battle – this is the most beautiful thing for a warrior!” The answer was rather careless, but seemed sincere.

“That’s true... but I mean something other than battles. The Imperial Palace? Is it beautiful?”

Only udoğan were allowed to visit the palace of the ruler of the Empire. Yes, all the guards and caretakers also held a title. Women were treated in the same way, except for the venerable widows who had lost their husbands in battles. They were disposed to cook, clean, and carry out other household chores in the Imperial Palace.

“It is majestic,” said E’Do, giving his assessment.

“And the Emperor’s famous gardens? The hall of valor? And... the daughter of the Emperor? Tsvetsho? You are the only man who has seen her, aren’t you?”

E’Do was silent. Do’Ayve even assumed that he wasn’t listening. *Or maybe he is thinking? Remembering?* But then he saw E’Do’s face turn pale, and a vein twitched in his cheekbone. Suddenly, the udoğan unfastened Hanvet from the belt, removed it from its sheath, picked up a flat stone from the ground and began to sharpen his sword.

For the first time, E’Do was sharpening his sword in front of him, in front of Do’Ayve!

The grinding stone slid gently along the sparkling blade, striking golden sparks. It looked fascinating.

“*This* is wonderful!” the udoğan finally uttered, nodding at the sword.

Do’Ayve thought that the commander had not understood him.

“I’m talking about a different thing. You see, in Shohan, shortly before we set off on our trip, I met the young and beautiful Reyve... and since then only she is in my heart,” explained Do’Ayve, who got carried away spilling out everything that was boiling up inside him.

“I can’t think about battles! I can’t hold a sword in my hands! I want to be with her, and not to go to war, yet I’m a warrior and I want to be one! But somehow, I’m drawn away. Why? This is *feeling*, right?” he looked at E’Do.

“Yes,” E’Do replied.

“And you... was it ever like this for you?”

“Like that, never!” E’Do’s responses became exceptionally dry.

“Is the *feeling* a bad thing?” the young man continued. “For if it’s interfering with battle, then, I’d think, yes. Am I right?”

“Right.”

“You know, it seems to me I was incredibly excited about our journey when I realized that I could escape from my feelings! But it turns out that that is not how it is! I’m running from Reyve, but not from my feelings for her. The feelings take over again and again! Perhaps you don’t understand me. You said it yourself that you have never felt anything like that.”

“Go to sleep!” E’Do suddenly grabbed his sword and plunged it into the ground to the very hilt. “You’re on duty tomorrow! Therefore, you have to sleep! That’s an order!”

All thoughts left Do’Ayve’s head at once. That’s what was good about the Itoshin philosophy. At the exact moment that you are unable to act by the Code, you will be put in place by an order!

Do’Ayve received this order from E’Do, and then gave himself the order to fall asleep. This time, the power of the udoğan’s word overcame his own emotional sufferings. He had to obey.

## 5

The next morning Do'Ayve woke up in a disgusting mood. He felt that black circles had crept out under his eyes. His temples felt as though someone was squeezing them. But even more, so the young warrior was amazed at E'Do's face. Not only could the traces of obvious insomnia be read on it, it seemed the udoğan had aged in one night, as though throughout the entire night there was some sort of inner struggle, much more powerful than fighting against demons.

There was also a struggle going on in Do'Ayve, but he understood that the scale of his struggle was much smaller.

*What was the reason for the udoğan's struggle? What is his secret? What lies in his heart? What did he hide from his loyal warriors?*

For several days, Do'Ayve did not talk to his commander. And every day, he saw E'Do grow more and more grim, and in turn became gloomier himself.

*My question awoke some of his inner turmoil... that which had almost been won over by the udoğan. But what had I said?*

The Itoshins made five similar crossings with five stops.

They walked as a black column along the long path, enveloped in white fog. Their swords clanked against the steel protection on their hips. Shoulder and breast shells seemed to absorb all the cold of the stale mist and transmit it to the body. But a true warrior couldn't be scared of the cold!

On the sixth day, there was an event that became a landmark for Do'Ayve.

About a dozen demons rushed at them from nowhere. It was as though they had long taken them into a ring, slowly crept up and suddenly decided to attack.

Lado struck the first one, thanks to his lightning-fast reaction. With an easy movement, Ğan-Iolai took off the clawed nipper of another one. Todo ran up and finished the third demon with a stabbing blow. Joe screamed wildly and rushed towards two at once. He waved his sword in all directions and soon turned the monsters into a bloody mash.

Do'Ayve rushed forward, exposing the blade in front of him without shouting a war cry or making any drastic, unnecessary movements. While he was emitting as much fury as Joe in that moment, the fury was directed more towards himself and the inability to overcome his passions. Do'Ayve simply cut the first demon in half, evaded the attack of the second, and quickly slashed the third, which let out an ominous screech. He then returned to the second, pushing the blade into its mouth to the very hilt. But he miscalculated the demon's strength.

While pulling out the strip of steel from the flesh of the monster, Do'Ayve felt his legs tied by an unknown force. He lowered his eyes and saw a disgusting tentacle curl around his limbs. He wanted to slash it with a sword, but it was tightly stuck between the teeth of the previously murdered creature. And the tentacle had already started to drag the warrior. As Do'Ayves let go of his sword and fell, he got a glimpse of the huge jaw, ready to swallow him.

At that moment, the mighty figure of E'Do jumped out of the fog. Hanvet danced a semicircle from shoulder to earth and the tentacle tying the legs of Do'Ayve was cut off. However, another dozen tentacles on the huge monster immediately rushed towards the udoğan. The speed of E'Do's movement was incomparable. Simultaneously, the commander did not lose composure, doing his job clearly and confidently. Soon the ominous jaw no longer made any sonorous squelching noises; instead it roared with extreme pain. Its two huge eyes filled with red and quickly died out as Hanvet crashed down between them.

Do'Ayve was on his knees breathing heavily.

"Any demons left?" E'Do screamed into the fog.

"No," answered Lado.

"No!" confirmed Todo.

“This is my first one! This is my first one!” a sonorous girl’s voice babbled joyfully, which Do’Ayve recognized as Leerie.

“Well done, apprentice!” E’Do approved. “Today you took a great step towards becoming a warrior!” After that the udoğan came up to Do’Ayve, who was burning with shame. “Bad, warrior! Very bad!” he began, quickly jumping to quotes from the Code. “The essence of the warrior is not in a rage, but in fearlessness! Fearlessness is not the absence of reason, for mind is necessary to the warrior in battle. And the mind of a warrior must be cold. The essence of the warrior is not in anger, for anger obscures the mind. The essence of the warrior is in the veridical power that is hidden in him!”

Do’Ayve knew the Code by heart. But these words would forever be stuck in his head. Throughout the following days on the way to the Valley, he repeated them over and over again, whenever he began to experience emotional turmoil again.

## 6

They met no more demons on the way.

On the twentieth day of the journey, the fog suddenly dissipated and an amazing landscape opened to their view.

Do’Ayve stopped dead, his mouth wide open. The other Itoshins stopped as well, apparently experiencing similar feelings. Everyone was stunned. Nobody thought the world could be like *that!*

The contemplation of the surface of Moon Lake on a cloudless night was beauty’s top for any Itoshin. But here, the Valley was full of various colors. The green color of grass and trees prevailed, as well as the azure color of the sky with occasional white clouds. On the glades, there were flowers of red, yellow, and blue hues and a few more, whose colors Do’Ayve didn’t even know.

He looked back and saw a dense white veil.

*Can this be? Is it really the Valley, which is despised by all who have returned to the Empire of the Itoshins? How different it is from our world... how scant and poor it turns out to be. And I lived without even knowing that. I’m a warrior! A warrior! And I will follow my spirit further, but can’t a warrior rejoice? Now everyone is happy. Even E’Do has changed in the face, and I want to smile! Oh yes! That’s what struck me in Reyve! She smiled at me, though we almost never smile! I look around at my comrades, and they also have smiles on their faces!*

If the soldiers could still somehow contain their emotions, the yauls have given themselves over completely. They began to moo and mumble wildly through the green glades.

Leerie and Nainuk ran to a tree with bright yellow fruits with reddish sides and began to pick them.

“Wait!” E’Do commanded. They obeyed.

The udoğan approached the tree and tore a fruit himself. He brought it to his nose, sniffed. Bit it slightly.

“Edible” he announced, smiling for the first time (*what an unusual sight indeed!*), and plunged his teeth into the juicy fruit.

The whole group rushed to the tree and subjected it to intense shaking. Do’Ayve was eating sweet juicy fruit until he realized that he simply couldn’t take in any more. And after a while, his stomach contracted with a sharp pain. Almost everybody’s did at the same time except for E’Do, who announced that henceforth everyone would know their limits and not overeat wild fruit.

With each passing day, the Itoshins observed more and more landscapes. The scenery changed, the colors changed. Each day was interesting in its own way – you could see something new and unusual. Simple, genuine joy came into the troop. Do’Ayve hadn’t felt it in the north, and he couldn’t understand the meaning of the words said by Goro, who preferred life in the north to the life in the Valley.

At the same time, Do'Ayve's people remained in the cold, raw north and incomprehensible feelings of shame washed over him as he walked through flowering plains, eating juicy fruit, basking in the warm sun. The eternal struggle with the demons remained.

Suddenly quite rebellious thoughts began to visit his head, which the young man himself was frightened of.

*What prevents all the Itoshins from moving here? Why does the Emperor prefer to stay in that harsh and unfriendly land? After all, we can build our fortresses here, on the borders, to keep the defenses from the demons in them! Here it is a free, uninhabited land!*

But Do'Ayve quickly dismissed these thoughts. Who was he to doubt the wisdom of the Emperor? If a great ruler founded an Empire in the north, then it was necessary!

E'Do was happy, too. He tried not to show this, but his hidden joy could be read in small things: gestures, words, deeds. At the same time, the udoğan continued to warn about possible danger. After all, the Itoshins still hadn't met any people. And at present, the detachment still didn't know what exactly had come to pass in the Valley.

## 7

The Itoshins came to a huge river that E'Do called Kawa. Now the path was straightforward – go along the shore. Todo suggested building rafts and going downstream, but the udoğan refused this idea.

“We can fight on land. We were taught that from early childhood,” he said. “But to learn how to run the ships as well, even if just a raft, on the river, requires skills. We can learn this, but later. Now we need to get to the Valley of the Ancestors. This is most important!”

In the evening, a beautiful falcon started dancing in the wind above the camp. Dissecting the air with his wings, he sank lower and lower until he came up to E'Do's head. The udoğan recognized Hash, the Emperor's favorite bird! A parchment with a message was attached to the foot of the falcon.

Do'Ayve knew about the Emperor's falcons, which could overcome the veil of fog and maintain a connection between the ruler and other people, but now he saw the postal bird of the ruler with his own eyes for the first time.

E'Do carefully read the message, and then announced:

“The Emperor welcomes his valiant warriors and blesses the detachment to continue the journey!”

“Hail the Emperor!” the detachment shouted as a chorus.

“The Emperor commands us to pass the city of Kawa, which stands on this river, and go straight to Eavette, one of the four Great Cities of the Valley. For those who don't know, Eavette is the homeland of our Emperor! The city from where he came to the north! The city from which the Ito Empire originated! The Emperor hopes that we will enter the city earlier than other nations whose caravans are already certain to be heading to the Valley!”

The Itoshins were inspired by the Emperor's message and promised E'Do that at the next crossing they would go faster than they could.

“And what about the ruler?” Do'Ayve asked, only then realizing that perhaps this question shouldn't be asked at all, but it was too late. “Was the Emperor able to convince the other nations? Will the Valley have a single ruler?”

“It will,” E'Do nodded dryly.

## 8

Do'Ayve was the third one on watch. He slept until early dawn, and then took the post from Leerie, who was initiated last night and became a full-fledged warrior. The young girl-warrior was

still over the moon with happiness and seemed ready to remain on duty for the whole night, and even the next.

But emotions are emotions, and a rest was a necessity. This lifestyle hardened the Itoshins, as it was quite common to rush into battle half-asleep, which is why E'Do adhered to a strict schedule of shifts.

Do'Ayve began his watch by throwing firewood into the fire, and bathing in the invigorating water of Kawa. He put a pot of water with some herbs on the fire, then went to the trees to pick fruit for himself and his comrades. He stood in wide black robes, without armor. Only his sword hung from his waist.

As Do'Ayve used the tail of his shirt to collect and carry more fresh fruit, a shadow suddenly darted toward him from the bush. The fruits scattered as the warrior jumped back to defend. The predawn twilight helped outline a human silhouette.

"Who are you?" Do'Ayve asked in a menacing voice. In response, there was an inarticulate sound, more like a roar.

*Daemon! A demon who took on a human form!*

"Stand by for action!" he yelled at the top of his lungs as he simultaneously drew his sword and knocked off the strange creature's head. The body fell back into the bushes as more figures began to appear from the predawn gloom, and Do'Ayve continued his attack. By this time E'Do ran in to help, followed by Todo and Ćan-Iolai, and then the rest.

A frenzied cry was heard: it became clear that an a'jo'ĝan was running into the battle. Warriors parted in different directions, and Joe crashed into the dark silhouettes, sweeping bodies in different directions.

There were a lot of demons, but they were all so slow and sluggish that the Itoshins quickly finished them off. And as the first rays of sun sprang from behind the hill, illuminating the recent battlefield, surprise engulfed the soldiers when they saw who they had been fighting.

"These are people!" exclaimed Biu.

E'Do bent over one of the corpses and examined it carefully.

"The dead!" said the detachment commander.

"Dead, obviously. After all, we've just killed them!" Do'Ayve didn't understand at first what E'Do was trying to tell them.

"No!" the udoĝan turned to his soldiers. His severe, pale face expressed anxiety. "Come here!" He waved Do'Ayve over.

The young man also bent over the corpse. Once, what had probably been a middle-aged man was now a swollen body with pale skin of a greenish hue, a battered face, and whitish eye sockets without pupils. An Itoshinian sword cut the defeated in half almost around the belt. And seeping from the huge wound was not blood, but a viscous black slime flowed out into puddles.

"They all died long ago!" E'Do stated.

"The dead came alive?" someone whispered uncertainly.

Everyone could see everything perfectly. It was simply that no one understood how this could be possible.

*Here's your carefree life in the Valley!*

A chill ran across the skin of the fearless Do'Ayve.

## CHAPTER 3. FROM THE WILDERNESS TO THE LIGHT

*A moose moves in a straight line, stepping from cell to cell,  
In any direction for any number of steps.  
He stops in the cell where he ate the figurine.  
The moose is the only one who can't eat a pike.  
From the rules of the popular Vedich game "Hurra"*

### 1

A bright red semicircle of the morning sun appeared above the impenetrable wall of trees. Its rays instantly painted the dark green tops of sharp centuries' old fir trees a fiery color. The fire also ran along the small forest streams and the blooming meadows. It became lighter even in the darkest thickets where the mighty coniferous crowns formed a heavy dome under the sky, covering their secret dark kingdom. But the bright rays of dawn now penetrated these too! They found small squirrels among dense foliage and needles, and flew inward, making life in the gloomy wilderness a little cheerier.

The time of haze and darkness was receding, a dark terrible time, a time of terrible six-fingered monsters. Every Vedich knew to firmly lock one's house with shutters, or the six-fingered would come at night and drag you off; first into the dark thicket, and then into the underground hole. He knew if that happened, that would be the end and one was lost. Neither the sabers nor the bears would be able to help because the six-fingered were not afraid of them. But when one woke up, he was to open all the shutters, put on the light in his house, and go out to thank Mother Nature for saving him that night and scaring the monsters off!

A new morning fell upon Swa-Ioledea, also known as the Vedich city of the Sacred Dawn or for some strangers, simply Sacredawn. There were legends that told of the ancestors of the Vedichs, who had travelled for a long time from the Valley of the Ancestors to this place. After setting out on their journey, they exited the city into a huge forest glade. And from the thicket across the glade came another unknown tribe, calling itself the people of the Vedas. As the elders of the tribe approached each other, a red dawn rose above the forest. Such a bright one, such a beautiful one.

"This is a sign from above," agreed the elders, believing that Mother Nature herself had given instructions to her children. Since then, these two tribes united as a single nation, whose name became the Vedichs. And near the glade grew the City of the Sacred Dawn, built on trees with thick branches that served as family houses as the trees themselves were connected by pendant footbridges.

Because the Vedichs worshipped Mother Nature, they didn't cut the woods, burn grass, or break branches off bushes. There was no need, as the mature fruit fell into one's hands all by itself! If the forest wanted to get rid of unnecessary branches or extra trunks, a strong wind would come and do its thing. Then one could go and pick up whatever was needed, such as firewood for fire, berries with fruits, branches and logs to strengthen dwellings or crafts, dishes, amulets, plaques for writing. The herbs also were handled carefully. If one raised the bush up to one's waist, the twigs were cut gently so that it could grow further. And the ones that were cut off were used either in pottage or used to make threads and fabrics.

The Vedichs were also skilled craftsmen who loved beauty. Their clothes were embroidered with various colors and patterns. It was a shame for a Vedich to walk around in dirty clothes! Nature had given the forest rivers and lakes for drinking and ablution, so one should always be clean. All of their wisdom, stories, and poems about the beauty of their forests was recorded on wooden plaques, but the Vedichs didn't keep track of time.



## 2

Faolabre, or simply Fao, always thanked Mother Nature for being born in such a beautiful and amazing forest. Yet she could do nothing with her restless character, which resulted in her occasionally quarrels with the elders. For example, when she asked about other lands, they directly caulked her mouth. They said one mustn't even talk about them!

*But why?*

It annoyed Fao that there was never answer to that – and so many other questions – and sometimes she didn't hold back her emotions when they chose not to answer. But being rude to an elder is as unacceptable as doing harm to Nature, so Fao was often punished for her curiosity. While she was happy to live among her people, who were wise, kind, and hardworking, it became necessary to put up with the local way of life and customs.

The elders of the Vedichs have always lived in the roots of the tree. For old people, it is difficult to move from branch to branch, even if they have retained the ability to turn into a lynx or squirrel. Those who are stronger and younger, who have not yet turned six times the six times of six years, live on thick branches at the base of the tree. Living overhead are those who just passed the initiation ceremony and at the highest branches – very young and light, those whose first life cycle has not yet been passed.

Fao's house was woven on the branches of a huge spruce and belonged to her family of Gray Martens. On this morning, she awakened to tiny rays of dawn, which struck a small carved window covered with a flat, transparent mica stone. When a red ray falls on such a stone, it becomes a small luminary itself and multiplies the sunlight, which covered the entire length of the opposite riverbank.

Fao had turned two times six years, and two more years. There was a third small circle of initiation. Fao already knew how to address small animals, but she hadn't yet decided who she will become when the first round is completed. Among the wild forest inhabitants, she had many friends, but she did not want to become like them.

With light movements, clinging to the branches, slightly swaying, she jumped lower and lower. Already on the thickest branch she could not resist – her leg slid and Fao went down. The morning coolness deprived the resin of viscosity, making it hard and slippery. She dived downward, falling on the roof of the lower house that was covered with a dense layer of moss.

A squeal came from inside, then an angry grunt, after a few swear words in old Vedichian, and at the end came the moaning and groaning.

“Forgive me, great-great-grandfather!” Fao immediately apologized. Apparently, the great-great-grandfather, forgetting himself, again fell asleep like a wild boar, but when he woke up, immediately turned into a man and felt the pain straightaway.

*But great-great-grandfather is tough. And kind. He won't hold a grudge against me!*

The Vedich families retained their names only for the pedigree. For example, in the family of Fao, for a long time no one had turned into martens. However, the name remained. It was the same with others: Coniferous Black Grouse, White Wolves, Red Sabers, Swamp Raccoons, and others.

Fao went to the Pure Grove, and there praised Mother Nature for a quiet night and a beautiful morning. Afterwards, she took the bowler and tugged the water from the lake into the trough while collecting firewood in the forest. Today she happened to be the first in the Pure Grove, so she got the longest and thickest branches.

*My parents will be so glad! Maybe they will stop being angry with me for quarrelling with Elder Anolim three days ago.*

Then she took the basket again, and headed to Berry Grove.

*And again, I am the first!*

The blueberries were not yet filled with a dense color, but the wild strawberries had ripened just right! Fao shook the bushes, and pinkish specks began to pour into her bag. Very soon it was filled with fragrant berries. Their smell beat in her nostrils. Fao ate a handful herself – that's a breakfast! She didn't shake more. One needed to leave some berries for other families!

*No matter how lazy they are, they are still fellow tribesmen.*

Fao carried the berries to the foot of her spruce. From the roots, again came the boar's snoring.

*Oh, that great-great -grandfather! He's become completely scatter-brained!*

Now the rest of the morning was free, and Fao could dedicate it to communicating with her friend. She quickly ran past Pure Grove, jumped Ice Creek, galloped through the Ravine Expanse and found herself in the Bear Woodlot. She went to a big snag and began to call:

“Nucko! Nucko, I’ve come! Nucko! Well, where are you?”

Finally, sniffing was heard from under the driftwood, and the fluffy muzzle of a large bear emerged into the light. Nucko drew his morning air with his nostrils, snorted, and after that all of his body emerged. The bear cub was larger than Fao.

“You grow by leaps and bounds!” the girl was surprised, “And it turns out that you are also a sluggard! I’ve been awake for a long time now! I missed you, Nucko.” Then Fao embraced Nucko’s fluffy neck and began to gently tousle the scruff of his neck. Pleased, the bear cub growled happily.

Fao loved bears. Especially while they remained small. “They are so cute and funny!” she thought. The mature bear had no time for games, but almost half of the adults of the Bear Woodlot recognized Fao and paid her attention by licking her hands or carrying her on their backs.

Despite her love for all the bears, Fao did not want to become one after the initiation, when the features of the beast transfer to the person. Fao wanted to remain slender and mobile, not big and fat like the bears. She might be a deer... *but deer are very shy. A squirrel? Squirrels are terrible! Quick, but stupid. What if I become stupid too? Sabers are fast, graceful, beautiful, and smart. But they smell disgusting, and a girl must smell good!* Already on the third circle, Fao sighed at the uncertainty of who she will become. But she was certain of one thing – no matter which bestial appearance she took on, she will still be friends with the bears!

“This is for you! I deliberately put some aside, and ate less myself,” Fao said, holding out a palm with a handful of strawberries to Nucko. The joyful bear cub swallowed all the berries at once, and then licked Fao’s hand for a long time, which still exuded the sweet smell of berries.

After this, it was time for the game. Fao tried to saddle Nucko but he wasn’t having it, and constantly dropped her away. Once, he even pawed so that Fao fell and saw red circles before her eyes. When the bear cub realized that he miscalculated his own strength, he ran up and repeatedly licked her cheeks as an apology. Fao was very ticklish, and she laughed.

Suddenly the bushes moved, and Fao jumped to her feet.

*Who is there? Clearly a human!*

But then Fao saw her friend, Inaonomose (Ina), before her.

“I knew I’d find you here,” she said.

Ina simply shone with happiness, her eyes burning with sparkling lights. It immediately became clear that something important had happened.

“What? What’s happened?” Fao wanted to get in on this secret as soon as possible.

“You will never believe it! The Taurs! The Taurs are back!”

This was the news of all news! The Taurs had not come to Swa-Ioledea for more than three years! Neighbors to the Vedichs, the Taurs conquered the will of the animal and forced them to transport themselves, their cargoes, and cut down the forest. The Vedichs considered the Taurs to be savages who didn’t respect Nature and animals. The Vedichs rarely visit the Taurs, and vice-versa, but when caravans of embassies come to visit each other, both people obeyed local laws.

When I asked the elders why the Taurs had not come for so long, I received silence at best; at worst – a box on the ear. But there was really nothing to guess. It is as clear as a bright day, that the konung of the Taurs had another conflict with the elders of the Vedichs.

*But what made the Taurs come back?*

“Where are they?” asked Fao.

“Their chief went with the elders to the Quiet Creek.”

“How do you know?”

“I’ve peeked in,” Ina replied, embarrassed.

“So, you are suggesting...” Fao did not finish the question and smiled.

Ina winked, and the girls completely understood each other.

They looked somewhat similar: both had sharp noses, running black eyes, and bulging cheeks. Only Fao's hair was lighter and she had a constant blush on her face. But the most important thing that united the friends was curiosity. A craving for the new, a craving for discoveries.

Eavesdropping on other people's conversations was bad! The girls knew that! However, how could they miss the return of the Taur? How could they not discover the secret of this return?

"I'm sorry, Nucko!" Fao patted the bear cub by the ear. "This is very important!" He hung his head, clearly offended. They had not had time to play enough.

"Squirrels?" Ina asked continuing to smile.

"Squirrels!" Fao gave up.

Oh, how she hated those nasty little animals! For their harmfulness and stupidity. But squirrels were quick and fast and when needed, they were also noiseless.

Within moments two small forest rodents were already galloping at full speed on the ground and over the branches of trees to the Quiet Creek.

### 3

Fao and Ina stuck out squirrel muzzles from the leaves of the huge ash tree and turned their gaze to the clearing, where the three elders of the Vedichs – Anolim, Swarod and Liol-Nomo —were talking to a huge blonde-haired Taur.

The chief elder of Swa-Ioledea and all the lands of the Vedichs was the Liswa-Fa. He had already lived a full life cycle six times six years times six. The second full circle has already started, where the elder lived four circles six times for six years and began the second year of the fifth circle.

Liswa-Fa was a fox. From a side view, the beast form looked feeble with gray fur instead of red – but the Liswa-Fa was wise. Though it was hard for him, common sense and good memory never left the old man. At least, so the elders told Fao. The three elders who were in the clearing helped Liswa-Fa, listening to his instructions, and then expounding them to the other Vedichs. Now they had to talk with a stranger.

Fao had already recognized the massive Taur as Dockolmo-Leyam (Docko), the former ambassador of the konung of the Taur in Swa-Ioledea. By forest standards, he was still quite young, having passed only three full small circles for six years when he first appeared in Swa-Ioledea. But his appearance struck many locals, as Docko was broad in chest and shoulders and by far the tallest Vedich. When Docko first arrived, his chin was still bare, but he now wore his yellow hair in small braided pigtailed that fell alongside his thick, light beard. Docko never parted with his skillfully carved spear, which the Taur recognized as a sign of power by the red ribbons that adorned it. Docko had achieved a lot in his homeland during his absence in Swa-Ioledea.

Fao simply could not help but admire the young mighty Taur, and began to listen attentively to the conversation while sitting just above the elders' heads.

"We are flattered, young Dockolmo-Leyam, that you returned to our city," Swarod said leisurely. "You know that you are always a welcome guest here and a friend of the Vedichs. Whatever opinion the venerable Nojedeo-Oumo-Weylea-Kaul, the konung of the Taur, adhered to, this will not affect our friendship with you. Not as a friendship with a foreigner, but with a man."

"Thank you, respectable Elder Swarod," said Docko politely.

"But in order not to torment you for a long time, we will immediately answer with an honest refusal!" Liol-Nomo finished.

"But I asked you for permission to speak with the Supreme Elder of the Liswa-Fa!" Docko did not let up.

Unshakeable, Anolim replied, "Alas, this is impossible! And if you really want to show him your respect, then I will ask you not to disturb his gray hair. The elder of the Liswa-Fa is too weak.

We will tell him about the meeting with you. But do you truly think that he can actually tell you something other than what we have told you?”

“I only ask that you send a single caravan to the Valley!” Docko almost begged. “Just one!”  
*A caravan to the Valley! A caravan to the Valley! A caravan to the Valley!*

The squirrel’s heart of Fao began to pound wildly, and only those words pounded in her head.  
*For what? Why should Docko ask the Vedichs for this? Our people never leave the forest!*

One could not even dream about something like this in Swa-Ioledea! To visit the forest of the Taurus was the ultimate dream for any curious Vedich! And here – the Valley! Fao nearly lost control of herself and practically turned back into a human. How much she immediately imagined to herself, after all, there will be no other chance.

*Docko, please! Persuade the elders!*

“The Vedichs revere their traditions!” Liol-Nomo continued in a raspy voice. “We believe that sending someone from our people to the Valley is unacceptable. The Vedichs, who passed initiation, were created to live in the forest!”

“Then send those who haven’t yet been initiated!” Docko insisted.

After these words, Fao realized that she was completely losing her will. By means of her claws she slid down the trunk to find herself on the ground. Ina followed her. It seemed that her friend was experiencing similar feelings.

“You want to take our children away from us, Dockolmo-Leyam!” Anolim yelled angrily. “The children? Should I remind you of the six-fingered goddess of death?”

“You cannot say that!” Docko flared up. “You swore! And not ‘take away,’ but bring them to the Valley! After all, Elinor is our mutual home! The home of the Eight People!”

In the meantime, the charms of shape-shifting had finally lost their power, and Fao realized they had to run before they were found out.

“Who is there?” Swarod cried out, “Vedichs! We were overheard!”

But the squirrels were already running away, turning back into human girls only at Bear Creek.

## 4

After catching her breath and remembering the last words from the conversation, Fao realized what a terrible oath Elder Anolim had broken.

The Taurus and Vedichs shared a common history. The Taurus had come out of the Vedichs.

Where was legend and where reality – it was hard to tell, but the legends went like this:

Everyone got very frightened because everyone knows the six-fingered are the messengers of death. They usually come at night in a terrible disguise, but one afternoon an incredibly beautiful woman came. The Vedichs hid themselves on the tops of the trees because they could not defeat her with anything. The weapons burned in their hands, their limbs became numb, and her glare deprived their minds. Then the Vedichs realized that death herself had come to them! They prayed to Mother Nature for death to leave Dockol-Mo, and nature helped them. However, several families left after the horrible woman. They went to the forests of Nanol-Mo, places not as wild and hidden, where people from the Valley wandered sometimes. So, the people of the Taurus appeared.

In Dockol-Mo, these people were first called the Damned. However, it gradually became clear the Taurus did not turn into servants of death and remained human beings. The Vedichs began to communicate with distant fellows, having forgiven them their delusions. The Taurus also supported communication with the Vedichs. Although everyone knew perfectly well the Taurus continued to worship the very death that was named Ayduen!

At some point, again, as the legends say, the elders of the Vedichians decided it was time to save the kindred people from the dark witchcraft. Detachments of the strongest and most agile men went

to Nanol-Mo to kill the six-fingered goddess of death. However, they did not yet know what power she had given to the Tauris!

During the time of the worship of Death, the Tauris began to lose touch with nature, so they could no longer turn into wild beasts. However, their physical strength multiplied tremendously. The Tauris killed all the fellow Vedichs who went to free them from oppression. And then they themselves invaded Dockol-Mo and besieged Swa-Ioledea. The city fell and the Tauris forced the elders of the Vedich to swear an Eternal Friendship Vow.

According to it no Taurus could kill or even hit the Vedich, and vice versa. But the Vedichs also swore they would no longer call Ayduen the goddess of death and would not dare harm her. The Tauris themselves also swore that Ayduen would never encroach on the Dockol-Mo forest.

Fao did not really believe in the stories about the six-fingered ones, or even in the existence of Ayduen. However, she knew one thing – wise Elder Anolim had just broken the oath. The sacred oath!

*We call them sages, but they behave like madmen!*

Indeed, after such words, which were apostasy of oath, a much larger conflict could have arisen!

*That way it's not too far from the war!*

Fao hoped that Docko would not allow this and would behave wiser than the elders of her people, of whom she herself was ashamed.

## 5

Fao and Ina returned to the city armed with an excuse if asked where they'd been. They were playing in the Bear Woodlot with Nucko – which was true. No one needed to know that they turned into squirrels and listened to the conversations of the elders.

Two huge moose grazed on the guest glade and a black bear of quite gigantic size was dozing peacefully. Two Tauris, as young as Docko, stood motionless near the animals. One was incredibly mighty, with long curly hair and a large face. In huge arms, he clutched the hammer handle, dropping the weight itself on the ground. The second Tauris wasn't as wide, but was tall, wiry, and lean. From under his belt a long sword could be seen; on the other side was an axe. Throwing knives protruded from his boots.

His face was covered with a shadow of mild severity, but kindness was seen in his eyes. His hair was light and curly, slightly darker than Docko's. As Fao held her gaze on him, the Tauris noticed the attention and smiled slightly at her.

A Vedich boy by the name of Muolwool (from a neighborhood far from Fao) ran around huge, more than six times bigger, strangers, and provoked them up with sarcastic screamers. The Tauris didn't react to it, standing motionless without showing the slightest emotion on their faces. Such were the Vedichs who did not like strangers. There was a shout from the mother of Muolwool, who called her son home.

If someone else was interested in guests from the neighboring forest, he watched them with great care, from behind the bushes and trees.

Suddenly, the bear woke up and yawned loudly. Fao turned away from the young Tauris and his younger brothers and looked at the big beast. It immediately dawned upon her. This was Kesho!

“Kesho! Kesho!” Fao screamed joyfully and ran towards the bear, with Ina right behind her.

“This is the bear of our commander Dockolmo-Leyam!” she said as a tall Tauris, the one Fao liked, tried to stop her. The big man with the hammer did not even twitch.

But the bear had already recognized Fao, climbed to his four paws, rushed to her and began to lick her. His tongue alone was the size of the half the girl's arm. She tried to stroke him on the nose. In response the bear sneezed, showering her with a not-so-pleasant mist.

*Well, it's my own fault!*

“I recognized you!” There was a voice from behind her, Fao turned around and saw Docko. He was sad and gloomy. But, looking at her, tried to smile. “You were very upset and cried when the Vedichs gave it to me!”

Then Fao remembered the whole story of Kesho. The bear had been about two years old and had already grown to an incredible size. Docko, having then arrived in Swa-Ioledea with another embassy, was amazed at the power of the huge black bear. As it turned out he was also very fond of these animals; only he rode their backs.

When the elders asked Docko what gift he wanted to receive as a sign of friendship with the Vedichs, the Taur asked for this bear. The elders agreed under one condition: Docko should not break his will. When the Taur approached Kesho the bear licked his hand, and then he volunteered to be ridden. Docko rode Kesho without a saddle and a bridle.

And Fao, then very young, had cried. She was sad that Kesho had exchanged her and Dockol-Mo’s forest for a young Taur.

“Do you take good care of Kesho?” Fao tried to start the conversation seriously.

“He’s now called Keshol-Irajk! We are good friends.”

“And we know why you are so sad,” Ina suddenly blurted out.

“Do not take offense, please, at our elders. Not all Vedichs are like that!” Fao decided to speak up.

Docko immediately looked back at his Taurs, but they stood without stirring, and then he beckoned the girls to the side. Fao and Ina followed him.

“So, you were really eavesdropping, correct?”

Fao and Ina nodded guiltily.

“Pretend that you have not heard anything!” he ordered severely.

“But we would like to go to the Valley,” sighed Fao.

“If they let us go,” Ina added.

“I’d like to go, too,” said Docko thoughtfully.

“What happened, anyway?” asked Fao.

“It does not matter anymore.”

“It does! Say it! At the end of the day, you were sent to the Vedichs for this!”

“The Valley has been deserted,” Docko said after a moment’s thought. “At some point, people just disappeared from it. The rulers of Elinor felt that all eight nations should take part in repopulating the Valley and to find out what misfortunes happened there.”

“It cannot be,” Ina stood with her mouth open. “Listen, take us!” suddenly she suggested abruptly.

Docko’s eyes widened.

“Do you want war between the Vedichs and the Taurs? The elders aren’t letting you go!”

“Yeah, they won’t,” Fao sighed again.

“Then at least tell us how one can get to the Valley!” Ina asked roguishly.

Silence fell. Fao understood that her friend had crossed all possible lines. Docko was already in a bad mood, and here they were with their stupid questions. But the Taur reacted to Ina’s request very calmly. He closed his eyes and sighed heavily. And then he made another step towards them and turned to her friend.

“Give me your left hand.”

Ina extended her little palm. He turned her palm down and took her thumb slightly to the side, in the direction of the Gray Thorns.

“As you enter the thicket,” said Docko, “Stand in front of the moss cap on any tree. The index and the middle fingers should be pointed exactly in the direction the moss grows. A thumb will show you where to go. Here! Remember how much it needs to be bent. If you don’t get off the track, on the twentieth day you will reach the huge river of Kawa, and then go along its bank downstream.”

“Thank you, Docko!” blurted Ina, obviously not expecting the Taur would fulfill her request.

“No matter what happens, don’t you dare say that it was I who told you the direction!” the Taur almost barked with unprecedented severity. But it was superfluous: Fao and Ina immediately assured him they would obey.

“And you yourself will go to the Valley?” Asked Fao.

“Right away! Only the direct way,” answered Docko and climbed onto Keshol-Irajk’s back. Taur assistants began to saddle the moose.

## 6

Unhappy, the girls walked through the glades of Swa-Ioledea. And everything that was occurring wasn’t pleasing to their eyes at all. The Taurs were gone, and life returned to its original course. Gawk, secretly looking at the guests, had long hid in their trees.

At the fir where Fao lived, her great-great-grandfather, on whom she so unceremoniously landed in the morning, played Hurra with his friend of about the same age.

The older the Vedich, the more he loves playing Hurra. If you don’t like playing Hurra, prepare to spend your old age alone. All day long, the players clatter their bones and rearrange the figures on the field. Year after year, circle after circle, the inhabitants of the forest Dockol-Mo sharpen their skills in the game. Once Fao said that she considered playing Hurra a waste of time. Oh, how she was punished! Since then, she simply hated this traditional entertainment.

The old people were all still sitting, looking thoughtfully at the hexagonal board. Slowly they moved the figures with trembling fingers.

Fao looked around to see a burly Vedich woman, a bear sow, pounding berries in a mortar. Next to her, in the canopy of oak there was another one, younger and much slimmer, a doe, embroidering patterns on her shirt. Two husbands weaved a large hammock and prepared a floor for a new suspension bridge between the trees.

And then Fao’s eyes filled with tears, as she realized she would see this same picture her whole life.

Yes, the forest of Dockol-Mo was incredibly beautiful. Yes, she had hairy friends in Bear Woodlot, but nothing, *nothing* changed in the town of Swa-Ioledea, only if a new embassy from the Taurs or a travel explorer from the Valley wandered in!

*How I’m bored of all this! To live in freedom – only the imaginary one. To live as the elders order – those elders who break sacred oaths, who put prejudices above reason! Listen to fairytales about the six-fingered, although no six-fingered was ever seen. Watch how old people play Hurra and pretend to enjoy this spectacle! Get a wig for curiosity! Get boxed on the ear instead of answering questions! That’s how it is – the Dockol-Mo forest!*

“Listen,” Fao looked at Ina. Her tears disappeared instantly, and her voice became confident. “Did you ask Docko about the way to the Valley in earnest?”

The friends’ eyes met. The eyes of Ina flashed with the same spark again. And again, the girls understood each other.

## 7

Swaol-Ney wasn’t as spirited as Fao and Ina, but she was just as curious. While she hid her desire for discoveries and shared secrets with friends, with her parents, grandfathers, and especially the elders, she kept her mouth shut. But Swaol-Ney read a lot and understood a lot. If you had to go to someone for advice, then she was the one to go to.

Swaol-Ney listened attentively to her friends and shook her head.

“You are mad! You turned into squirrels and consequently began to think like squirrels! Primitive! So, you plan to just leave? How do you imagine that?” She was getting more and more upset.

“Just take off and go!” Fao replied looking into her eyes, though she was beginning to recognize their venture was insane. “Nobody has ever tried!”

“And the Valley,” added Ina, “They’re calling all the people there. Though we go against the will of the elders, we are obeying the will of... errr... all of Elinor!”

“Of course, sure,” Swaol-Ney frowned. “Here come the people of Elinor begging the Vedichians to go to the Valley...”

“So, you’re not with us?” Ina put the question directly.

Swaol-Ney fell silent, hung her head, and then gave an answer that Fao hadn’t expected:

“Yes, I’m with you!”

The joyful Fao and Ina began to hug their friend, and when everyone’s emotions died down, they began to formulate their plan.

“Well, how do we do it best?”

Swaol-Ney changed in the face.

“Ah, so you came to me to fix everything up for you?”

“Well, you’re the main inventor among us,” Fao said guiltily.

“We must first understand who else is ready to leave!” Swaol-Ney declared.

“But the more there are of us, the easier it will be to catch us... to stop us...” pointed out Ina.

“How can you say such a thing?” Fao responded. “Maybe someone has long longed to see other nations, to see the Valley, just as we have! Then we’ll act dishonestly not only in relation to our parents and elders, but also to our like-minded people!”

“Okay, okay... Let’s do it that way!” Ina was embarrassed, and Fao managed to marvel at her own eloquence.

“Anyway, we need someone older, more experienced, someone who knows the Common Language,” Swaol-Ney began to reason again. “How will we go to the Valley not knowing the language?”

“Right,” said Fao. They didn’t even think about it with Ina.

“But they say that those who have already been initiated cannot live outside Dockol-Mo,” Ina began. “And anyway, it’s unlikely that any of the elders will agree to support us... and none of the young ones know the Common Language.”

“Wey-Leya!” remembered Fao. “Wey-Leya knows the Common Language!”

Wey-Leya was still young enough, only five years older than the girls. However, she had already managed to visit Taur, where she learned to speak the Common Language just a little bit in her own estimation. And very few knew about this because Wey-Leya hid her skills.

“Indeed, Wey-Leya will be able to help.” Swaol-Ney rejoiced. “So, we’ll do the following: let us each go to our acquaintances and suggest to those whom we consider appropriate to escape, to start the journey. And we must leave today! At night! You don’t believe in fairytales about the six-fingered, do you?”

“No!” Fao and Ina shook their heads. Although in fact, they couldn’t give a clear answer to this question even for themselves.

“But others believe! Those who aren’t afraid, they will come with us! The others will notice our absence at dawn, therefore there is a chance to run far,” concluded Swaol-Ney.

“It is decided then! We will meet up with Wey-Leya with the last sunset beam!” declared Fao.

## 8

First, Fao hurried to Nomesdesoldok (Nome), confident that he would join their conspirators' society. In a year and a half, Nome was supposed to go to the third small circle, so, in respect to the girls, he was more mature. He had a piercing gaze and unusual greenish hair the shade of spruce needles. Nome was a favorite one among peers, and girls mostly admired him. Bright, enterprising, creative, with a special charm. He, out of all people, was the one who clearly was born in some other place. As expected, Nome immediately agreed to an adventure.

For his age, Nome was successful in the art of shape-shifting. He already knew how to turn into predatory animals. The bears and wolves, of course, were far away, but he could easily turn into a fox or a saber.

Fao was very close with Nome, he was one of her best friends. So close in nature, in spirit, in interest, that Ina was sometimes jealous.

Nome did not ask unnecessary questions and did not even hesitate before such a responsible step. He said, "Yes!" and specified the time when they should gather in the Forbidden Glade.

The time was decided – the highest point of the full moon rising.

After talking with Nome, Fao went to Komos. Komos was a hereditary sorceress. She had no equal in the knowledge of herbs and white magic among peers. It was written in her fate to become the best sorceress of Swa-Ioledea. Only the dreamy Komos wanted more from life, and Fao gave her this chance.

Komos, quiet and slightly timid, was not as straightforward as Nome. However, Fao immediately stated that she was not going to persuade her, and that the time for preparation was short. Although it was clear that parting with Swa-Ioledea would be hard for her, Komos sighed and agreed to join them.

Next was Dockomol-Ildas (Docko-II), a favorite of the elders. He dreamed of becoming an artisan, and his golden hands mastered everything from spoons to the most beautiful amulets. Only Fao thought that with his activity, he was definitely not suited to the life of the Vedichs. At first, Dockomol-Ildas was frightened by the proposal of Fao. She prepared to leave, but the young artisan unexpectedly changed his decision and with certainty declared that he would come to the Forbidden Glade.

Fao was amazed at how easily her peers agreed to such a responsible and adventurous step.

*How could they? To live for so many years without changing one's way of life, to keep traditions, to invent laws and teachings... and then suddenly one event completely changes the habitual way. It turns out that all our peers, all young, even very young, wish to leave! Each of us honors our ancestors, loves our parents, loves our whole big family, and respects the elders. Perhaps, if it weren't for these harsh and sometimes stupid laws and constant restrictions, we would not want to leave Swa-Ioledea so zealously.*

Fao also spoke with Ainurmo. They had never been particularly good friends, but had one common interest – bears. After the initiation, Ainurmo wanted to become a bear, and altogether admired these animals for their strength and perfection. However, he could not turn into a bear yet. It must be noted that, in general, very few of the young could. To become a bear, a Vedich required character, patience, will, concentration, and experience. Ainurmo was also a year younger than Fao, and was distinguished by an unprecedented absent-mindedness.

Ainurmo immediately refused, and Fao did not insist.

The last on Fao's list were inseparable friends Laol-Jamal and Molaynur. With them, the conversation turned out to be even shorter when they offered a sharp "No."

Fao even wished she hadn't entrusted her secret to so many people.

*Oh, someone might tell the adults and cause trouble. Then the Valley will stay unseen forever.*

Full of worrying forebodings, Fao hurried to Cane Backwater, to Wey-Leya's house.

## 9

Born on the border with Nanol-Mo, Wey-Leya came from an ancient family of Reed Foxes and had communicated with the Tauris since childhood. Surprisingly, being a very small girl, Wey-Leya received parental permission to visit the forest of a neighboring people.

*And how on Elinor did the elders of her village react to this?*

Perhaps that is why Wey-Leya now moved to Swa-Ioledea. Who knows, maybe she did not want to be forcibly returned to her native village. A few years of life among the Tauris will seem to any Vedich a rather strange circumstance.

In town, it was persistently rumored that Wey-Leya knew the Common Language, was strong in the trade craft, and whilst living with the Tauris she communicated with strange people driving caravans from the deserts. What the was desert, Fao still could not understand. Judging by the descriptions, a huge meadow without trees and grass, where it was very, very hot.

*And how to live on such glades then? They say that in the deserts, there are people with the skin color of old oak bark, and they ride on fatty elk with huge humpbacks but no horns. Oh, whatever! You never know what kind of fables one could virtualize. Better let Wey-Leya herself describe everything! On the way to the Valley!*

As the sunset disappeared into the forest, Fao arrived at the house of Wey-Leya, where Ina and Swaol-Ney were already waiting. While greeting them cordially, Wey-Leya did not hide her surprise from the unexpected guests as the girls crawled into a cozy house made of reeds and clay.

“Do you understand yourselves, what you want to do?” Wey-Leya asked very seriously as the girls settled in. Although not much older than girls, life had already taught her many sad lessons.

“Apparently not!” continued the Cane Fox. “You want to violate the prohibitions that have been honored for centuries! You are going to renounce your families. There will be no way back!”

The girls were silent. “But there will be no life here, either,” Fao timidly said.

Wey-Leya smiled sadly.

“I'll lead you!” she said. “The elders of my tribe have already cursed me, and nothing will change from the curse of the elders of Swa-Ioledea. But beware, it will be hard! Unimaginably hard! And the punishment to all of us will be terrible if we fail!”

## 10

Arriving at the Forbidden Glade, Fao was taken aback. There she discovered Laol-Jamal, Molaynur, and Ainurmo, who at first refused to leave Swa-Ioledea. They explained to her that they weighed all their options and decided to trade the Vedich forest for something more. Fao was pleasantly surprised, but angry with Swaol-Ney. She called quite a few more children – Pariolwool, Muolwool, Mayamolive, Mousabr, and even a very small Buka. Swaol-Ney only spread her hands:

“Well, they all wanted to come!”

“They still do not understand what they want!” Fao boiled with anger. But there was no turning back now. Either take a chance and go, or stay and wait for their conspiracy to come out sooner or later.

Ina brought Mo-Tenge-Lioywe, Muolkomes, Luoluy, Muoldock, and Rodolrod. The presence of the last one was not at all pleasing for Fao. He was always on his own wave, he frowned for no reason, then joked out of place. His humor was strange, sometimes too coarse and incomprehensible to the rest. Rodolrod was adult enough, but had not yet learned to turn into an animal, though he didn't seem stupid and was skilled enough. He sometimes made Fao uneasy. But now she had to reconcile herself with his presence.

“I want to say goodbye to my mother!” MoulSabr declared suddenly.

“Me too!” Buka climbed up.

Fao immediately cursed the moment when she trusted Swaol-Ney. She was ready to pounce on a friend.

But then the matter came under the control of Wey-Leya.

“No goodbyes!” she said. “Whoever wants to leave leaves with us now! Who wants to stay, stays!”

“I stay!” Buka yelled.

“And I!” added MoulSabr.

“Good! Then we will tie you to the trees! And in the morning, they will find you!”

“Are you serious?” Fao grabbed Wey-Leya by the sleeve.

“I do not want to be in the court of the elders for the second time!” Wey-Leya confidently stated, and Fao even felt embarrassed at her own feebleness.

“But the six-fingered people will drag us away,” Buka lamented.

“If they yell like that, they’ll surely wake up some of the adults,” Ina whispered.

“Let’s go! We’re all going!” Nome fixed the situation, stepping forward. “Children too!”

They agreed, as the fear of being tied up in the clearing at night overpowered the fear of the unknown.

The detachment of the young Vedichs advanced into the dark thicket.

## 11

At first, they walked cautiously, but once away from the city, they broke into an easy run, led by Nome, who had excellent eyesight. Wey-Leya drove the little children from behind with her threats. Ina ran beside Nome, ensuring they followed the path Docko had described.

Fao and Swaol-Ney were in the middle. Rodolrod ran immediately behind Fao. This neighborhood was not very pleasant, and Fao could feel a heavy glare on her neck.

At dawn, they decided to stop because the younger ones were falling asleep. When they woke up, the sun was already high, and an excited Wey-Leya was ready to get moving. Fao, who usually woke up feeling cheerful and joyful, now felt worried and frustrated. She was ready to repent and go back. But having witnessed the zeal with which Wey-Leya was waking the detachment, she dismissed such thoughts.

After seeing no fallen fruit on the ground, Wey-Leya tore off the greenish fruit from the hazel bush. “Won’t doing that offend Mother Nature?” one of the young Vedichs asked cautiously.

“Mother Nature has already given us these nuts!” Wey-Leya insisted. “Sooner or later they will fall off anyway! So, what’s the difference?”

“But the elders say...” began Laol-Jamal.

“That you can’t leave the forest of Dockol-Mo,” Fao finished, amazed at how her idea of the world had changed in just a day. Just yesterday, she would have considered eating unripened nuts an outrage.

After eating a light breakfast, the detachment got back on the road to continue on their journey when suddenly, Nome abruptly stopped. He closed his eyes and gestured with his hand for everyone to stop. He stood for several moments in silence, and then opened his eyes wide.

“Sabers! They are running very fast! And a few other big animals with them!”

“A pursuit!” Fao guessed.

“We’ve got to hurry!” Wey-Leya ordered.

Soon, Fao heard the chase too. Suddenly, from the bushes ahead, the muzzle of a bear appeared, accompanied by a roar. The squad stopped. The first thought was that they were surrounded by the

countrymen from Swa-Ioledea. However, very quickly Fao realized that it was not a Vedich, but a simple animal. The bear shook his head and disappeared into the bushes.

*Can it be? Can it?*

The heart of Fao began to beat faster.

“He’s calling us!” she announced and followed the bear.

“Impossible!” objected Nome, who rushed after his friend.

The thickets parted, and a forest river opened to Fao’s eyes. Just as she realized that it was too wide to cross, Fao saw four more bears rolling a huge dry tree trunk to the edge of the shore.

*They are helping us! Yes! They are helping us!*

“How can this be?” whispered Wey-Leya, apparently not believing her own eyes.

“That’s because they’re my friends!” said Fao proudly.

The bears rolled the trunk into the river, after which two of them dived into the water to push the dry tree to the other shore. The ferry was ready! The fugitives climbed aboard and quickly passed the newly emerged bridge. Once they completed the crossing, the powerful forest animals turned the trunk along the river where it was picked up by the current and disappeared, as though it were never there.

“Thank you! Thank you!” a joyful Fao shouted from the shore as Wey-Leya pulled her by the sleeve. “I’ll never forget you!”

From the thickets on the opposite bank, the predatory eyes of sabers began to show.

## 12

“What have we done?” Dockomol-Ildas began to lament first. “We have betrayed our own people! We will never be forgiven!”

“You should have thought about this before!” Wey-Leya reminded sternly.

“We did not betray our people!” Nome objected. “They were betrayed by our elders! If other people of Elinor have decided to go to the Valley, then why should we sit out in the woods? What did Docko say? That people from the Valley suddenly disappeared! Now the rulers of all nations send caravans to the Valley to find out what happened. And what if Dockol-Mo suddenly becomes empty? If suddenly we all disappear, who will remember us? Listen, we will all remain Vedich! Let’s swear on it to each other! To keep its life, we will use the culture and traditions of our people! But this doesn’t mean that we can’t communicate with other people! We communicated, after all, with the Taurs, didn’t we? So, it’s not the time to reproach ourselves! We must move forward!”

“I swear!” Fao jumped to her feet, proud of Nome and his inspirational speech.

“I swear!” repeated Ina.

“I swear!” recalled Wey-Leya.

“I swear!” said everyone in a chorus.

## 13

The forest was changing.

Somewhere in the eerie green, there was succulent grass that grew up to the waist and thickets of hawthorn and elderberry that clung to the branches and tore their embroidered clothes; where the flavors of flowers beat into the nostrils, making them sneeze.

Every day during the transition, it became easier to plunge into these fresh new colors. Or to more modest places, where blue forget-me-nots and yellow inflorescences of celandine shyly appeared along the beige cover of fallen leaves, where the oaks dropped on the heads of negligent travelers with heavy acorns, and from under the roots, the grunting of the wild boars could be heard.

There were quite gloomy ones also, where the dark green needles pricked in the face and the back, where the cones hurt painfully on the soles of the boots, then made them limp for a half-day, where the gray moss and cobwebs spread over the fragile branches, where the trunks were covered with sticky mold and raw bark, where huge mushrooms grow almost waist high; some could be eaten, and some with a single smell could conjure an image of the talking saber right before your eyes.

The transitions were very challenging, but traveling through the native forest was incredibly interesting. The Vedichs didn't even know their Dockol-Mo could be so diverse. And it only took leaving one's native city in the wilderness to experience a few transitions.

## 14

One night, as Fao, Ina, Nome, and Komos all suffered from insomnia, they decided to communicate quietly – almost in a whisper – so as not to wake the others. Only the solitary hoot of owls accompanied their conversation and gave it an ominous color.

“And remember,” said Fao, “how they frightened us with the six-fingered? Like, lock all the windows and doors for the night, otherwise the six-fingered will come and drag you away! And now? We already slept three times six nights on naked moss in the darkest thickets – and nothing! We were frightened by fairytales!”

“It's strange,” Nome began to argue. “Tales or not, the images of these six-fingered came from somewhere, didn't they! Why do they scare kids with them? My grandmother told me a fairytale about a swamp monster that could swallow a bear, and I was so scared! Just imagine what this monster is like, if it can swallow a bear!”

“They say the Goddess of Death, whom the Taurus worship, is also six-fingered!” Ina reminded the group.

“There is no Goddess of Death!” snapped Fao.

“Maybe not the Goddess of Death,” Nome suggested. “But Ayduen existed. Yes, even if she is a six-fingered, she just gathered the squad once and left Swa-Ioledea, as we did! Henceforth, the elders called her the Goddess of Death! To take revenge!”

“Aha, and now the Goddess of Death is called Faolabre!” giggled Ina.

Fao slapped her hand, “Why not Inaonomose?”

“Wait,” said Komos, who had been silent before. “Maybe there have been many six-fingered ones. Only they lived a long time ago and looked like people, but they had six fingers. They were very, very evil, and they killed everyone. People eventually defeated them, but the fear remained,” he said quietly. The Vedich girl shivered, as though she had become frightened by her own intonation. Fao and Ina stopped laughing at once.

And then the owls began to grow louder. Everyone became uncomfortable.

“You scare us,” Fao whispered.

“And I heard a story,” Nome continued in a serious tone, “that somewhere far away in the west of our forest, in one village, a baby with six fingers was born. His parents were so scared they immediately killed him.”

“Well, I won't fall asleep now!” confessed Ina.

And then Fao felt something fall on her shoulder. She froze with fear.

*Somebody's hand!*

Fao seemed to feel six fingers on her shoulder. She immediately screamed and jumped to her feet.

A huge bat flew from her shoulder and disappeared into the night mist.

Fao looked around, embarrassed. Now the entire camp was awake, as the younger comrades stared at her in bewilderment.

## 15

The next day, the forest began to thin out. With each step, the trees parted as more and more and openings began to appear all around, leading to a solar kingdom! Such a huge clearing in the world could not exist.

Fao guessed that they finally reached the great river Kawa.

First, they walked smoothly, holding their breath. They were whispering about what awaited them when the trees finally parted. They could distinguish a huge blue sky with white clouds, a powerful water barrier, and beyond it – an endless green glade.

“A field!” explained Wey-Leya. “Not a glade, but a field!”

Gradually, curiosity completely took over the most troublesome ones – Nome, Ina, Swaol-Ney, and, of course, Fao.

Laughing and shouting excitedly, they rushed forward. While on the move, they agreed to run a race. Whoever reached the river first wouldn't need to do anything at the break. Nome broke forward, with Swaol-Ney not far behind. Fao rushed along with Ina, and then made a sharp jerk, leaving Nome behind.

She jumped out into the open space, and stopped dead.

In front of her stood a group of people lined up in black robes. They were dressed in absurd sleeveless jackets with an incomprehensible symbol at the center – a lizard with wings. Fao looked at the faces of the men, women, and even several children standing there.

In the middle stood a very lean man of short stature. Muscles showed through his clothes. The man's hair was cut short in a strange ornament. Such patterns were also drawn with dark paint on his hands. He shifted his thick black eyebrows and looked threateningly at Fao. She tried to turn around and run back into the forest, but the terrible man extended his arm forward, and Fao stopped abruptly. She did not understand what kind of power was holding her, only that she could no longer move. She was frozen like a stone!

## CHAPTER 4. THE DEPRIVED FROM THE SKIES

*To know the teaching of Tau, one must know oneself.  
Master Shan, School of Sunset Foothills*

### 1

Ulari, throwing the sword from hand to hand, watched as Mou’Kaa, Khan, and Sa’Ea brought the rest from the forest.

Master Nao still held the four Vedichs in a daze. They were the first to jump out of the forest, however, the Ulutau were already prepared to meet them. They had felt the approach of the unknown people for a long time, and Ulari had no doubt their newly appeared captives were the Vedichs. Already in Tokana, Master Nao told his pupils how representatives of other nations can look.

“Is that all?” Ulari asked Mou’Kaa.

“It is,” she replied. “I’m sure.”

Ulari counted sixteen prisoners.

*Four more are on the beach. The faces are very young, some are still just children.*

“Who’s in charge here?” he asked calmly, but severely.

“I am!” the redheaded Vedich girl stepped forward. “My name is Wey-Leya and my people will serve as the Embassy to the Valley! By what right do you hold us and threaten us with weapons?”

Ulari looked intently at her face. Wey-Leya was also young, but still looked older than the others.

*She is indeed in charge!*

“Master Nao wants to talk to you!” Ulari preferred that his teacher himself answered the questions asked by Wey-Leya.

The leader of the forest-squad obeyed and followed him. The other Vedichs slowly followed. When they reached the shore of Kawa, Master Nao finally dropped his hand, and the four teenagers, who up until now were held frozen, collapsed to the ground. The master knew how to draw away enemies with a simple move of the hand – let it be six or six hundred.

“Her name is Wey-Leya,” Ulari introduced the red-haired Vedich girl to the master. “She’s the eldest!”

“I want to know why you stopped my squad!” Wey-Leya took a step towards the master, her voice angry.

Master Kuno and Master Ean took a step forward to help Nao, but he stopped them with a gesture of his hand.

“Are you Vedichs?” he asked Wey-Leya.

“Yes, we are the Vedichs,” she responded.

“Can you shape-shift into animals?” interrupted the master.

“I can, but...”

“Shape-shift, then!” he interrupted.

*Now we will finally find out whether this is true or fiction! The wonderful gift of the Vedichs.*

“Why are you ordering me?” Wey-Leya was furious.

“Shape-shift,” the master calmly repeated his demand.

For some time, Wey-Leya just stood still, until she lifted her head upwards and her face stretched forward, becoming a red, furry face. The Vedich girl’s reddish hair color was passed on to her body, which in a moment was covered with fur. From under the hem of a linen shirt, a fluffy

red tail popped out. A few moments later, a large fox was standing on the clothes that had fallen on the ground. At that moment, representatives of all the three schools gasped at once.

“It’s true!”

“Incredible!”

“What an inexplicable power!”

Men, women, children – everyone whispered in surprise. Ulari, as though still not believing what had just happened, looked around at the faces of the Masters, who were also staring at the fox. And only one person seemed unperturbed – Master Nao, of course.

The fox looked into the master’s eyes, then sniffed loudly. She stood still for a while, and then rose to her hind legs. Then her features began to change again. The limbs became human hands and feet, and the muzzle became a face again. A girlish, attractive face.

Ulari regretted that the master treated Wey-Leya so severely. However, he understood the necessity.

A sage said that one should not yield to temptations of appearance. External beauty could be deceiving. Before you trusted a person, you need to know his inner world, look into his thoughts, look into his heart.

The Vedich girl was standing in the clearing, covering her nakedness with clothes picked up from the ground, and she was shaking, either from fear, or from anger.

“Shape-shift once more!” the master told Wey-Leya again.

“Enough!” she snapped.

“Shape-shift!”

“What for? I won’t!”

“Shape-shift...” The master continued to insist on this, slightly lifting his right palm up.

Wey-Leya clenched her teeth even harder, but still obeyed. She raised her head again. She strained all the muscles and her body continued to tremble. Finally, she collapsed on her knees.

“I can’t!” almost in tears, the Vedich girl cried out.

Master Nao calmly let his hand down.

“They are not dangerous!” he declared to his people. “You can lower your swords!”

Ulari drew attention to the gaze of his master. Though not a single muscle twitched on his face, that gaze expressed a bit of compassion. However, the teacher had made his discovery! Not all the Ulutau had realized this yet, but the master was able to understand that the unusual gift of the Vedichs was not magic, and that the strength of Tau was enough to stop the shape-shifting.

*Master Nao did it! So, the Vedichian people are the same people who have flesh and blood, body and soul, and not at all beings of any other race unknown to people.*

The Ulutau warriors lowered their weapons.

The two Vedich girls who first ran to the shore now rushed to Wey-Leya to help her stand up and cover her nakedness. The anger and pride that just overwhelmed the fox disappeared dramatically. Wey-Leya looked broken and depressed. Tears rolled down her cheeks.

“Who are you? And what will happen to us?” she asked the Master.

“If you have no bad intentions, nothing will happen to you,” the teacher replied. “My name is Master Nao. I am the new ruler of the Valley!”

## 2

The Ulutau rarely left their native land. There was no point, as their country supplied their every need. Blue sky, blooming glades, fresh mountain air, deep water rivers and lakes, forests full of game, and fertile fields.

This region was awarded to the ancestors of the Ulutau, who came from the lands of the Itoshins. The country of the mountain people was peaceful, beautiful, and plentiful, while every day we fought

for survival in the Ito empire. Terrible demons came from the fog, bringing death and destruction from the most sinister place of the Dead Land the Path of Horror.

There was a legend that one day, a young man named Tau fell crazy in love with the Emperor's daughter, who was called Tsvetsho. Myth says that Tosho's daughter was the most beautiful woman in the world, and Tau was an entrusted Emperor's udoğan who often visited his palace. He asked the Emperor for Tsvetsho's hand, but the Emperor became furious. Despite the fact that he was a very brave udoğan, he did not want his immortal daughter to be given to a simpleton. Since then, the Emperor forbade the men of the Itoshin people from looking at her.

He was going to execute Tau, but the brave young man admitted his guilt for betraying the empire and its sacred Code. Tau asked the Emperor to spare his life in order to try to pass through the Path of the Horror, which had not yet been conquered by anyone. Either perish there or atone for his crime by a great feat. Touched by the nobility of the young man, the Emperor granted him forgiveness and ordered him to find a settlement if he found suitable land beyond the Path of Horror. Several brave, young, strong men and women decided to support Tau, for they were also impressed by his noble impulses and brave heart.

Tau and his comrades went through the Path of Horror and found themselves in a beautiful land, which they called Ulu (Mountain, Majestic Mountains). In the mountain canyons, he managed to repel an ancient relic called the Demon Flesh, which gave the pioneers on the Path an unprecedented power and helped them not to go mad with fear.

Now a mature man who had seen and experienced a lot, Tau rethought his life. He realized everything that happened to him was not an accident. Unrequited feelings, his fall from grace, forgiveness, a path to nowhere, a sense of fear and the attainment of fearlessness, comprehension of power and, finally, a mountain valley made for life.

Even as an Itoshin, Tau heard stories about the Valley of the Ancestors and the morals that reigned there. The stories were about people who lived in contentment and welfare, and were primarily concerned with prosperity instead of their souls. They lived in freedom, not knowing that in the north, the Itoshins were defending the right to this life with a weapon.

Tau did not want his country to follow this same path. Therefore, for the sake of the life of his people, he laid a special teaching of the eternal path, aimed at improving their inner world. The sage Tau himself pondered the Flesh of the Demon and the power inherent in the relic. And he asked himself: can one gain power and absolute fearlessness in oneself without using the artifacts of antiquity? After all, if such artifacts stored true power in themselves, then this power could be obtained from outside as well! The people of Ulutau have since given themselves to eternal self-development and gaining power through constant meditation, tempering body and spirit, and self-contemplation.

Once, a huge bird flew into the mountain country. When she approached Tau, he saw a letter attached to the bird's foot. Much to Tau's surprise, the message was written by Tosho! The Emperor wrote that he had a wonderful dream where Tau created a city in beautiful fertile lands, and Tosho sent his birds out to find this land. The Emperor blessed the work of Tau as correspondence began between the Emperor and Tau, and, later, his successors.

Sage Tau died in deep, deep old age. His body was burned and ashes scattered all over his land, so that the soul of the sage became part of this country. Eventually, new sages began to interpret the teachings of Tau in their own ways. They did not deviate from the foundations laid by their great teacher, but began to build their own schools, each of which became separate settlements. And it was masters who led the schools.

The people of Ulutau started families, raised children, plowed the land, and engaged themselves in hunting and fishing, but devoted all their spare time to self-development. Each school lived as a separate community led by a master who was responsible not only for the spiritual development

of his pupils, but also for their way of living. Each master assigned himself to an entrusted disciple who became a master after the death of the teacher.

And in the Bright Palace of Tokana sat Ino-to, a wise old man, who could interpret the teachings of Tau better than all others. Chosen by the masters of all schools, Ino-to did not have any power because the concept of power was absent in the country of the Ulutau. Even the masters didn't impose their will on the disciples, but only helped them on their life journeys. If the master himself strayed off his path, he could always ask for advice from Ino-to the Wisest.

The Bright Palace eventually lost its own school and became the abode of Ino-to, who spent all his time there in constant meditation. Representatives of schools made regular pilgrimages to the Palace, monitored his condition, cleaned up, used archives and libraries, but never settled nearby. There was no violence, murders, or robberies in the Ulutau country, because the inhabitants of the Celestial Plateau strived for self-improvement, and human vices were alien to them.

Master Nao was a pupil of Master Mao in the School of the North Slope. After the death of Mao, he headed the school. At the time, he just turned six times six years. Nao managed it with dignity, instantly earning love and respect among the pupils. Martial arts and the ability to handle the sword were an indispensable part of his teaching, while so many schools began to practice meditation without perfecting their bodies.

Nao was as strong in spirit as in body, well-knit, incredibly courageous and mobile, and no one in the mountainous country could match him!

### 3

At first, Ulari wanted to be like his master in everything. However, Nao himself explained that each person keeps his own Tau in his heart, for his path is as unique as his soul.

“Think like Ulari and not like Nao!” the master once said to his pupil.

Since then, Ulari only consulted with the master, but made decisions independently. At first, he made many mistakes, but Nao only praised him for these mistakes for with each new one Ulari only became stronger.

“One mistake is one step towards independence and freedom! Awareness of this error is a leap to wisdom!” concluded the master.

When Ulari was three times six years and four years old, Nao appointed him to be an entrusted apprentice, and after Nao's death, told Ulari he would lead the School of the North Slope. But Nao was not old, and things could still change – Ulari could leave the teachings, and Nao might choose another disciple. Masters and their entrusted ones were not forbidden to have families. Nao himself had a wife and a son, Inao. However, the management of the school did not allow him to spend enough time with his family. Each pupil of Nao – a mature man, a teenager or even a child – was a warrior who raised the perfection of his own body above worldly affairs.

“The Ino-to himself has asked me to the Light Palace of Tokana. I want to take three of my best disciples with me: you, dear Ulari, Mou'Kaa and Sa'Ea,” Master Nao told Ulari. His heart filled with joy at the chance to see the Bright Palace of Tokana in the Celestial Plateau and the Supreme Teacher Ino-to.

Never would Ulari forget that great day!

Ulari approached the Bright Palace with his mouth open – it was a huge monolithic structure of white stone compared to the School of the North Slope, which was only a small settlement. The Palace was surrounded by stretched alleys with evenly planted green dwarf pines. The fragrant aedels were flamed by scarlet tulips with a hint of lilac, like the pre-dawn twilight. The tall columns of the Palace supporting the arch above the main entrance sparkled in the sun, similar to the extraordinary whiteness of snowcapped mountain peaks.

Before the Palace stood a pedestal with a sculpture of the father of the people, the wise Tau made from granite by one of his disciples when. At the time, Tau just smiled and said, “Why go to the stone, if you want to address me? Let everyone see me as they want to see!” After his death, his followers wove the pedestal, but by the order of the teacher, the statue of stone never appeared on it.

As Ulari approached the pedestal, he was met by the face of the bright Tau, smiling at him and blessing his way while Master Nao and his disciples retreated deeper into the Palace, observing more and more new beauties. The floors were lined with pure marble, and the walls were decorated with semiprecious stones. Ulari already fantasized how awesome the hall where Ino-to sits would be. As Nao pulled the handle of the heavy door with the golden sun engraved upon it, Ulari held his breath, ready to see the greatest splendor. Instead, he saw only a raw stone, absolutely empty. The floor was covered with straw, and in the middle of this reclusory sat a gray-haired old man, wrapped in coarse woolen rags.

“Greetings to you, radiant and wisest Ino-to, a storehouse of knowledge and good thoughts! I, Nao, the Master of the School of the North Slope, and my disciples come to you in order to heed your golden words.”

Master Nao stood on both knees. Ulari, along with Sa’Ea and Mou’Kaa, followed his example, although he still hadn’t recovered from his astonishment. He eventually realized that having seen Ino-to, he knew the true greatness was not in giant marble columns and skillful gold engraving, but in the man himself.

“And I salute you, Honorable Master Nao!” Ino-to sang in a measured voice. “Do you know why I called you to the Bright Palace?”

“I can’t even begin to guess, oh wise one,” answered Nao.

“Then listen carefully to what I have to tell you, and do not interrupt. The falcon of Emperor Tosho brought wondrous news. We have all heard about the Valley of the Ancestors, which is far away from our beautiful mountains. I’ve never seen the Valley of Ancestors with my own eyes, but can imagine its glorious appearance, even though it’s been defiled by human vices. In the Valley, the inexplicable happened. Its population disappeared. Disappeared at once! What happened there, no one knows. However, the rulers of the Elinor people sent caravans to the Valley to resettle it. Let it be known to you and your disciples that the Valley has always been ruled by the burgomasters of the four Great Cities – Eavette, Mata-Mata, Dalaal, and Konolwar.

Their meeting was called The Council of the Four and all the rulers were equal amongst themselves, as well as the clans that existed in the Valley. Many of them pursued enrichment as a main goal and not self-improvement. For every one clan striving for knowledge, there were five clans striving for wealth and power. Do you know what money is? I can only imagine it and I am glad that I never held it in my hands. In our country, we do everything ourselves: we hunt and plow, erect majestic structures, and create works of art. Imagine that in the Valley no one does any of these things for free. To create the sun, such as at the entrance to my room, the man of the Valley will take a hundred gold roundels.

Do you know what “governing” is? Governing means ruling people. You are a master, and you train your own disciples. The governing man doesn’t teach. Such power wants to see a person stupid and cowardly, weak and feeble, gloomy and humiliated, and all in order to make it easier for them to govern. Do you think, Nao, that the people of the Valley with such values brought into the rank of the benefactor will be able to resist the scourge that has fallen upon them? Will the mystery, as to where the people disappeared, be solved? I will repeat again: no. And praise heavenly wisdom that not only I think so. The rulers of Elinor decided the clans and the Council of Four could not, as before, rule the Valley, that they would again be immersed in strife and discord. Therefore, they’ve decided that this should be taken upon by someone who doesn’t care about wealth and power. And such a person can only be found among the people of Ulutau.”

*Money, wealth, power...*

Of course, Ulari had read about all this and heard about it from the Master. But for the time being he could not explain or imagine what this power could look like and how it could be manifested in reality. *This power*. The very word itself sounded both sweet and threatening at the same time. *Power... money*.

*In the Valley, people chase money, although in fact it is just golden roundels.*

“Did they turn to you, oh hovering over the sky-high distances Ino-to?” Nao asked once his respected interlocutor paused.

“They turned to our whole our nation! The rulers of Elinor decided one of the Ulutau must come to the Valley in order to rightly rule it and prevent people from getting bogged down in wars and conflicts.”

“Are you going to the Valley, teacher?”

“He-he!” For the first time Ino-to laughed, displaying the few teeth he had left. “I’m already too old for this. No, Master Nao, you will go to the Valley!”

“Me?” Nao jumped back, surprising Ulari.

“You, you!” the serene Ino-to replied, continuing to laugh.

“But why?”

“Because I decided so! Because you comprehended the teachings of Tau and were able to build your own teaching! Because you are strong in spirit and body! Because you have a bright mind! Because you will stand against the temptations of the Valley!”

“If it’s your will, Ino-to, I’m ready! But I do not even know what it’s like to govern!”

“To govern is to call people to order and justice, while remaining true to who he is and continuing to comprehend his own Tau!”

“Can I go to the Valley with my school?” he asked as Ulari, Sa’Ea, and Mou’Kaa exchanged glances.

*So, will we share the journey with our teacher?*

“You will definitely take your pupils! Let whole families that are not afraid of trials and changes follow you. Elinor is our mutual home and to carry enlightenment and reason to the world is our duty! I will address other masters, those who would want to support the will of the people. But remember, Nao, it is you who will be the main one in the Valley! From now on, you have accepted what has not been accepted by any Ulutau – power!”

## 4

The novices of the School of the North Slope walked along the narrow mountain paths toward the morning sunrise. Sometimes it was necessary to tread on slippery icy roads and risk falling into the misty cloudy abyss. But even the youngest travelers could, if necessary, balance on the thinnest rope stretched over the abyss. They were well prepared by Master Nao.

It was the Master’s will for the School of the North Slope to continue existence on the native land of the Ulutau. This is when the mountain people first encountered an unexpected problem. Previously, masters repudiated their schools; some went into solitude, some were afraid of responsibility and just joined the community, and some people left the country altogether. History also shows several masters were expelled by the joint council of the school community, but in all such cases, a new master was recommended by Ino-to.

As it turned out, Nao himself found a way out of this situation by leaving his wife, the most faithful supporter of his teaching and closest to him in spirit and reason, in the mountain country. Master Nao lived, prospered, and continued to practice the teachings as nearly half of the school and entire families decided to follow him to the Valley, including his son. Despite this, Ulari continued to be the first successor.

Master of School of Blooming Meadows Kuno, and Master of the School of Snowy Wind Ean, also followed the example of Nao, taking with them several families and leaving successors in schools, following the newly elected ruler of the Valley. The detachment advanced to one of Elinor's greatest miracles – the Celestial Staircase.

How Ulari dreamed of seeing it, and how afraid he was! Everyone was afraid, for they knew that after descending the Celestial Staircase there would be no turning back!

Legends said the monumental structure was built by the First Race, whose representatives were marked with unprecedented strength, knowledge, and wisdom. No one saw the representatives of this First Race; however, the traditions persistently repeated the same thing: they existed! They were supreme creatures, different from people, and were able to build the Celestial Staircase!

There were only two paths to the country of Ulutau. One was the Path of Horror, and the second was the Staircase, although, to be more precise, it was an exit, not an entrance. Having descended to a certain stage, the traveler was caught in the swift water streams that carried him down to the origin of the Kawa River. It was simply impossible to ascend back along the steep rocks. Ulari was ready to question this, as he was firmly convinced that Master Nao was able to climb a sheer rock to a height of at least six hundred lue. At least for now, Ulari did not want to admit the impossibility of returning back, although he remembered perfectly well that everyone who left Ulutau by the Celestial Staircase disappeared forever.

It was terribly, terribly scary for Ulari. It was not a fear for his life, as it is, in principle, alien to the Ulutau. It was a fear for his soul.

*And what if life in the Valley really turns out to be so terrible the heart can't accept it? If the people in the Valley are so stubborn and insidious, then why should the Ulutau go there at all?*

*Elinor's fate is in our hands* Ulari thought, recalling Ino-to's words at his reclusory.

Well, the Path of Horror was still there. But apart from Tau, only one person was able to pass through it, and that was Azir Amunjadee. He was from the Djunit people. His skin was dark with hair was like a crow's wing. Many of his images were kept safe in the libraries of Tokana.

They say that when Tau thought he reached the limit of his inner strength, he threw the Demon's Flesh into the waterfall of the Celestial Staircase and the waves picked up the relic and carried it away. But the Demon's Flesh returned to Tokana with Azir Amunjadee, which helped him overcome fears and gain strength in order to defeat the terrible demons. The wise men of Tokana met Azir, but soon the outlander entered the philosophy of Tau himself, and in his heart, he was pure and selfless. The man of hot lands became a friend of the mountain people, having lived in Tokana for many years. When Azir's hair began to turn gray, he asked the masters and Ino-to for permission to leave Tokana before his death. He wanted to see his family, his children, possibly his grandchildren, and most importantly – to give the other people of Elinor his books.

Ino-to and many wise masters blessed Azir's return, believing his books would bring a lot of light to Elinor, so Azir descended the Celestial Staircase, taking the Demon's Flesh with him. The years dragged on, and many people from the mountain began to yearn for the good old man nicknamed the Rogue Azir, who had conquered their hearts. And how much joy there was when once, from the east, Azir returned! It turned out that during his wanderings, relatives forgot about him and his children had scattered around the world and disappeared. Being an old man Azir decided to live his life until the end in Tokana and was able to pass through the Path of Horror for the second time.

## 5

As the days dragged on and the Ulutau descended even lower, it became chilly and damp as they walked in the thick, cloudy darkness. The disciples' wet bodies trembled with cold, and the journey was hard even for Master Kuno and Master Ean. And only calmness, composure, and the iron will of Master Nao gave them the strength and power to move forward – more precisely, to move down!

Three days later, the cloudy veil dissipated and the rising sun quickly warmed the children of the mountains. A majestic landscape stretched across the bright green blanket below with thin, threadlike patterns wriggling along the river. After passing two stone gorges, the Ulutau finally found themselves at the straight, smooth, and perfectly peeled Celestial Staircase. It was worth traveling the dangerous foothills just to see the wide mountain rivers merging into one infinitely long stream with no end in sight.

*Only the First Race could have created this! Truly, these people were powerful and skillful! For none of the present masters would not have been able to do this.*

Perfect coordination and fighting skills were no help here, and at first, walking down the staircase was very hard. It seemed like one wrong step would have you at the foot of the Staircase before you would have wanted to be there. Hanging over the abyss to indulge in meditation was one thing, balancing the abyss was something entirely different. Ulari quickly adjusted and was able to help the others, as Master Nao caught two slow-moving children who were about to lose their balance. Again, the steadfastness of the leader helped his people feel confident.

Eventually the trek became easier for everyone, as they managed to sleep on small spaces throughout their journey. It was unknown whether people of that era could walk without stopping or sleep in unimaginable positions. But they took care of each other and the spaces really helped, giving the travelers the rest, they so needed.

By the end of the fifth day, the roar of the waterfall could be heard, as mighty streams of water slipped through the crevices that were under the last step of the Staircase.

The staircase was ending and the abyss, just beginning – a bottomless pit, into which the waterfall disappeared.

“Should we go straight there?” Inao asked his father in an alarmed voice.

“Remember, my pupil and son, that doubts give rise to fear!” Master Nao replied. “Listen to me all! Conquer your doubt! And if you do not believe me, know that this way was suggested to me by Ino-to, our brightest sage. Believe in yourself!”

After uttering these words, the Master was the first to step into the seething water and disappear downstream. Masters Kuno and Ean stayed back to step into the waterfall last. Ulari, no longer having any doubts, followed their example to help others with a kind word and support. First, with timidity, and then with increasingly greater confidence, the pupils of the School of the North Slope began to make their descent into the unknown. It now was time for Ulari to go. He knew there was no return!

As powerful waves picked him up and rushed him downstream, Ulari thought the water would cover his head and flatten him with its weight. But on the contrary, it carried him smoothly and easily as though it were taking care of him. He did not fly or fall down, but slid.

The stream carried his body into the warm waters of the river Kawa where Ulari dipped his head for the first time. After emerging, he saw his detachment, led by Master Nao, on the shore. All were safe and sound. They had to only wait for Master Kuno and Master Ean.

“So, we have descended from the skies to the ground!” declared Nao.

Henceforth, the School of the North Slope was divided into two parts.



## 6

And then the Ulutau met the Vedichs. Judging by the conversations, many mountaineers still feared these strange forest inhabitants. Quite explanatory! After all, the redheaded Vedich girl showed that they really could turn into wild animals. However, Ulari fully trusted the words of his master. Moreover, before them there were no warriors or men, but just children.

But this incredible skill continued to intrigue the Ulutau. Simple and understandable was the power of Master Nao, allowing you to immobilize the enemy. This was incredibly difficult to achieve such a skill, as the other forces available to the Tau masters, such as levitation, could be easily explained.

*But to turn into an animal so easily! To change your appearance... how was it possible? After all, the bones must break, the flesh must change.*

Ulari was convinced that even his master could not unravel such a secret, but for now the most important thing was that he called the Vedichian people harmless.

Together they all walked along the shore of Kawa for several days. Master Nao announced that the Vedichs were free to go. However, Wey-Leya asked to travel together; at least to the city of Kawa.

At first, it looked very strange. For sure, the forest dwellers should have been harboring an ulterior grievance for such an unpleasant first meeting. The offense was brought to Wey-Leya, but Master Nao was wise, quickly found a Common Language with the Vedich girl, and apologized. She accepted and judging by her behavior, no longer held a grudge.

As a result, both nations regarded the collision on the coast as a misunderstanding.

Ulari himself became acquainted with Fao and Ina, rather grown-up and cheerful girls. They told him that they could turn into squirrels, martens, raccoons, and ferrets. Curious, Ulari asked for a demonstration, but they laughed loudly.

The young Vedich with greenish hair looked at his communication with the girls with obvious indignation. If he remembered right the boy's comrades abbreviated his name to Nome, but Ulari would never be able to utter the full name.

*Strange names these Vedichs have! Although they themselves say these names were prompted by the forest; nature prompted them. What a nature they have, that whispers such names!*

When the city of Kawa appeared on the horizon, Ulari became a little sad. He managed to make friends with the forest people and he very much hoped that his path would one day again intersect with Fao and Ina in the Valley.

Masters Kuno and Ean also left the squad, entrusting their schools to Nao. They returned to the waterfall of the Celestial Staircase to await new envoys from the mountain people.

## 7

As Kawa was getting closer and closer, Ulari began to see the differences. Tokana was made of huge stones and built on majestic peaks, whereas Kawa was small and compact like a toy and stood on the river. The Kawa houses were made of wood and the city was surrounded by a high hedge of tall pine trunks, pointed upward. Master Nao called this hedge a fence. He explained that it protected against wild forest animals and robbers.

Nao, like everyone else, was seeing the Valley for the first time, but had already read almost everything about it in the information about the remaining nations brought to the Tokana by Rogue Azir. Having learned the local language, Rogue Azir translated many books about his people for them, and also wrote several of his own in the Ulutau language. The Ulutau were taught the Common Language using his books.

Ulari never understood why they needed to learn the Common Language until he met the Vedichs. And it turned out to be very convenient! How would the Vedichs know the language of the Ulutau, and vice versa if not for the Common Language? The Vedichian people spoke it terribly, as if they had just learned, and it was Wey-Leya who spoke the most. Fao and Ina had to be asked to repeat what they said several times to understand what they meant.

At the entrance to the city, their squad was met by a strange man with long blond hair wearing a leather suit with steel heels – an outfit which obviously didn't resemble armor. The Ulutau themselves didn't wear armor either, but in Tokana's libraries there were many pictures of the

Taurs and one could immediately understand that armor was needed to protect against demons. This stranger's clothing would not help in battle; the cloth was sewn chaotically. And on the bridge of his nose the man wore a metal frame with transparent glass circles.

"He's from the Tuasmatu people," Nao explained.

"What's on his face?" Ulari inquired.

"It seems that it helps him to see better."

Tuasmatu! Or Mechanicum, as they were also called. This nation was related to the Ulutau and the Itoshins. However, if Emperor Tosho blessed the mountain people, then he cursed the Mechanicum! Itoshin Kunu-Lau left the city of Shohan without the knowledge of the Emperor, and afterwards with like-minded people he founded his kingdom in the west.

*Mechanicum, according to stories, are strange people. They are smart and inventive, but don't share their secrets, so information about them is very contradictory. They say that Mechanicum can use their technologies to create people from stone and revive them, they can build special devices to swim in under the water, they can almost build the second Celestial Staircase.*

But who in Tokana believed such stories?

"Master Nao," said the same Mechanic, "It's good to see you!"

"You know me?" the Master asked with surprise.

"They sent me especially to meet you!" The stranger smiled, but that smile was cloying and disgusting. Ulari's attention was immediately drawn to this. After all, any Ulutau feels sincerity. The smiles of Vedichs were sincere!

"Who are you?" asked a clearly puzzled Nao.

"My name is Eoamit Asmalou. I am the representative of the Reyro kingdom, a glorious Tuasmatu people. The burgomaster of the Great Cities has instructed me to meet you and lead you to the Valley with all the honors."

"It's not worth honoring," Nao waved him away. "Our people do not accept this. However, I am grateful for the warm welcome."

"The leader of the city of Kawa is already aware of your arrival, and has prepared the best chambers for you in his own home."

"It's not worth it! We'll stop at the guest house. What's it called?"

"The inn? What are you talking about?" the Mechanic spoke heatedly before the Master. "It is extremely uncomfortable in there! Hard loungers, meager food."

"On the journey, we slept on rocks and ate what we had," the Master interrupted. "Thank you, but we will choose an inn."

"And you will not visit the governor of Kawa?"

"Does he relate to the Valley?"

"He fulfills the will of the Burgomasters of the Great Cities."

"Does he know why the Valley was deserted?"

"Not at all, just like everyone else. Neither I nor the Burgomasters."

"In that case, we'll go to the inn if you have nothing more to say."

"Then until tomorrow... come to the pier! The river ship will take you to Eavette in a couple of days!" Asmalou held out a heavy bag, "A gift from the Burgomasters! This is money! We are aware that it is not being used in the Ulutau country, but here you will have hard times without it. By the way, they simply don't allow you to go into the inn."

The Mechanic quickly disappeared from sight, and the Master remained standing, holding the gift in his hand, which he either did not have time to, or just could not, refuse.

*This Eoamit Asmalou is insistent indeed, you can say nothing else. What will be next?*

The wooden city struck the Ulutau. And the inn, scolded so much by the Mechanic, seemed to be an abode of ancient fairytales. It was so unusual inside! In a separate outbuilding stood tall beautiful animals that looked like mountain deer. They were called horses and people rode them.

Inside the tavern, there was a delicious smell of roasted meat and fragrant vapors from drinks that sharply warped the mind. Master Nao said that people in the Valley drank such drinks which turned them into fools. Why they drank them, he did not know.

The dinner was just amazing. Ulari and the other Ulutau never ate such delicious and unusual food but praised it. However, at night almost all their stomachs twisted. Some spent the morning in the special rooms, and when there was no more space there, others were right behind the inn.

## 8

The Master openly confessed to his disciples that he did not want to go to the pier or travel with the ingratiating Mechanic. However, the route that ran along the river was the fastest indeed, and the offer had to be taken advantage of.

Eoamit Asmalou outwardly was unimaginably glad to see the Ulutau.

*Maybe he did not expect us to actually come?*

The School of the North Slope experienced more and more miracles, and on this day was excited to sail on a ship for the first time. However, they quickly learned from Captain Torros, a mighty bearded Guawar, this was not a real ship, but a river boat.

Captain Torros, wearing the traditional Guawarian caftan girded with a red sash to which a sharp curve of a saber was attached, shared a lot of interesting things about this seaworthy craft. He told them that the ships in the sea had much higher sides which allowed them to stay on the waves better. They also had wide sails and a device called a keel.

Ulari missed or did not understand some things, but ships sounded quite different than the craft they were on. With no language to call their own, they spoke the Common Language using a Guawarian dialect and some Ulutau words went misinterpreted.

The team of strong muscular men sang songs as they leaned on the oars, and the boat seemed to literally fly across the river's surface. Given there were women and children on board Ulari felt the oarsmen's songs too obscene, but convinced himself that he probably misunderstood unfamiliar words.

Ulari and Master Nao were standing at the stern when Asmalou approached them with his fake smile. He wanted to say something, but Nao was ahead of him.

"I don't understand," the Master began. "I thought that the Valley was completely deserted, that there were no people left!"

"Quite right."

"But in tiny Kawa, I counted more people than in huge Tokana!"

"Quite right, again!" repeated the Mechanic, "Having learned about the mountain in the Valley, the people immediately rushed to bring life to it!"

Nao said nothing. And when Asmalou left, he turned to Ulari and said:

"They hurried here to quickly get rich! This is the Valley, my dear disciple, and the customs are like that!"

At night, they slept in the open air and the next day arrived at the Lake of the Ancestors in the evening. Such large lakes could not be found in the Celestial Plateau, and the beautifully deep waters hinted of violet in the twilight. Sailboats, similar to Captain Torros's ship roamed the lake; slowly moving the barges and longboats loaded with goods, some so heavy that people from the shore dragged them with cables. And there was no number to the fishing boats on the lake.

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