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**CODES FOR LOVE AND ETERNITY**

Maria's Book

Sofia, 2023

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CODES FOR  
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(MARIA'S BOOK)





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# THE DNA PROJECT

## PART ONE

She sat doubled over, bending toward the water. The rain flowed down her hair, forging a path like through a disheveled field. It gathered it into locks with furrows between them and ran off in wide rivulets, with the melody of water running playfully down a drainpipe.

Her body began relaxing somehow, in spasms – slowly and painfully, like the effort exerted to open a fist that had seized up after having been clenched for too long.

*Thank God I forgot my umbrella, she thought with a feeling of relief. If I had taken it, I would've stayed dry out of habit.*

She looked down at the water in the puddle, which seemed to be dancing under the heavy raindrops. She tried to see her face in it, but all she glimpsed was the shiny, blurred reflection of the street light.

*Or maybe I simply don't exist anymore. Maybe I've turned into that ripply lamp in the reflection.* She liked this idea – it struck her as poetic, and she smiled at the puddle enigmatically.

She tossed her head a little to one side to flip back the wet lock of hair hanging down over her eyes, and that's when she saw her.

It was a woman, standing not a foot away from her. This seemed completely impossible to her – for several reasons. The proximity was disturbingly close, and when she had ended up at this last stop of the tramline at eleven o'clock at night, in the pouring rain, she was certain she'd been completely alone.

She felt cramping in her body again, but this time, from her painfully clenching fist. This presence confused her, surprised her, and made her feel frightened and vulnerable, because it had been following her around almost the whole day today.

The rain suddenly grew stronger and changed its rhythm. The street lamp in the puddle below her shook convulsively. Now she felt the strong need of an umbrella! Her heart was thudding like the clapper of an alarm bell inside her wet t-shirt.

She instinctively understood that she was frightened not so much by the oppressive proximity of the woman to her left as by the crushing feeling of sensing something familiar about her, something already experienced, something personal. In her peripheral vision, she observed her standing motionless, her body bending slightly to lean over the puddle, and she saw how the rain ran down her hair, forging a path like through a disheveled field... and she shivered in horror!

Was it possible for her to simultaneously be herself, in this place where she was at the moment, and to also be watching herself, a foot off to the side?

She wanted to stand up and run away, but she couldn't move, as if she had turned into a natural conduit between the rain and the puddle. Her ears were suddenly roaring as if thunder had crashed inside of them, a clap of thunder whose rumble, instead of fading, was getting louder and louder. In an instant she realized that this wasn't the echo of a thunderclap, but the clanging of the approaching tram, and she noticed in horror that the puddle she was leaning over was right between the two lines of the track. She instinctively managed to overcome her stiffness and jump back from the rails just as the tram clattered up to her almost solemnly and stopped.

"Everything's over!" she repeated to herself breathlessly. "It's finished, do you hear? Get back into the earth!"

\*\*\*

*I am writing this on the last day of my life. Nevertheless, not everyone knows when this sacred day will be, but I do know. Tomorrow at dawn, this pain will end. I am not afraid, and I want nothing – it is as if I am writing only to put the thoughts in order in my head. Truly, I regret much, because this entire story could have had quite a different outcome. But let Aten's will be done!*

*Ever since I was little, I have played baby with dolls – I would hold them to my breast and pretend to be nursing them. I played this with my*



sister and with my girl cousins, and sometimes we even convinced some boy to play the daddy. There was jasmine growing behind the house, and its scent has imprinted itself so deeply in my memory. We would play there with a doll cradle that my older cousin nailed together. The wood had not been smoothed, though it did grow smoother with time; sometimes it left splinters in my hands. But I was so involved in my play that this would not stop me at all, and they were constantly scolding me about some forgotten household chore:

*“Amaya, why haven’t you swept up...”*

*“Amaya, you haven’t tidied up yet...”*

*“Amaya, don’t you hear me?”*

*My name was Amaya then. Exactly when it was that I became Amah<sup>1</sup>, I do not remember, but I have always known that I was born for this work. I am not one of those people who wondered what to do: either everything is interesting to them and they cannot decide, or else they do not find anything interesting. Whether they are simply making excuses, I do not know, and I do not judge them. Maybe they have even forgotten. I have never forgotten; I knew it from my first moment on the Earth. And that is why my life took this turn, why they sent me to serve the queen. A great honor! Mama was very proud of me: when she heard the news, she fell to her knees, praying in gratitude, and cried. But I did not immediately understand where it was I found myself. Our village priest spoke with my father; by that time, I was already a widow, and my father was making my decisions for me.*

*“Tell me, Amah, how can I conceive a male child?” she would ask me.*

*“We will pray, my Queen, we will ask for God’s mercy and we will hope. And if a girl is born, we will love her. That is what we can do.”*

*She would often ask me the very same question. I joined the family when Meritaten was three years old, and Meke had just been born, in the new capital of Akhetaten<sup>2</sup>. Everything was still being built then. I could have figured out that they chose me because I was the mother of a boy, but then, it did not cross my mind. She gave birth to six girls, and I looked*

<sup>1</sup> Amah (international) – wet-nurse, nanny.

<sup>2</sup> Akhetaten (or Akhetaton): the city built as the new capital by Pharaoh Akhenaten (Amenhotep IV), dedicated to the new monotheistic religion and cult of Aten, god of the Sun. The name means “Horizon of Aten.” The city is also known by its later name of Amarna.

*after all of them. And how beautiful they were, Great Aten! Since he did not grant her a boy, how unearthly her daughters were! I watched them grow and wondered what kind of person had thought up the idea that the monarchy and kinship must be passed down through the paternal line, when there is such nobility, pride, and dignity in the female vestment. This was not God's work, but man's. But just try to convince men of this – you would more easily convince Aten.*

*During this time, her husband, the Pharaoh Echnaton, was changing the world. He had begun the great reform and was acting with a creative breadth of vision that verged on fanatical determination. He was changing everything we knew up to that point and which we had grown used to before leaving Thebes and moving to the new capital of Akhetaten. It sprang up before our very eyes, in all its majesty, and along with it, the might of the impressive temple to the god Aten rose as well – the god of the solar disk, who extended the noble rays of his arms to the earth and to all of us. May his will be done!*

*I was always with the girls, and it seemed that the oldest, Meritaten, was more attached to me than to her divinely beautiful mother, Nefern-eferuaten. She shared everything with me. Merita, as we affectionately called her, liked and ardently accepted the changes wrought by her father. It was probably no coincidence that her name meant "Favorite of Aten"! She liked that we left the wealthy palace in Thebes and moved somewhere completely new, where everything had to start over from the beginning. This did not worry or discourage her at all; on the contrary, she joined with sincere enthusiasm the religious rituals and holidays in the name of Aten, which her father initiated, and he adored her not only for this reason. He arranged for the architects to design and build, especially for her a small palace and a lovely garden with an artificial lake, in the middle of which there was even an island and paths with many flowers, each more beautiful than the next. But Merita was the most beautiful flower of all.*

*I was, of course, close to the other five daughters of the pharaoh – Meke, Ankhesen, Tashe, Nefer, and Sete. The absence of a son, however, gave the pharaoh no peace. The queen visibly suffered from the fact that each successive birth brought yet another girl child. After Sete, she seemed to have accepted that she would not succeed in giving her pharaoh an heir, and something in her died. Echnaton sensed this and sent envoys to rulers near and far that they might find and bring him a new woman whom he could make his second*

wife and queen. Thus, one day, the Nubian princess Kiya came to Akhetaten. She bestowed Echnaton with a son, whom they named Tutankhaten – “living image of Aten.” Later, everyone would know him as Tutankhamun, but this happened after he had already ascended the throne and had taken his half-sister Ankhesen as his wife. But were things really what they seemed?

*I want to write down everything that is welling up to burst forth from me in these last hours of mine, because I want it to be known, I want the coming generations to know everything that happened, and therefore, perhaps they will not judge, but understand. What a great sorrow! I have little time, but enough, I hope, before my final hour, and may great Aten protect me!*

\*\*\*

She took a deep breath and looked abruptly to the left, convinced that the strange vision had vanished, startled by the noisy, rusted tram.

The inexplicable stooping figure continued to exist a foot away. She stared at the silhouette involuntarily and, dear God, she saw that the outline was beginning to look more like that of a man. The man, with his long, wet hair and his slender, but well-built body, appeared deep in thought and somehow unearthly. The rain had changed its rhythm again, and a slow haze rose from the ground, resembling the mysterious London fog.

In this infinitely long moment, the clatter of the tram door opening suddenly knocked her out of her stupor, and she instinctively jumped inside. The doors banged shut immediately behind her, and the tram slowly rattled away. She looked around. It looked like no one had gotten on or off. There were only two or three passengers in the poorly-lit tram car. In this heavy rain and at this late hour, few people had ventured outside.

In the silence of the jostling and rhythmic rocking, her telephone abruptly rang. She quickly reached for her pocked to stop the sound, as if to keep the old, rusted tram from collapsing. Her phone was ringing a lot today, intrusively and incessantly. At times, anxiously, at others – angrily. But she had neither the will nor the strength to talk to anyone whatsoever. She needed to be alone, to stand in the rain without an umbrella. She had welcomed this rain!

Since this afternoon, her life had turned into an utter mess, disgusting and sticky, which made her feel like she was squelching through mud, sludge, quicksand; it made her feel like she was sinking, choking... She felt like vomiting, and she hadn't eaten anything the whole day.

The image of the woman was constantly emerging in her mind, and she couldn't get rid of it. She had even started seeing it in the puddles at the tram stops. And she so wanted to be rid of it.

The old train came to a sudden stop, and its decrepit doors opened again with a bang. The heavy mist of the pouring rain blew in from outside. She had reached the last stop, situated in the little forest in the middle of the city. She felt claustrophobic. She needed to get off, and there was a bench at the stop. She would not look at the puddles; she would sit on the bench and gaze up at the sky. And the rain would rinse her, slowly, methodically, and thoroughly, exactly the way a cat licks its kitten. At this moment the rain, and the rain alone, was the only thing that could wash this woman's image from her mind.

She got off and sat on the bench. The tram closed its doors and moved away, slowly and rustily. She leaned back and looked up. The wet branches of the pines enigmatically let the sky through. The rain ran down her hair, smoothing it back. She wasn't cold on this summer night, and she felt good being completely wet. Her body relaxed into spasms again – slow and painful.

The memories began surging into her mind – vivid, strong, and painfully alive.

\*\*\*

*How often I speak of sorrow! Yet we were then living with such beauty; everything was being built, everything was new, and we looked forward to the future with such hope. Temples, gardens, the palace, and everywhere artists, priests, excitement, music, everything drenched in sunlight, oh, Great Aten! History will hardly be able to bring together so many learned men and women in one place ever again. I am happy that I saw with my own eyes how all of this was built from nothing; I am happy that fate assigned me the task of bringing up the princesses with love; and most of all, I am happy that I raised my own child in the only city in the world where a person could follow the impulses of their heart and create beauty.*

*From the time he was small, Thutmose loved to make figures out of mud. True, all children dig in the mud, but he seemed to be searching in it for some hidden form, a hidden treasure. When he grew older, he would disappear for days at a time, and I would discover him in the palace workshops. He would neither eat nor sleep during these periods. I worried about him a great deal, but I saw that he was happy. This is why I did not scold him at all. What a wonder a mother's heart is!*

*One day, when we were walking around the garden of Merita's small palace, I caught sight of a splendidly chiseled statue of a young woman; she had stepped gracefully onto her pedestal and was gazing toward the horizon. I asked the girls whether they knew who had made this splendid piece. They looked at one another, blushed, and smiled.*

*"Don't you know, Amah?" Meke asked cheerfully.*

*I replied with a puzzled look.*

*"This was a gift for Merita from your Thutmose," she continued.*

*I was indeed surprised, although I attempted not to let this show in front of the girls. Such unearthly beauty could be inspired only by a very strong and sincere love. Did my Thutmose really love Merita? Since when? Did she return his feelings? These were questions which furiously darted through my mind.*

*I decided that I should delicately talk to Merita. I had to find out what was in her heart. She had always shared with me. But I also knew that I needed to talk to Thutmose as well. A love like this could turn out to be ruinous for him, or it could lift him up higher than he had even dreamed. Oh, Thutmose, Thutmose, for the heart there are no borders or obstacles that cannot be overcome! Merita and Thutmose were of the same age. They had known each other since they were quite small. They grew up together.*

*Late in the evening, when the whole city had grown quiet, Thutmose came home. His hair and body were soiled with mud. He replied that he had been in the sculpture workshop.*

*"Why didn't you tell me about the gift you made for Merita?" I came right out and asked him.*

*He looked at me and blushed, as if he had thought this would somehow remain unseen. He looked at me, and we locked eyes, but he continued to keep silent.*

*"Do you love her?" I calmly asked.*

*"I have never loved anyone more, mother. Merita is the most divine creature I know. She is everything I have ever wanted," he said, without taking his eyes off me.*

*He was speaking with the determination and depth of a mature man, in spite of his still being a boy of fourteen years. Something quivered in my heart, but I declared, "Let it be so, son."*

*Thutmosé's gaze, his expression, and the way he spoke to me reminded me of his father, whom he had never seen. My boy had already become a young man. How quickly time flies – it seems like only yesterday that I last saw his father.*

*Love exists outside of time.*

\*\*\*

The whirlwind of painfully vivid memories began with a lifelike apparition. She experienced it as being somehow heavy and greasy, sticking to her whole body – both inside and out. She could not wash it off with soap and water, nor could she flush it out internally, even with the help of strong alcohol, and she had tried both the former and the latter many times.

She remembered sitting on a slate-blue couch, across from a woman who stared at her in a peculiar way, and she secretly scrutinized her with her gaze.

*Is she a Miss or a Mrs.? Nooo, she's too old to be unmarried. And she looks too good to be an old maid. On the other hand, you can see she doesn't have kids... People with these kinds of professions don't usually have kids. And the ones who manage to produce offspring anyway are committing a crime against humanity.*

It was unpleasantly quiet in the room. So quiet that the ticking of the little Mickey Mouse alarm clock on the desk under the window sounded loud, intrusive, and slightly neurotic.

*I'd be willing to bet the alarm clock doesn't measure whole minutes, but quarter minutes!" she had thought to herself with annoyance. A cheap trick for robbing people.*

The woman across from her had been staring at her with that peculiar smile for some ten minutes now. The woman sat motionless the whole time; she had crossed one leg over the other, and her ash-rose

jacket somehow blended in with the wallpaper behind her and gave the illusion that she herself was part of its motif.

*That's definitely what she was going for*, Maria thought with suspicion.

Just then, the woman looked at the alarm clock, exhaled softly, recrossed her legs with the other leg on top, and said in a quiet voice, monotone but firm, "One more time: Hello, Maria. You haven't answered the questions I asked you fifteen minutes ago. How do you feel? How was your day today? Do you have any expectations, requests, or questions for me?"

*Don't expect me to so much as yawn during this appointment!* Maria instinctively clenched her body into a fist on the couch, and against the background of its slate-blue color, she looked like a grain of sand stuck in an oyster.

"Or you can just say whatever pops into your head, just like that, totally spontaneous and natural," the staring female wallpaper motif continued to drone.

Maria did not even flinch. She was sitting immobile and hostile on the slate-blue couch, with her gaze seemingly following the hands of the alarm clock, but in her peripheral vision, she followed the lady with an eagle eye and did not miss a single one of her words or movements.

"And do you know why you're here?" the lady asked, crossing her legs in the other direction again and once more freezing like a motif from the wallpaper. Maria didn't budge.

"Alrighty, let's try something different. From your behavior, I see that you either have nothing to tell me about yourself, or you just don't want to. So let me tell you what I already know about you, is that okay?"

Maria remained completely motionless, but a feeling of leaden heaviness appeared in her abdominal region.

"Your name is Maria," the lady continued in her monotone, "and you're fifteen years old. You study at an elite high school and you manage the material well. Is that right so far? Do you have anything to add, to refute, to change?"

Maria didn't even blink.

"Fine, then I'll continue. According to your parents, you're a very intelligent and bright child, but what worries them is that a week ago,

they found out that you have sixty-seven unexcused class absences from the beginning of the semester till now, that is, over a period of three months, is that right?”

*If they'd gone on their latest long and useless trip, they wouldn't have even found out!* thought Maria angrily.

Her parents had a strange and very “humanitarian,” as they liked to say, hobby, under the pretext of which they were usually gone anywhere from three to six months out of the year. They volunteered for the preservation of endangered animal species in Africa. Last year, for example, they were saving the bald ibis by building special nests, under the guidance of a group of African zoologists, which they then distributed around the African steppes in a Land Rover Defender.

And at sunset they would drink red wine on white linen chaise longues in front of some luxurious villa, and with classical music playing in the background, they'd talk at length about the intoxicating number of virtues with which they were both endowed.

This year they needed to collect the newborn bald ibises from their respective nests and carry them to the Souss-Massa National Park in Morocco so they wouldn't become the victims of predators or die of hunger.

The woman from the wallpaper suddenly interrupted her thoughts.

“But what worries them even more is that in this same period of time, you've lost about fifteen kilograms.

*Ha! Did they really notice?! Maria felt frightened and astonished at the same time. Frightened, because she had been trying to wear larger and baggier clothing so it would not show that she was wasting away day by day, and astonished by the fact that her parents had noticed at all.*

“This is really worrying them, Maria! They've given up their next three-month project in Africa because they're worried about you.”

*They'll be more worried about what the neighbors'll say if I happen to croak while they're gone!* Maria sensed the metallic lead in her stomach getting hot, melting, and taking on the form of liquid lava.

“And something else very important – they know the reason behind your condition!”

Maria was internally startled by these words, but she instantaneously regained her composure, and not so much as a muscle on her face



moved. *That's completely impossible. Speculate as much as you want!* she thought feverishly.

Suddenly the wallpaper across from her stirred, and the monotone lady stepped out of it, stood up, and moved toward her desk.

"I want to play you a recording. It was made with a Dictaphone your father put in your bathroom. Do you want to hear it?"

Panic rose in Maria's body. She felt the liquid lava looking for a path to escape.

\*\*\*

*It is time to reveal the truth. For so many years, I've held it tightly within my soul, like a priceless pearl that I had to keep in a rough shell overgrown with seaweed and sand, so that now I am not sure if I can even open it and show it to the Sun (may Great Aten forgive me for these words!), but considering my approaching fate, I feel obliged to do it.*

*Behind Echnaton stood a being possessed of a more powerful spirit than his, but chiseled into a more fragile, elegant, and tender body. This was his enigmatic and divinely beautiful wife, the mother of the six girls of whom I was the nanny – Neferneferuaten.*

*She was only known by this name among the Egyptian priestly elite. It means "The splendid beauty of Aten" (and not at all by chance!), but the common folk and everyone else in the palace knew her as Nefertiti.*

*What almost no one suspected, however, was that she had a pernicious influence over her husband. Because long before he began to change our external world, she had begun to change his internal one – his mind and the thoughts in his head. Consciously or not, he had turned into a hypnotized executor of her strong suggestions.*

*The palace gossip had it that she was the one who made him believe that worshipping the mysterious powers in the visible and invisible world must come down to the one single, concrete, and total divinity – the god birthed life and bestowed strength – or, called by his true name – the Sun itself.*

*I have heard her say to him, "Because the solar disk, my beloved Ruler, will always and everywhere intertwine with your higher essence and throughout the divine manifestations of your personality, it will project on the visible earthly world."*

*And so, under her magical insinuation, Echnaton proclaimed Aten as the supreme – and later, the only – god of Egypt. And thus he began subsequently, with a daring amounting to fanaticism, to destroy the temples and sacred inscriptions of the previous divinities.*

*The Egyptian priests and a large part of the population were truly frightened, and they tried to subdue him by reminding him of where his roots were, but he replied unflinchingly, “There is only one god – my father. I can turn to him both day and night.”*

*But this was not all, not by a long measure! Nefertiti participated in the religious ceremonies side by side with Echnaton, and at times she even led them herself, as a full equal! An action which completely contradicted the individual power of the pharaoh! She went so far as to command them to create a gilded fresco on the wall of the palace that depicted the Pharaoh Echnaton together with his three older daughters, Merita, Meke, and Ankhesen, under the rays of the Sun-God Aten! And Echnaton raised her up, day by day, into a cult, giving her divine status, in order to emphasize her close connection with the new and supreme god Aten, whom she served.*

*Gradually, a part of the frightened and confused elite of Egypt began instinctively to sense who stood behind the actions of the leader and wanted to remove the pharaoh’s queen. They publicly accused her of not being able to give birth to a future leader. The dangerously intelligent Nefertiti quickly grasped where things were heading and manipulated the pharaoh into taking the Nubian princess Kiya for his second wife.*

*After all of this I, without having the right to choose, turned into an integral part of the following events.*

*When people want something so badly and think of it day and night, then God denies it to them as a lesson. I never insisted on my only child being a boy. And here he is, a boy. Maybe for us, mere mortals, it is easier to resign ourselves to what is, but my queen did not shy away from difficulty. How much she reproached herself, how she prayed, how many secret rituals she performed, how many heretofore unknown herbs she discovered, and how many healers and soothsayers passed through her chambers, only she knows. The girls grew up without a mother; she simply was not there for them. The queen had need of a disciple, not a child, and the person closest to her was Merita. The oldest, the first born, the pearl, my most cherished. A strange thing – she is actually the only one*

*I did not nurse; she was three years old when my son and I arrived in Akhetaten, but I cherish her so. She is a pure soul, so noble. My greatest pain is for her.*

\*\*\*

The peculiar semblance of the woman from the wallpaper turned back to Maria, portentously waving a small audio cassette from the recording device in her hand.

“I’m putting it in.”

At the beginning, only some crackling could be heard, probably coming from the device itself.

The lady pushed the button to fast forward, because apparently nothing could be heard for a certain amount of the recording.

A little after she turned the recording back on, the opening and closing of a door could be heard, then steps, the gushing of a faucet, and immediately after the faucet – of the lid to the toilet bowl.

Next, a choking sound was heard, followed by a cough, and finally, similar to the bellow of an animal, a sound that was clearly that of someone vomiting into the toilet. The sound was sinister – as if someone was pouring their anger into the plumbing, all the while screaming in pain. Then the sound of the water in the toilet bowl, followed by nose-blowing, and then – water in the sink and the sound of angry vomiting once again. This went on at least four or five times, and finally – something like a sigh of shame and relief, then the door opening and closing again.

Maria sat there, very pale and balled up like a fist. Now, against the background of the blue couch, she looked insignificant and defenseless.

“Maria, you’re suffering from bulimia,” said the woman, in just the same monotone, before blending back into the wallpaper, “and if things continue like this, not only will your health be seriously threatened, but also your life.”

The lady paused a moment to increase the power and significance of the words that followed.

“Luckily, with me, your mother happened upon a good expert in the treatment of this psychological illness, which is still not very well

understood. But to do this, you have to work with me. I've cured more than twenty-five young ladies around your age, and permanently, at that. Unfortunately, our time is up for today. I'll be expecting you in two days, on Thursday, after school. Give some serious thought to whether you're just going to stay silent again."

Maria remained white as a ghost and frozen on the slate-blue couch. She had the feeling that she was completely frozen and numb on the outside, but inside, she was full with hot lava that was scalding her and welling up, ready to erupt.

The little Mickey Mouse alarm clock on the desk rang, sounding somehow silly, and the woman reached to stop it.

"And Maria, I forgot – you have a homework assignment. From today to Thursday, count how many times a day you vomit."

Just then the lava that had been welling up in Maria's stomach erupted in the form of a powerful geyser and soaked the slate-blue couch with its hot odor of bile and acid, as well as the ash-rose of the facing wall, the Mickey Mouse alarm clock, and the entire left half of the monotone woman.

\*\*\*

*I do not have the necessary courage to reveal the name of my son's father yet; I will only mention that he was part of Egypt's chosen people. Unlike me. I was not one of them at all.*

*I loved him exceptionally! And when he passed away, I had the feeling that he was doing it above all because of me. To soften my unhappiness that I did not have the good fortune to be born under a lucky star and I was not rocked in the bosom of the wife of some pharaoh or golden nobleman. It was in fact precisely for this reason that we could not be together.*

*After his death, I often talked to him at night. Especially after young Thutmose would fall asleep unexpectedly in my lap, before he had finished his dinner, exhausted by fatigue, or dusty, because he was too worn out to wash, with arms and legs scraped up from scuffling with his friends and dogs in the brambles, but with the smile of a happy and loved child, in spite of his fate. I would share my fears and worries about Thutmose with his father, and he would always answer me correctly and wisely. He would give me important advice and would*

*somehow be present in our lives, even as he was absent. I know I will meet him again in the Hereafter, as long as I can figure out how to find the road there (I hope the great Aten will guide me!), but I also know that he will always be beside me through my whole earthly journey. And beside Thutmose!*

*Ever since I heard my son's revelations about Merita, I began to secretly observe the two of them. I found that he and Merita met quite frequently – actually, every single day, in the early afternoon, when the sun had already passed the middle of the obelisk. This was the time when no one was looking for Merita for any reason. She had finished her morning lessons, and it was not until sunset that she would go to the ritual hall of the large palace, where she would perform the daily worship of the great Aten alongside the pharaoh and her mother.*

*Thutmose would usually wait for her around the statue, pretending to be correcting some tiny flaw. After he saw Merita descending behind the hill of the palace, he would slowly and absentmindedly set off – again, as if quite by chance – after her. Merita would meet him behind the hill with shining eyes, her whole being radiating beauty and happiness. Then they would hold hands, running like little children over the hill, whispering to each other secretively, as if there were someone nearby who might hear them, and then they would burst out laughing.*

*When I saw this for the first time, a stone fell from my heart – glory to Great Aten, their love was true, burning, and most importantly – shared! I was happy for them with all my soul, and I secretly cried tears of joy, well hidden in the grasses. My two favorite children loved each other in a beautiful and infinitely pure way! What greater joy could there be for a mother?*

\*\*\*

When she came home around six-thirty in the morning, after the avalanche of memories that inundated her at the bus stop in the pouring rain, she had the feeling that she was returning home after a long journey. The hallway seemed foreign to her, and her favorite African ritual masks, a gift from her mother and father from when they had still been together, looked somehow unfamiliar hanging on her wall. She was soaked to the bone, with mud and pine needles stuck to her,

smelling of the forest and the tramline, but she felt much cleaner and bathed than she had several hours ago.

She had an anxious feeling of having been away a long time, and she sighed in relief when she saw the date marked on the company calendar in the kitchen, still on yesterday's date.

"God, I've been gone for less than a day, and I'm already in a panic," she thought to herself. "Enough, Maria, grow up already!" and she wagged a scolding finger at her reflection in the hall mirror.

The house was perfectly tidied and smelled clean, something that always brought her pleasure. In all the chaos that was spinning around in her head, this little island of safety, the exact way it looked, acted on her like a mother's womb.

She made herself a warm, aromatic cappuccino with her expensive new Italian machine, and before sitting in her favorite yellow rocking chair in the living room, she pressed the button on the answering machine of the landline phone out of habit.

Three beeps and a short crackle later, the recording started playing.

"Hi, Mutsi!" She heard the ringing voice of Misha, her best friend since childhood. Misha knew quite well that Maria hated being called "Mutsi" – it made her sound ditzy and shallow, which she certainly was not – and this was probably exactly why Misha regularly called her just that.

"I really don't feel like us each being depressed alone in this horrible, torrential rain that's been coming down since four o'clock and will probably finish God knows when, so I propose that when you get off work, we go to The Captain and down a few shots of tequila. Then we can find a cozy little movie theater to watch some half philosophical, half romantic melodrama, which will give us a reason to pick up a nice bottle of white wine and go cry to our hearts' content at your place or mine, what do you say, huh?"

Maria instinctively smiled. Misha was the most chaotic creature in her life, but who, in some strange way, brought a perfect order to her own chaos.

The device beeped and began to blink, showing that a pause was coming. Immediately after it, the next recording started, from which Misha's voice resounded again.

"Yoo-hoo, Marilyn! Give me a sign, please, when I should start worrying about you, because you're not answering your phone, and it's

a quarter till eight, and I don't even want to think that you're still at work! I'm opening a bottle of white wine and I'm giving you exactly five minutes to get home so we can watch *Good Night, Kids!* from different places. And then we'll think about whether you're coming to my place or I'm coming to yours and what we're gonna do. I'm hanging up and waiting. Oh, by the way, I have a fantastic idea for your book, I definitely have to tell you about it!"

Maria had decided to write a book. Actually, the idea had not been hers at all.

Some time back, she had remembered the words of her psychologist from her teenage years, who had once told her, "Vomit up everything from your soul onto a pile of blank pages, Maria. Then put on a white dress and go out in the middle of the night to ritually burn it somewhere! This is a really strong message to your subconscious, and you'll see that after this, it will agree to leave you alone."

Maria longed for her subconscious to give in and leave her alone, and that's why she obediently made several attempts in this direction, but nothing happened. When she confronted the blank page, at the mere idea that she needed to "vomit," she would fall into a stupor and literally freeze up.

During one of their "tequila sessions" at The Captain, she had shared this with Misha, and Misha had selflessly rushed to save her. She was constantly thinking up topics and methods to help Maria start writing, but the result was always the same – stupor and writer's block before the white page.

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*Several months later, however, something happened that clouded my joy at the children's love and made me shudder in fear. This happened when Thutmose came to me one evening with his dreamy gaze directed at the sickle moon, as I was laying the laundry out in the meadow in front of our house, and he said to me, "Do you know, mother, I'd like to build the most illustrious kingdom of all times in the lands on the banks of the River Nile. Do you believe I could do it?"*

*My legs went weak and I almost sat on the grass on top of the wet clothes. I remained silent, and I remember only that the rhythmic chant*

of the cicadas managed to somehow soften the pounding of my heart in my ears. I probably stayed like that for several seconds, but it seemed like hours to me. Finally, I managed to overcome my emotions and I answered him, trying to look completely composed:

*“Thutmose, you know very well that in these lands in the valley of the Nile, the laws for inheritance of the throne are absolutely unshakable.”*

*He gave me a furtive look and replied, “If this is so, then who is ruling right now, mother, in spite of the tradition imposed that women should never be allowed close to power? In the supposedly men’s world of pharaohs and priests, with their thousands of secrets and enchantments, there’s no place for the eyes of women, is there?”*

*I was astonished by this answer of his! Could a boy of fourteen years reason in this way? Had someone intentionally filled his head with such things? I quickly realized, however, that Nefertiti’s behavior was so obvious that even a blind man could see it. The latest thing she had succeeded in doing was to convince Echnaton, and then also the mercenary priests – by showering them with gold and expensive gifts – to declare her the daughter of the great and the only Aten, which let it be supposed that she would reign together with the pharaoh until his death, and even after that, all the way until her own, if fate determined she would live longer. This boldness of hers had led to societal discontent, but Nefertiti approached wisely and managed to win over the opposition. And where that did not work, she acted mercilessly. Thus, two of the pharaoh’s advisors died suddenly under uncertain circumstances, and shortly thereafter, the same happened to his favorite cousin, from whom he had been inseparable since childhood.*

*After this she began placing her trusted people among the palace entourage, and she was always searching for paths and opportunities to do the same in all of the higher spiritual circles. There was simply no way that my son had not been a witness to multiple discussions and conversations on the topic.*

*His voice abruptly yanked me out of my thoughts.*

*“Merita is doing everything required of her to perfectly learn the secrets both of governing and of the invisible world that her mother and father are passing on to her personally. And they realize that she is far more intelligent and elevated than the majority of the men around her. She will be the future ruler of Egypt, and I will protect her. I’ll stay by her side for better or for worse, and I will be faithful to her to my grave!”*



*I looked at him in fright.*

*“But Thutmose, what you’re saying to me is absurd and completely impossible!”*

*I probably turned white as a sheet, because what Thutmose had declared about Merita’s intentions for the future (especially those of her mother!) had also occurred to me, but I somehow had not dared to admit it, even to myself! I had understood by intuition alone that the present actions of the intelligent and ambitious queen were being carried out with a much longer-term goal in mind. She was simply trying in every way possible to guarantee the transmission of the throne to her daughter Merita! And now, especially after she had been recognized as a daughter of the great and only god, Aten, this supposed that her daughters were as well! O Great Aten, Nefertiti, besides being the surreptitious founder of a cult to you, was also about to impose the rule of a female dynasty – something unheard of and unseen before this moment! And why was she educating Merita in the ancient knowledge and ways, which she herself no longer professed?*

*Thutmose took my hand and pulled me out of the confused and worrisome thoughts that were swirling in my head.*

*“Mother, you have no idea how advanced Merita already is! She can read scrolls that tell of the Sun’s travels in Duat. She is learning the names of the inhabitants of the Hereafter by heart, and she can draw their sacred images! She knows certain incantations for overcoming the thousands of obstacles that have to be overcome in this journey. She is the Chosen One! She is the Next One! The First and the Only!”*

*From the time I was small, I was taught that after the physical death of the body, man walks the same road to a new life in Duat, in the Hereafter, as the Sun God makes every day in his nighttime travels toward the new sunrise, but I knew that only men of noble and divine lineage were versed in this secret.*

*“I don’t want to know any more!” I was barely able to get out; I threw down the laundry and ran in the house to hide.*

*At that moment I hadn’t the strength to accept many things! I had no strength to accept what had been arranged as Merita’s future mission for quite some time. I had no strength to accept that my son, at his still tender age, was fully aware of everything that was happening. And above all, I hadn’t the strength to admit to myself that Thutmose’s desire to build the*

*most illustrious kingdom of all times in the lands of the Nile Valley had a solid basis – because royal blood flowed through his veins!*

*I could not accept it, and I was afraid. Afraid of what would happen when the discontent with the pharaoh and his pious wife finally erupted. The priests and the common folk could put up with a new religion, a new god, even an uncharacteristic monotheism; they could put up with the pharaohess interfering in state and spiritual affairs; but could they put up with the transfer of the throne along a female line? After this conversation with Thutmose, fear became lodged in my soul and never left it again. What would happen to Egypt when this moment came? What would happen to my precious girls, to Thutmose, to my dear children?*

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Maria was startled to hear Misha's increasingly combative voice again, and she practically jumped. The next message was playing.

"Heeeey, I'm starting to get jealous now! It's ten forty-eight. At some point, enough is enough, and now you've gone too far! Why aren't you answering your phone, damn it! The only excuse I would accept at this hour of the night is that you're with Brad Pitt, George Clooney, and Antonio Banderas at some cool pizzeria on Vistoshka and your phone's been devoured by a Neapolitan Mastiff who was kept on a strict diet for three days!"

Maria's phone case, a gift from Misha, looked like a donut – a joke about her huge addiction to sweets.

"And one more thing – I already have a totally clear idea for where to find the infamous driver for your off-road race in Egypt! It's intriguing – don't miss out! But hurry, because I've almost finished the wine and this monotonous rain outside isn't having an encouraging effect on me at all."

Riiight, the off-road race in Egypt... Maria's latest unrealized whim. She had decided to take up extreme sports. Actually, once again, the idea had not been hers.

"Lay down a new track in your mind, Maria, a totally new one! Try something different, unexpected, even something frightening," her old psychologist had told her on a different occasion.

And since Maria had seized on the work "track," she decided to take up off-roading. In the beginning, she didn't know the first thing about

what it even meant; she only knew that it was something different, unexpected, and intimidating. After she started reading different online forums and websites, it became quite clear to her that this really was something different, unexpected, and intimidating! And since this time she was firmly determined to distance herself as much as possible from her failure in book writing, she found herself an entirely real plot to participate in. And how real! An actual weeklong off-road race in the deserts of Egypt, with a rented jeep. The idea of seeing Egypt, and in this way at that, seemed impressive and especially attractive to her. With no roads in the desert, she would be quite literally off-road. The idea of tracing her own track in Egypt seemed important and fateful.

All of this pleasure didn't come cheap, and it also required no small amount of preparation and equipment, but Maria was determined to make it happen at any cost! She bought a helmet and a driving outfit and attended two elite courses in navigating with road maps and solving complex azimuth problems. She did extremely well, and this gave her satisfaction and self-confidence.

"This will be my thing, Misha, not writing books, but racing in the desert! And I'm so crazy about everything Egyptian! I have no idea why, but it's like something is pulling me there."

Maria was at the peak of her enthusiasm when, at a particular point, she realized that she could not go to the race in question alone, because there she would be expected to be part of a crew – a crew consisting of two people, a driver and a navigator.

And if she was preparing to be the navigator, then who in the world would act as the driver?

Of course, Misha had once again rushed in selflessly to save the day, and she was finding all kinds of idiots from online forums, off-roading meet-ups, and extreme sports clubs. She had even put an ad in the free newspaper *Call*, which had been answered by some small-town tractor driver, from Kaspichan, with fifteen years of experience in driving and servicing tractors!

The last message cut suddenly into Maria's thoughts. It was Misha again, of course. This time, however, she spoke in a sleepy drawl.

"Hey there, if you're mad at me for something, you'd find another way to tell me, wouldn't you? I know I probably kid you a little too much, I call you "Mutsi," and sometimes I even contradict you, but I

do it because... because I love you, you understand me, don't you? It sounds so stupid! My grandfather, rest his soul, used to say, 'I beat you because I love you.' Oh, I can't keep my eyes open anymore, but tomorrow we're going to have a serious discussion about your behavior!"

There was a crashing sound from the receiver, as if Misha had suddenly fallen asleep on it.

Maria shook her head with a smile and took a sip of the warm cappuccino in her cup.

She dropped into the chair and began rocking back and forth rhythmically. She needed to think through the previous day in peace and quiet.

What a strange day...

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*Then Meke died. Maybe it was actually her death that was the beginning of the end. Everyone suffered, they loved her very much, and I, too, but strangely, I, with my strong faith in the Hereafter, accepted it more easily. Yes, I had carried her in my arms. Yes, I had wiped her tears, but today she had no need of this. She did not owe me anything. I simply did what was needed. Aten does not owe me anything. He dies every day and is born the following morning. Who am I to doubt in the great meaning of his creation? I consoled all of them. The queen cried a lot, as if not so much for Meke as for her own woeful fate. She only bore girls, and what's more, they were beginning to die.*

*"Let Aten's will be done, O Queen!" What else could I say to her?*

*Soon after Meke's death, messengers brought the news that the Hittites, those eternal enemies, had rebelled again and had taken our territories along the border. They had looted, killed, and in the end, taken Canaan. The Hittites had reached Gubla<sup>3</sup> and could continue even further south, toward Sidon. There was no one to stop them because they had routed the Egyptian military garrison north of Gubla.*

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<sup>3</sup> Gubla or Gubal was the name used in the Armana letters for the city of Byblos (in modern-day Lebanon) in North Canaan. The Armana letters are a collection of clay tablets containing diplomatic and military information about the politics waged by the New Kingdom of Ancient Egypt in Canaan. The name comes from Amarna, the capital of Pharaoh Echnaton in Upper Egypt.

*The Pharaoh Echnaton was greatly angered by the news. He was as strongly devout as he was impulsive. Under no circumstances would he allow an inferior and weaker empire to occupy part of his much larger and more powerful one. For him, this was, above all, a challenge to his power, and he believed that he ruled through divine decree.*

*Early one morning – on the first day of the second month of the season Shemu, the season of the harvest – the entire city gathered on the square around the large temple of Aten. Echnaton and his most important commanders took part in rituals for success before setting out. In order to be quicker and more able to maneuver, the pharaoh had gathered a large army of the best prepared soldiers, who had arrived in the capital in the preceding days from different corners of the empire.*

*After the conclusion of the ceremonies, the pharaoh, along with all of his commanders and soldiers, embarked on several dozen ships moored along the banks of the Nile. One by one, the ships maneuvered away and slowly pulled into the current of the river. This way they would reach Memphis quicker and more easily. From there, they would continue north on land to Sinai, toward the lands of ancient Canaan, and even further north, to Gubla. There they would meet the advancing Hittites.*

*Before embarking on the imperial ship, Echnaton said farewell to each of his daughters. Finally, he hugged and kissed the queen. He radiated confidence and readiness to endure what awaited him. When she saw his ship disappear from view, a strong, sharp pain pierced Nefertiti's heart. I understood this only by a small gesture – she pressed her hand over her left breast.*

*Whether this was an omen, I did not yet have any way of knowing then. I realized the meaning of that gesture two months later, when the ominous news came that the Pharaoh Echnaton had perished in battle. My entire world crumbled.*

*What would happen to us now, to Thutmose, to Merita, and to Queen Nefertiti?*

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Shortly after all the recorded messages finished playing, the telephone rang again, but louder and seemingly with its true ring. Maria got up and picked up the receiver. On the other end she heard Misha's

heaving breathing and her voice exclaiming, “Thank God you’re alive! Where’d you disappear to out of the blue like that?”

Maria sat cross-legged on the floor, because the telephone cord wouldn’t reach the chair. She had thought so many times about getting a different phone, or at least a longer cord, but she never seemed to have time.

“It’s a long story.”

“I have all the time in the world! And I’m coming over right away! You’re not planning to disappear anywhere again in the next few minutes, are you?”

“No, I’m not.”

“I’m revving up my flip-flops and coming. And Mary...”

“I’m here.”

“You have no idea how happy I am that I’m not your husband!”

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*But everything in its own time! In the beginning, after the reports of the pharaoh’s untimely death had made their rounds, great confusion and chaos set in. Suddenly all the opponents and enemies of Echnaton’s government crawled out of their holes like snakes.*

*Nefertiti shut herself away in the depths of the palace and seemed to sink to the bottom of the earth. The girls stayed huddled around me, and Merita either stared feverishly into the empty space before her or cried inconsolably.*

*Thutmose paced around the house nervously, almost like he felt personally responsible for finding a solution to this complicated situation in one of the corners. He simply happened to be the only male present among so much female sorrow.*

*Rumors began circulating from all sides that after Echnaton’s death, everything that had been built up to this moment was doomed to devastation. And these concerns were largely well-founded. By law, the crown would quite soon be placed on the head of the five-year old Tutankhaten, who would begin ruling through a strong regentship due to his immaturity. This situation would inevitably be used by those among the old priests of Osiris and Isis who had survived, as well as by the repressed former elite. Uprisings and heavy persecution against the worshippers of the god*

*Aten were expected, beginning with Nefertiti, her immediate family, and her attendants.*

*As a first step, of course, they would try to return the capital to Thebes, with the idea for Akhetaten to gradually be obliterated, its temples to be looted and burned, and the new architecture to be razed to the foundations, so that the existence of so much “desecrating blasphemy” might be forgotten forever.*

*A frightening, frightening future was being drawn in front of us! What a strange thing life is. It presents situations in which you go from being on the top to plunging into the abyss. And it is not a matter of just a single person, but of entire throngs, cities, and peoples! And for what? Because of a different point of view and the power that revolves around it.*

*The ordinary mortals began to pack up their household belongings, preparing to leave the city. I hugged the girls, who huddled against me like small, defenseless children, and I wondered what I could come up with to reassure them.*

*“Amah,” murmured Ankhesen, “everywhere in the palace they are saying that after the pharaoh’s untimely death, Nefertiti will try to take his place, but she will be doomed to failure...”*

*It is interesting that Ankhesen did not call her “our mother,” but Nefertiti – as if at the moment she did not sense her as a mother, but as an institution that must enter into its role and fix the situation.*

*“...Because she is not a man,” the girl continued, dissolving into tears. “What is sinful about being a woman, Amah, what is insufficient and unworthy in that?”*

*I rocked her in my arms like a little child and stayed silent! Her words opened an old wound inside me. I remembered once when I addressed Thutmose’s father with a similar question: “What is sinful in being a woman, my protector, and what is sinful about having been born into poverty?”*

*“In this world there is no one to give you a fair answer to this question, Amaya, for the simple reason that the world itself is not fair. But there, in the Hereafter, in Duat, everyone is equal; you and I will meet there, and we’ll be together forever.”*

*“And why do you think that only people of noble descent are sent to the Hereafter? Why are only they chosen to be supported with ancient knowledge and rituals along the Path?”*

*"I already told you – because this world is not fair. But I don't believe that only the nobility will reach Duat. I'm sure that every soul knows the Path and can pass through the challenges along the way all by itself."*

*He was pensive for a moment, his mind soaring somewhere in space, and then he turned to me with a smile and began kissing my face and neck.*

*"Besides, I will come myself to lead you personally, so don't worry about it."*

*"And who has told you that you'll be first?" I said, startled. He smiled.*

*"You have an important task, Amaya – you have to look after our son, Thutmose, and to make him into a strong, worthy, and wise man."*

*Then he narrowed his eyes slyly.*

*"Whereas if you're first, you'll come back to take me, won't you?"*

*"As long as I can find the Path there myself and then I succeed in overcoming all the priests, guards, and people surrounding your bed to send you off so that I can get to you." This came out of my mouth somehow spontaneously and with a sigh.*

*"We're talking a lot today, but there are things that cannot be expressed with words."*

*His lips traveled down my body, embroidering tender and passionate landscapes, and as I got lost in them, I forgot what we were talking about. We made love until morning.*

*"Yes, Amah." Nefer's voice startled me and pulled me out of the beautiful memories. "Everyone says that the main reason for the black days that lie ahead of us is that the pharaoh has no son, no son who is worthy and grown up enough to continue the ideas of our father."*

*Out of the corner of my eyes, I saw Merita shudder at these words. Thutmose also sensed it and instinctively started fussing over her.*

*"What do you think, Merita?" It was almost like Nefer wanted to provoke her.*

*Merita lifted her sad eyes.*

*"That doesn't matter to me at all at the moment. You're putting the cart before the horse."*

*Everyone looked at her in astonishment.*

*"Don't you understand!" She held out her arms in despair. "Echnaton's body was found in pieces, and now it cannot be prepared to journey the Path to Duat!"*