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His Emissary, Caprara, currently resident in Istanbul, will be taken hostage, although accorded the privileges fitting to his station, and accompany the Ottoman army to his homeland, where he may then, at his leisure, witness it being blown asunder from end to end.

* * *

The seyis hurries back from his morning prayers to his horses. The city is bursting with sound: wheels grinding over stone, men shouting, animals calling, birds chattering, storks clapping their bills, seagulls cawing, the baş imrahor barking orders. His horses have to leave for Edirne today with the Sultan. Even this force is to be divided. The Sultan wishes to hunt. He anticipates being in Edirne in December. The Vizier anticipates being in Edirne in November. The Vizier is leaving after the Sultan. The Sultan is to go to Edirne by way of every forest in Rumelia. The decisions of Sultans and Viziers are beyond the reasoning of seyises. Seyises deal with each day as it comes. They must live day by day according to the Higher Will.

Insignificant seyises look after horses – at the whim of their masters. And Envir Altinay Paşa has now become the seyis' master.

Envir Altinay Paşa is a skilled horseman and he handles horse and weapons well. He is a whirlwind of a man with his strong arms and the flying darts, he is a lion with his white teeth and his roar, he is an acrobat and can bend down in the saddle and pick a dart up from the ground and hurl it again. He has been riding Bora every day and although the horse has responded well, he trots and canters and corners and gallops with his ears back. The man is competent: he holds the reins well and sits properly, he looks out over the horse's head and not into it, he is relaxed and his hips move in unison with the horse's muscles – he is a fine horseman: the men cheer and even the seyises and slaves shout and whistle, he can hurl a çirit dart further than anyone and has knocked opponents clean from their saddles with one well-aimed shot. He relies on his hands to do this and his legs to do that. Even the Sultan has changed elbows as he cradles his chin watching the games and he too, is a fine horseman.

But Envir Altinay Paşa neither notices nor knows how a man's inner instincts are minutely recorded by horses.

He does not know that the voice the horse hears is not the outer but the inner one. It is the inner voice to which a horse first responds and then to the outer. If these voices are at odds then the horse obeys at a level which is mechanical, and will work only mechanically. The horse will not be able to use his talents. He will not be able to fit his mind to the mind of the rider nor move his legs as finely as he is able.

Something stains Envir Altinay's heart that makes the horse hold his ears back. Envir Altinay might be a Paşa, he might go to the mosque and pray five times a day: he might give ten percent of his income to the poor and walk like a man with the heart of a bull and the bearing of a Ghazi knight – but the horse knows something about him which he does not reveal.

'Show me a horse and I will tell you about his master,' the seyis breathes: 'I'm glad Bora belongs to me.'

The seyis watches as Envir Altinay ends the game of çirit. He has won again. Now he flings the reins over the horse's head and drops from the saddle, slaps Bora hard on the neck, barks an order to the seyis and swaggers across the dusty, roaring, cheering, whistling ground, past the column of Theodosius and the obelisk, past the spiral snakes on the spina and flops on to the Bokhara rugs under the trees to drink apple chai and croon with the silk-draped, dark-eyed daughters of the Viziers and Paşas and their silvery laughter who have come to pull the hairs on his chest and drown in his eyes.

The seyis leads the black-sweated Bora back to the stables. The horse nips the sleeve of his chemise and holds it in his teeth. He knows his seyis knows and his seyis knows he knows. We do our best. If a man does not know, he does not know; there is little hope. The horse steps on, drops the seyis' sleeve and feels the mottled pink, reassuring fingers tighten on his neck under his mane.

A high pitched squeal from Azarax in the stables signifies one who knows. The seyis would recognise that voice anywhere. Out of the voices of thousands of horses, he can pick it out as easily as he would a needle glinting in the saman. Bora responds. The horses greet each other in the cool of the marbled interior with noses to knees and the flying front foot. Muzzle to muzzle, the crested neck, the whicker. Saddle off and a bucket of water across the back. The seyis smooths the water and sweat off with the flat of his hand. The horse looks around as though he has entered the stable for the first time: the seyis smiles. 'Bora,' he says and splits a colossal water melon into quarters, a half for him and a half for Azarax and as tenderly as a mother for her newborn child, gazes on, squatting down beside them as they slobber and gulp and chew and drool, their eyes flat and calm in the unity of each other's company, their seyis who watches over them and the sweet, cool, pink flesh of the watermelon.

The flies buzz in the stables, the noise of the çirit games cease, and the afternoon slows. A slow sea breeze ruffles the leaves of the trees in the inner court and in the stable yard. The seagulls caw overhead and namagua doves coo softly in the branches.

Azarax stands peacefully in his stall, eyes glazed as though suspended from the normal run of life, not quite asleep, not quite awake. Bora sleeps the sleep of a horse, eyes half-open. The seyis kneads the horse's muscles and hums some strange, terse little tune.

He waits until he hears the echoing footsteps of the baş imrahor retreat down the white marble into the long, hot afternoon. Except for the horses, the stables are empty.

The seyis collects his bow and quiver. He makes a tiny sound which flicks the switch that restores Azarax to animation, watches him stretch and yawn, clench his jaw, and shake. The seyis puts a hand to the muzzle, Azarax's big brown eyes swing to meet his and the horse is ready. On goes the bridle. On goes the cantle-less saddle. Up vaults the seyis. An unspoken word to Bora and he and Azarax clip out of the stables into the lowering afternoon sun.

The seyis leaves the instruction to his horse. Azarax walks and then, in his own time, he racks. From racking he turns to quarter trot.

The seyis is alert, waiting. It is a game.

From quarter trot, the horse gathers to half then to full then to extended trot.

The seyis obeys the horse.

Suddenly the horse switches his gait, his head comes up, the seyis feels his big powerful hind quarters spring and feels the three-beat drum of a canter.

It is a slow, paced canter.

From paced canter he moves effortlessly into a slow gallop.

From slow gallop they go to half, three quarter, then full.

The horse gallops. Sand flies behind him.

His breath rises and falls with each stride.

There is magnificence in the rhythm. The pace is powerful and even. The wind buffets in the seyis' ears. The horse's ears are levelled with the wind. Wind billows the clothes of the seyis. His eyes stream with water. The speed is high.

Of his own volition, the horse hits the sand harder.

The horse can feel his own power. He loves to feel his own power. He loves to feel his own power with the seyis because the seyis loves to feel his power and shouts in the wind to the horse that he is a fine horse and very strong.

He shouts it again and again.

He feels incredibly free.

It is as though the world is spinning beneath their feet.

The horse and the seyis are a streak of light in a blur of flying walls and sea and sky.

The seyis is low in the saddle and now the horse pulls on even harder. His stride has lengthened and it is enormous.

They belong to the air.

They belong to the air with the pounding touch of the hoof on the face of the earth and the horse spins it faster still.

This horse is stretched right out.

He goes even faster.

His energy is coming from the sun and the wind and the sea and the rushing floor of the world as he flicks it beneath his flying hooves as though it were a weightless ball and now he goes faster still. And then when it is not possible and the seyis is screaming and his eyes are streaming, the horse goes even faster. The seyis releases the reins, draws his bow, turns at the hip and when the horse is stretched out to absolute maximum velocity, the seyis shoots three arrows into his last three hoof prints, the mark of the horseman archer.

Two hearts, two minds, one will.

The hassa sipahi Envir Altinay Paşa is a fine horseman. He is a very fine horseman.

But his groom is in another league.