

TIMES OF CONTEMPT

Andrzej Sapkowski



<http://en.thewitcher.com/forum/>

Vedymins, a. called Witchers by Nordlings (ob.) – a mysterious elite cast of warrior-priests, probably an offshoot of Druids (ob.). According to folk beliefs they possessed magic powers and superhuman abilities with which they fought against dark spirits, monsters and evil creatures. In reality, being the masters of swordsmanship, they were used by Northern Chieftains in their tribal battles. During the battle they fell into a trance, most probably caused by autohypnosis or drugs, during which they fought with blind fury while completely immune to pain and even the most severe wounds – the fact which strengthened the superstitions about their supernatural powers. The theory about their supposed origins as products of mutation or genetic engineering had not been proved. V. are heroes of many folktales of Nordlings (por. F. Delanhoy “Myths and legends of Northern Peoples”)

Effenberg & Talbot,
Encyclopaedia Maxima Mundi, Book XV

Chapter One

In order to make a living as a courier, Aplegatt used to say to the youngsters applying in the ranks, two things are needed - a head of gold and an ass of steel.

A head of gold is indispensable, taught Aplegatt, since inside of the leather sack under his clothes the courier keeps only messages of low importance, the kind that can be fearlessly entrusted to the treacherous paper. The truly important, secret messages, the kind that matter a lot, the courier must memorize and tell the one whom they are intended for. Word by word, and sometimes these are not simple words. Hard to pronounce, much less memorize. In order to remember and make no mistake in repeating one needs truly a head of gold.

As for an ass of steel, well, that every courier will find out by himself. After having spent three days and nights in the saddle and having run for a hundred or even two hundred miles on rocky roads. Ha, sure, one does not sit in the saddle all day long, one dismounts sometimes to rest. The human can withstand much, but the horse cannot. But when time comes to go back in the saddle, the rear sometimes yells 'God, no!'

But who needs couriers nowadays Master Aplegatt, asked the youngsters. From Vengerberg to Vizima, for example, one cannot pass the distance in less than four or five days, even on the fastest mount. And how much does a wizard in Vengerberg need to pass the message to wizard in Vizima? Half an hour at most. Courier's horse might go limp. Robbers or Squirrels might shoot him, wolves or gryphons might rip him apart. One minute there's a courier, the next he's gone. While a magic message will reach destination point for sure, won't lose the way, be late or become lost. Who needs couriers with wizards everywhere, close to every castle?

Couriers are not needed anymore, Master Aplegatt.

For some time Aplegatt also thought that he was not needed by anybody anymore. He was thirty-six, short but strong and sinewy, hard work didn't scare him and he had, naturally, a head of gold. He could find another job to feed himself and his wife, save some money for his two unwed as of yet daughters' dowry and keep helping the one who was wed already, but whose dim-witted husband had no luck in business. But Aplegatt didn't want to and couldn't imagine himself doing anything else. He was the Royal Messenger.

And suddenly, after a long and painful period of obscurity and inactivity, Aplegatt became needed once more. The hooves thundered on the roads once again. The couriers, like during good old days, again started crossing the country carrying messages from one settlement to another.

Aplegatt knew why it was so. He saw a lot, and heard even more. He was expected to wipe the passed message from his mind immediately, so as not to be reminded of it even during torture. But Aplegatt did remember. And understood why kings suddenly stopped communicating with each other by the use of magic and help from wizards. The messages carried by couriers were supposed to be kept secret from the magicians. The kings lost trust in the wizards, stopped sharing with them their secrets.

What was the cause of this sudden cooling in relations between kings and wizards, Aplegatt didn't know and didn't care. Both were, in his opinion, inconceivable creatures whose moves were incomprehensible – particularly now, in such difficult times. And the fact that difficult times were approaching was hard to miss while traveling the land from one city to another, one castle to another, one kingdom to another.

There were loads of soldiers on the roads. Each new step brought new rows of infantry or riders and each new commander was angry, alarmed, harsh and so sure of his own importance as if fate of the entire world depended on him alone. Also, settlements and castles were full of armed crowds, hustle and bustle day and night. The usually unseen counts and

castellans were marching restlessly on the walls and courtyards, angry like wasps before the storm, they yelled, swore, gave orders and kicks.

In other words, the threat of war hung over them in the air.

Aplegatt rose and looked around. Downhill was a river and behind it were forests. The courier rushed his horse. Time was pressing on.

He was on his way for the past two days. King's orders and letters found him in Hagge, where he was resting after his return from Tretogor. He left the castle at night, galloping along the left bank of the Pontar, he crossed the border of Temeria before dawn and now, at noon of the following day, he was already near the bank of Ismena. Had king Foltest stayed at Vizima, Aplegatt would have handed him the message just this night. Unfortunately, the king was not in the capital – he stayed in the southern part of his country, in Maribor, two hundred miles away from Vizima. Aplegatt knew this, which is why in the vicinity of the White Bridge he left the main, west-leading road in favour of forest paths in the direction of Ellander. It was a bit risky. The Squirrels still prowled the forests and pitiful was the lot of one who fell into their arms or found himself in the range of their bows. But the royal messenger must take risks. Such is his work.

He crossed the river with no trouble – there was no rain from June and water level had fallen a lot. He reached the road leading from Vizima to south-east in the direction of dwarfish smithies and settlements inside the mountain Mahakam. There were many wagons on this road and Aplegatt sighed with relief. Scoia'tael kept away from crowds. Campaigns against human-killing elves continued in Temeria for a year, the pursued Squirrel commandos split into smaller groups and smaller groups kept away from busy roads and didn't organize ambushes on them.

Before the evening came he was already on the western border of Ellander principality, near Zavada village, from where he had a straight and safe way to Maribor. There was a tavern near the road. He decided to give a rest for himself and his horse. He knew that if he left at dawn then just before the sunset he would see silvery-black flags on the red roofs of Maribor towers.

He took the saddle off the horse all by himself, ordering the stable boy to go away. The royal messenger never lets anyone touch his horse. He ate a solid meal. Drank some beer. Listened to the news. There was lots of it. All sorts of travellers stayed in the tavern, from all parts of the world.

In Dol Angra, heard Aplegatt, new incidents took place. Again, the Lyrian cavalry troops clashed on the border with Nilfgaardian ones. Again Meve, the Queen of Lyria, loudly accused Nilfgaard of a provocation and called the king of Aedirn, Demavend, for help. In Tretogor there was a public execution of a Redanian baron who secretly plotted with emissaries of the Nilfgaardian emperor Emhyr. In Kaedwen, joint Scoia'tael commandos massacred fortress Leyda. As a retribution, the population of Ard Carraigh carried out a pogrom, murdering close to four hundred non-humans residing in the capital.

In Temeria, said the merchants from the south, there's a sadness and despair among Cintrian emigrants, gathered under the banner of Marshal Vissegerd. It seemed that the terrible news of the death of Lion Cub, Calanthe's granddaughter princess Cirilla, had been confirmed.

He also heard other, even more terrifying rumors. In villages near Aldersberg cows had suddenly started leaking blood from their udders and the Deathly Maiden, an omen of horrible disasters, was seen at dawn in the fog. In Brugge, near Brokilon Forest, the forbidden kingdom of the Dryads, the Wild Hunt appeared and as everyone knows it is a sure omen of war. As for the cape of Bremervoord, a phantom ship was spotted there and on it's deck stood a wraith – black knight with the wings of a bird of prey on his helmet.

The courier didn't listen very carefully, he was too tired for that. He laid down heavily on the bed and immediately fell asleep.

He woke up at dawn. When he went outside he was surprised – he wasn't the first one to be getting ready for departure and that was a rare event. A black stallion stood next to the well and beside it a woman dressed in male clothing washed her hands in the trough. Hearing Aplegatt's footsteps she turned around and brushed away her long, black hair. The courier bowed. The woman nodded.

Entering the stables he almost crashed with the second early bird, a young lady in velvet beret who was leading an apple mare. The girl rubbed her face and yawned, supporting herself with the help of the horse.

'Oh my' she murmured, passing the courier 'I will fall asleep on the horse... I will fall asleep for sure... Uaauaaua...'

'When the mare starts trotting, the chill will awake you' said Aplegatt taking the saddle off the bench 'Have a safe ride Miss.'

The girl turned around and looked at him like she had just noticed him. Her eyes were big and green like a pair of emeralds. Aplegatt settled the saddle on the horse.

'I wished you a safe ride' he repeated. Usually he wasn't very talkative but now he felt the need to talk with another person, even if that person was just a plain, sleepy brat. Perhaps it was due to the long days on the trail, or maybe it was because the girl reminded him of his middle daughter.

'May the Gods watch over you' he added 'May they keep you from accidents and poor weather. There's only two of you and female at that... and times aren't good. Danger lurks everywhere.'

The girl opened her eyes widely. The courier felt a cold shiver sliding down his spine.

'Danger...' the girl said suddenly in a strange, changed voice 'The danger is quiet. You won't hear it getting closer on its grey feathers. I had a dream. The sand... The sand was warm from the sun...'

'What?' Aplegatt froze 'What are talking about Miss? What sand?'

The girl shuddered and wiped her face. The apple mare shook it's head.

'Ciri!' yelled the dark-haired woman outside 'Hurry up!'

The girl yawned, looked at Aplegatt and blinked as if surprised by his presence. The courier was silent.

'Ciri' spoke the woman again 'Have you fallen asleep over there?'

'I'm coming, Lady Yennefer!'

When Aplegatt finished saddling the horse and took it outside there was no sign of the woman or the girl. The courier jumped onto the stallion and remembered the green eyes of the sleepy girl, her strange words. Quiet danger? Grey feathers? Warm sand? She must have been feeble-minded, he decided. Many of such unfortunates could be seen around these days, insane lasses harmed by renegade soldiers or other thugs... Yes, she was crazy for sure. Or maybe just not quite awake yet? It's a wonder what people sometimes blabber about when still half-asleep.

He shivered again and felt a tinge of pain between shoulder blades. He rubbed his back with a fist.

The moment he was on the road to Maribor he forced his horse into a gallop. Time was pressing on.

He didn't rest for long in Maribor – the day was not yet gone and the wind was already blowing in his ears. The new mount, straight from Mariborian stables, swept the road with its tail. Aplegatt's chest was pressed by the sack with diplomatic post. His rear hurt like hell.

'Pfeh, may yer break yor neck, yer damn yob!' yelled some cart driver behind him while calming the horse scared by the galloping stallion 'He runs like death itself were lickin' his toes! Yer won't escape the Reaper!'

Aplegatt wiped the dust from his eyes.

The previous day he handed the post to king Foltest and then recited the secret message from king Demavend.

Demavend to Foltest. All is ready in Dol Angra. The masqueraders are waiting for orders. Planned time of action: second night of November, after the new moon. The boats must land on the other side of the river two days later.

A flock of crows flew over the path. They were flying to the east, in the direction of Mahakam, Dol Angra and Vengerberg. The courier kept repeating to himself contents of the secret message from the king of Temeria to the ruler of Aedirn.

Foltest to Demavend. First: Postpone the action. Smartasses are preparing a conference in Thanedd. This conference might change a lot. Second: the search for the Lion Cub can be called off. It's confirmed. The Cub is dead.

Aplegatt rushed his horse. Time was pressing on.

The narrow path was blocked by carts. Aplegatt slowly approached the long column of vehicles. He realized right away that he won't be able to make his way past the jam. Turning away now would take too much time and the thought of going around the obstacle through the forest at dusk didn't make him happy at all.

'What happened here?' he asked the drivers of the last cart in the column, two elderly men of which one looked asleep and the other looked dead 'Robbery? Squirrels? Speak! I'm in a hurry...'

Before any of them had a chance to answer, shouts could be heard from the faraway head of the column. The drivers quickly jumped onto the wagons and whipped their horses and oxen. The column started moving ahead. The sleeping old man woke up while the dead-looking one opened his eyes and stared at Aplegatt.

'How impatient.' he said 'Oi, sonny, yer sure are lucky. Had yer arrived here at noon, yer'd be standin' here with us waitin' for a free pass. We're all in an hurry, right, but we had ter wait. How ter get through the closed road?'

'The road was closed? How come?'

'Some terrible man-eater appeared here, sonny. Attacked a knight ridin' with his squire. It's said that the monster ripped knight's head off and horse's guts out. The squire managed ter flee and came back with dreadful tales of the path bein' painted all over with blood...'

'What kind of monster?' asked Aplegatt 'a Dragon?'

'No, not a dragon' said the other man 'They say 'mandygore' or sumfin' like that. The squire said that it's some sort of flyin' beast, right, terribly huge. And vicious! We thought: it'll eat the chuffin' knight and leave, but no! Son of a bitch sat on the bloody path and stays there, right, hiss'n', right, barin' it's fangs.... So, whoever got close and took a peek at the bleedin' monster left the bleedin' cart behind and run like hell. The bloody jam got a mile long and swamps are everywhere 'round, right, no way back or through. So we waited...'

'So many hardy men!' snickered the courier 'And stood there like a stunned mullet. Should have grabbed axes and slayed the beast.'

‘Well, some tried’ said the old man ‘Three dwarves from the merchant’s guard, and with them four conscripts on their way ter Carreras castle, right, to the army. The dwarves got terribly mauled and the conscripts...’

‘Chickened out’ finished the other man and spat ‘Run away the moment they saw that mandygore. Rumor has it that one crapped his pants. Oi, have a look, right, have a look, sonny, right there!’

‘I don’t wish to’ growled Aplegatt ‘Crapped pants are of no interest to me.’

‘Not that! The monster! The dead monster! Warriors are puttin’ it on a cart! See?’

Aplegatt raised his head. Despite the gloom and curious mob he could see a huge carcass. Warriors lifted it up and threw it onto the cart. Horses, nervous from the stench, neighed.

‘No stopping!’ yelled the soldier in command ‘Drive ahead! No blocking the pass!’

The elderly rushed the mules. Aplegatt rode along.

‘So it seems that the warriors did slay the monster after all?’

‘If only’ snickered the elder ‘Warriors, once they arrived, did nuffin’ but yell at people. Stand still, move away, do this, do that. They didn’t rush to the beast at all. They called for a witcher.’

‘For a witcher?’

‘Exactly’ assured him the other man ‘Someone recalled spottin’ a witcher in a village nearby, so they called for him. He rode past us later on. White hair, ugly gob and a big sword. Less than an hour later someone yelled that road is clear, because the witcher killed the beast. So we started movin’. And that’s when yer arrived.’

‘Ha!’ murmured Aplegatt deep in thought ‘I’ve been riding all over the world for so many years and yet I’ve never once seen a witcher. Did anyone watch him killing this monster?’

‘I saw!’ yelled a boy with unruly hair approaching the cart from the other side ‘I’ve seen everything! Struth! Coz’ I stood next to the soldiers, right on the front.’

‘Do tell, kid.’

‘Twas like this’ started the boy ‘The witcher came to the commander. Said his name’s Gernant. Commander said that one name or another, he better get the job done. And he showed where the monster were. The witcher came up, stared for a while and said that it’s an unusually big manticore and he’ll slay it for two hundred crowns.’

‘Two hundred?’ gasped the elderly ‘Was he mad?’

‘Commander said same thing, ‘cept a bit more naughtily. And the witcher answers that this is the final price and he doesn’t give a damn, right, the creature can stay here ‘till the bleedin’ end of the chuffin’ world for all he cares. Commander says he won’t pay this much, right, he’d rather wait for it ter fly away. The witcher replies that it won’t fly away, ‘coz it’s hungry and pissed. And even if it leaves, it’ll come back soon ‘coz it’s his hunting trierri... teri... terotor...’

‘Stop blabbing, you little snot’ growled the old man ‘Say what happened next.’

‘I’m trying! So the witcher says this: the monster won’t leave but it’ll spend the whole night eatin’ the knight’s corpse - slowly, ‘coz it’s inside the armor, hard ter pick out. So then the merchants gathered and proposed collectin’ together hundred crowns. But the witcher said that the beast is called a manticore and its horribly dangerous, so they can shove those hundred crowns up their arses, ‘coz he won’t risk his own for this amount. It pissed the commander off and he yelled that such is the ploughing witcher’s lot to risk their arses. But the merchants must have feared that the witcher will get pissed too and so they agreed on hundred and fifty. And then the witcher took out his sword and went after the manticore. And the commander made a sign against evil after him, spat over his shoulder and said that such devilish freaks ought not ter walk on this earth. To which one merchant said that if the army slew the monsters, instead of messing around with elves in the woods, then there would be no need for witchers at all and that...’

‘Stop wasting time’ interrupted the old man ‘Tell us what you’ve seen.’

‘I’ said the boy ‘was busy looking after the witcher’s mount, a chestnut mare with a white arrow.’

‘To hell with the mare! Did you see the witcher kill the monster?’

‘Errr... I didn’t. I was pushed behind. Everybody was shoutin’ and the horses were nervous, so...’

‘As I thought’ sneered the elderly ‘He didn’t see shit, the little snot.’

‘But I’ve seen the witcher come back!’ protested the boy ‘And the commander, who had watched the whole thing, was pale like a ghost and said to his soldiers that it must be some magic or elvish tricks, ‘coz a normal man can’t possibly be so bloody fast with his sword. The witcher then collected money from the merchants, jumped on his mare and rode away.’

‘Hmm...’ murmured Aplegatt ‘Which way did he go? To Carreras? If so, then maybe I could catch up and have a look at him.’

‘No’ said the boy ‘He went to Dorian. He seemed to be in a hurry.’

The witcher rarely dreamed of anything and even those infrequent dreams were quickly forgotten the following morning. Even the nightmares – and usually it was those that he had.

This time it was also a nightmare, but the witcher could recall at least a fragment. From the whirlwind of unknown but unsettling figures, strange but alarming scenes and incomprehensible but disturbing words and sounds suddenly emerged a clear image. Ciri. Different from the one he remembered from Kaer Morhen. Her gray hair were longer – the same she had the first time he’d met her, in Brokilon. When she rode past him, he wanted to call her but couldn’t find his voice. He wanted to run after her but felt like he was sinking in tar. And Ciri didn’t seem to notice him, she kept galloping further in the night, between the old, twisted willows and alders which waved their limbs as if trying to catch her. And he could see that she was being chased. Pursued by a black horse with a rider in black armor, wearing a helmet adorned by the wings of a bird of prey.

He couldn’t move, he couldn’t shout. He could only watch as the winged knight rides up to Ciri, catches her by the hair, pulls her off the horse and drags her behind him. He could only watch how her face turns blue from the pain and her mouth opens in a silent scream. *Wake up*, he told himself, unable to withstand the terrifying vision. *Wake up! Wake up right now!*

He woke up.

He lay motionlessly for a long time, recalling the dream. Then he got up. He took a sack from under his pillow and recounted the money. Hundred and fifty for the manticores. Fifty for the fogger he killed in Carreras. And fifty for Burdorff’s werewolf.

Fifty for a werewolf. It was a lot for such an easy job. The werewolf didn’t try to protect himself. Cornered inside a cave he knelt and waited for the blow. The witcher felt sorry for him.

But he needed this money.

Less than an hour later he was traveling through the streets of Dorian, searching for the familiar alley and the familiar sign.

The sign read ‘Codringher and Fenn, consultation and legal service’. Geralt however knew far too well that the service provided by Codringher and Fenn had little to do with law and the partners themselves had many reasons too stay away from it’s representatives. He also doubted that any of their clients knew the meaning of the word ‘consultation’.

In the lower tier of the building there were no doors; just a solid, heavily locked gate, probably leading to the stables. In order to get to the doors one needed to go to the back of the house, upstairs and then walk through a dark corridor.

Geralt knocked and backed away. He knew that a mechanism installed in doors could shoot twenty inch long spikes from the concealed holes. In theory, the spikes were shot only when someone tried to pick the locks or when Codrigher or Fenn pressed the triggering device but Geralt often had the chance of finding out that there are no perfectly reliable mechanisms and every each one of them sometimes activates even when it ought not to.

There was likely some device inside of the doors, probably magical in nature, which identified the guests. Nobody from the inside ever asked for a name. The door opened and Codrigher stood at it. Always Codrigher, never Fenn.

‘Welcome, Geralt’ said Codrigher ‘Come inside. And there’s no need to be so nervous, I disassembled the device. Something broke inside it few days ago. It activated out of the sudden and finished off a salesman. Come! What sort of help do you require from me?’

‘No’ the witcher entered the gloomy anteroom like always smelling of cats ‘Not from you. From Fenn.’

Codrigher laughed loudly, confirming the witcher’s suspicion that Fenn was an imaginary person, existing only to confuse the provosts, bailiffs, tax collectors and other unwelcome guests.

They entered a room, a bit brighter than others. Geralt sat on the guest chair. On the armchair across from him settled Codrigher, the man who demanded to be titled an ‘advocate’ and a man for whom there were no impossible things. Whenever someone had any troubles, problems, hardships – they went straight to Codrigher. And then that troubled person suddenly acquired an indisputable proof of the treachery and dishonesty of their business partners. Got a bank loan with no unnecessary impediments. Collected money from a bankrupt debtor. Got inheritance, despite the rich uncle’s threats of not leaving him a penny. His son left prison due to the lack of evidence, and the witnesses withdrew their claims. His daughter’s untrustworthy admirer suddenly lost interest. His wife’s lover had an unfortunate accident. And the hated enemy or any other bothersome individual stopped bothering – as a rule they disappeared without trace.

Yes, whenever someone had troubles, they rode to Dorian, run to the firm ‘Codrigher and Fenn’ and knocked on the mahogany doors. Then they saw ‘advocate’ Codrigher, short, thin, with greyish hair and unhealthy skin of a person who doesn’t get enough fresh air. Codrigher led them to the room, sat in the armchair, put a big, black-white cat on his lap and stroked it’s fur. Both of them – Codrigher and the cat – gazed at the guest with their creepy yellowish-green eyes.

‘I got your letter’ Codrigher and his cat gazed at the witcher with their yellowish-green eyes ‘I was also visited by Dandelion. He was riding past Dorian a few weeks back. He told me a bit about your problems. But he said little. Very little.’

‘Is that so? What a surprise. That would have been the first time Dandelion didn’t say too much.’

‘Dandelion’ Codrigher didn’t smile ‘Said little, because he knew even less. And he didn’t say all that he knew simply because you forbade him to do so. Where does this lack of trust comes from? Even towards a colleague in profession?’

Geralt snorted. Codrigher would have pretended not to notice but he couldn’t because the cat noticed. It opened it’s eyes widely, bared it’s fangs and hissed quietly.

‘Don’t tease my cat’ said the advocate petting the animal ‘Are you insulted by being called my colleague? But it’s true. I am also a witcher. I also save people from monsters and from monstrous troubles. And I’m also doing this for money.’

‘There are differences’ uttered Geralt, still under cat’s unfriendly gaze.

‘There are’ agreed Codringher ‘You are an anachronistic witcher whereas I am a modern one. Which is why you will soon be left jobless while I shall prosper. Soon there will be no strigas, wyverns, endriags and werewolves left on this world. And bastards will always exist.’

‘But you save from trouble mainly those bastards, Codringher. The troubled poor men can’t afford your service.’

‘The troubled poor men can’t afford your service either. Poor men can never afford anything, which is why they get called poor in the first place.’

‘What an unbelievably logical conclusion. And such a breathtaking discovery at that.’

‘One of the aspects of truth is that it’s so breathtaking. And it is true that the backbone and foundation of both our professions is wickedness. Except yours is a diminishing relic of the past while mine is a reality and still growing.’

‘Fine, fine. Let’s get to business.’

‘Finally’ Codringher nodded, petting the cat which purred loudly ‘But let us start with the matters that are the highest in the hierarchy of importance. First thing: my fee, dear colleague, is two hundred and fifty Novigrad crowns. Do you possess that amount? Or could this be that you rank yourself among the troubled poor men?’

‘Before, I’d like to check whether you deserve such a fee.’

‘Checking’ said the advocate coldly ‘is something that you should be doing to your own pockets and doing it very quickly. And once your done, put the money on the table. Then we shall go on to other, less important matters.’

Geralt untied the pouch at his belt and threw it onto the table. The cat abruptly jumped down from it’s master’s knees and run from the room. The advocate put the pouch inside a drawer, without checking it’s contents.

‘You shooed off my cat’ he said with authentic displeasure.

‘Sorry. I was under the impression that the clink of coins is the last thing which could scare your cat. Tell me what you found out.’

‘That Rience’ started Codringher ‘whom you’re so interested in, is a rather mysterious person. I only know that he studied for two years in the Ban Ard school of wizardry. He was expelled after being caught committing petty thefts. As usual, in front of the school waited Kaedwenian intelligence agents looking for potential recruits. Rience let himself be recruited. I didn’t manage to find out what he had been doing for the Keadwenian Intelligence. But the wizarding school rejects are usually schooled to be murderers. Satisfied?’

‘Very much so. Tell me more.’

‘Second piece of information comes from Cintra. Master Rience spent some time in the dungeons there. During Calanthe’s reign.’

‘What for?’

‘For unpaid debts. He hadn’t been there for long because someone paid them off along with the interest. The transaction took place through a bank, with the sponsor’s full anonymity. I tried to track him down but I gave up after the fourth different bank. Whoever bought Rience out was a true professional. And really needed that anonymity.’

Codringher coughed heavily, raising a handkerchief to his mouth.

‘And then, suddenly, right after the end of the war Master Rience showed himself in Sodden, Angren and Brugge’ he continued ‘Changed beyond recognition, at least in his behavior and the amount of cash he threw around. The cheeky son of a bitch didn’t bother making up a new name – he still called himself Rience. And under this name he started an intense search for a certain person, or rather a certain child. He visited the Druids from Angren Enclave who were taking care of war orphans. The body of one of them was later found in nearby woods, massacred, showing signs of torture. Then Rience appeared in Transriver...’

‘I know’ Geralt interfered ‘I know what he did to the peasant family in Transriver. For two hundred and fifty crowns I expected more. For now, the only new information to me was the one about wizarding school and Kaedwenian Intelligence. I know of the rest. I know that Rience is a heartless murderer. I know that he’s an arrogant thug who doesn’t bother using an alias. I know that he’s working on somebody’s orders. But whose, Codrigher?’

‘Some wizard, no doubt. It had to be a wizard that bought him out of the dungeon. You told me yourself, and Dandelion confirmed, that Rience is using magic. Real magic, not tricks known to expelled students. In that case someone has to be helping him, equipping him with amulets, probably also teaching him in secret. Some of the officially practicing magicians keep such secret students and factotums who are used for dirty and illegal jobs. In the wizard jargon it’s called working on somebody’s leash.’

‘If he were working on a magic leash, Rience would use camouflaging spells. Yet he changed neither his name nor appearance. He didn’t even get rid of the burn on his face, given to him by Yennefer.’

‘This only confirms that he’s working on a leash’ Codrigher coughed ‘Magic camouflage is no camouflage, only amateurs use something like that. Had Rience been hiding under an illusion he would’ve been immediately noticed by every magical alarm in town. Wizards can spot illusions perfectly. Even in the biggest crowd Rience would catch attention of a wizard as if he had flames coming out of his ears and smoke out of his rear end. I’ll repeat: Rience is working for a magician and he’s working in such a way so as not to bring on himself attention from other magicians.’

‘Some believe him to be a spy for Nilfgaard.’

‘I am aware of that. Such is the opinion of Dijkstra, the head of Redanian Intelligence. Dijkstra is rarely wrong, so we can assume that he’s right about this particular case as well... But one does not exclude the other. Factotum of a wizard can be at the same time a spy for Nilfgaard.’

‘In other words some officially practicing wizard is spying for Nilfgaard through his secret factotum.’

‘Rubbish’ Codrigher coughed and looked carefully at the handkerchief ‘A wizard would be spying for Nilfgaard? What for? For money? Ridiculous. Hoping for some great power under the rule of emperor Emhyr? Even more ridiculous. It’s not a secret that Emhyr var Emreis keeps his magicians on a short leash. The wizards in Nilfgaard are treated with the same respect as, let’s say, stable boys. And they have just as much influence as stable boys. Would any of our arrogant magicians decide to work for an emperor to whom he’s nothing but a stable boy? Philippa Eilhart who dictates the content of royal proclamations and edicts to Vizimir of Redania? Sabrina Glevissig who interrupts speeches by Henselt of Keadwen with a smash of a fist on the table and a demand that he shuts up and listens? Vilgefortz of Roggeveen who had recently told king Demavend of Aedirn that he had no time for him at the moment?’

‘What about Rience then?’

‘Nothing special. Nilfgaardian Intelligence wants to get close to the wizard by recruiting his factotum. Rience wouldn’t mind betraying his master for a handful of Nilfgaardian florens.’

‘Now you’re the one talking rubbish. Even our arrogant magicians would realize immediately that they were betrayed and Rience would go to the gallows. If he were lucky.’

‘You’re such a child, Geralt. Uncovered spies are not hanged but used. Fed lies and turned into double agents.’

‘Don’t tease the child, Codrigher. I’m not interested in politics or the work of Intelligences. Rience is bothering me and I want to know why and on whose orders. The orders seem to be coming from a wizard. Which one?’

‘I don’t know it yet. But soon I will.’

‘Soon,’ uttered the witcher ‘Will not be soon enough for me.’

‘I suspected as much’ said Codrigher ‘You sure got yourself in some serious trouble, Geralt. It’s a stroke of luck that you turned to me, I know how to pull people out of trouble. In fact, I pulled you out of it already.’

‘Is this so?’

‘Indeed, it is so’ the advocate brought the handkerchief to his mouth and coughed ‘You see, colleague, other than Nilfgaard and the wizard, there is also a third party in the game. Not long ago I was visited by king Foltest’s secret agents. They had a problem. The king ordered them to search for a certain lost princess. The job turned out to be more difficult than previously thought so the agents decided to seek help from a specialist for difficult jobs... While describing the problem, they suggested to the specialist that a certain witcher might know a lot about the missing princess. He may even know where she currently resides.’

‘What did the specialist do?’

‘Initially, he showed his greatest surprise. He was surprised that the aforementioned witcher had not been taken to the dungeons where traditional methods of questioning could be used in order to convince him to say everything he knows and even some things which he doesn’t know but will gladly make up in order to satisfy the interrogators. The agents answered that their king had forbidden them from doing so. Witchers, they explained, have such delicate nervous systems that under torture a vein bursts inside their brain causing instant death. Instead, they were ordered to follow the witcher, but this, too, turned out to be difficult. The specialist praised their common sense and asked them to return in two weeks time.’

‘Did they?’

‘Of course they did. And then, the specialist who already considered you his client showed them indisputable proof that witcher Geralt doesn’t have, never had, and couldn’t have had anything to do with the missing princess. For the specialist had found eyewitnesses for the death of princess Cirilla, daughter of Pavetta and granddaughter of Queen Calanthe. Apparently, Cirilla died of diphtheria three years ago in the refugee camp in Angren. The child suffered terribly before her death. Believe it or not, Temerian agents had tears in their eyes when they heard the testimonies of my eyewitnesses.’

‘I have tears in my eyes as well. I gather, Temerian agents couldn’t or didn’t want to offer you more than two hundred and fifty crowns?’

‘Your sarcasm breaks my heart, witcher. I have pulled you out of trouble and instead of thanking me, you’re breaking my heart.’

‘Thank you and forgive me. Why did king Foltest order his men to look for Ciri, Codrigher? What were they supposed to do after they’d found her?’

‘How naïve. Kill her, of course. She has claims to the throne of Cintra and there are other plans towards this throne.’

‘Codrigher, this makes no sense. The throne of Cintra was burned down along with the royal castle, the city and the whole country. Nilfgaard is in power over there now. Foltest knows it well, so do other kings. What claims could Ciri have towards a throne which no longer exists?’

‘Come’ Codrigher stood up ‘Let us find the answer to this question together. I will give you a proof of my trust... What is so interesting about this painting?’

‘That it has more holes than a fishing net’ said Geralt looking at a portrait in golden frames hanging on the wall opposite of advocate’s desk ‘And that it shows some unbelievable moron.’

‘My late father’ Codrigher grimaced ‘An unbelievable moron, indeed. I hung him in here as a sort of warning to myself. Let’s go, witcher’

They entered the anteroom. At the sight of the witcher, the cat, which was laying in the middle of the carpet and licking its paw, escaped through the dark corridor.

‘Why do cats hate you so, Geralt? Is it because...’

‘Yes. It is.’

Behind one of the mahogany panels was a secret entrance. Codrigher walked in first. The panel, no doubt magically activated, closed behind them. There was a light on the other side of the secret corridor. The room there was cold and the dry air was heavy from the smell of candles and dust.

‘Meet my partner, Geralt.’

‘Fenn?’ smiled the witcher. ‘Impossible.’

‘Possible. Admit it, you thought Fenn wasn’t real?’

‘Not at all.’

A screeching sound could be heard from between the bookshelves and soon after that a curious vehicle emerged. It was an armchair with wheels. On it sat a dwarf with a big head placed on disproportionately thin shoulders. The dwarf had no legs.

‘Let me introduce you,’ said Codrigher. ‘Jacob Fenn, a talented legist, my partner and invaluable co-worker. And this is our guest and client...’

‘Witcher Geralt of Rivia,’ finished the cripple with a smile. ‘I figured it out. After all, I’ve been working on our contract for quite some time now. Follow me, gentlemen.’

They walked behind the screeching armchair into a labyrinth of bookshelves, the size of which could put the Oxenfurt University Library to shame. The incunabula, guessed Geralt, must have been collected by whole generations of Codrighers and Fenns. He was glad for the trust he was given and for the possibility of meeting Fenn. He knew, however, that despite being a real living person Fenn was also mythical, if only in part. The mythical Fenn, Codrigher’s infallible alter-ego was often reported to have been spotted in town, whereas the talented legist had probably never left either the building or the armchair.

The middle of the room was especially well-lit. There was a low, easy to access desktop, which was piled up with books, scrolls of parchment and vellum, paper, ink bottles, bundles of feathers, and thousands of mysterious utensils. Not all were so mysterious though. Geralt recognized forms for counterfeit stamps and a diamond grater used to remove the records from official documents. In the middle of the desktop lay a small arbalest repetier ball and next to it, from under a velvet fabric, sat a large magnifying glass made of polished crystal. Such glass was a rarity and cost a fortune.

‘Found anything new, Fenn?’

‘Not much,’ the cripple smiled. The smile was warm and pleasant. ‘I have narrowed the list of Rience’s potential employers to twenty eight wizards...’

‘Let’s leave that for a second,’ interrupted Codrigher. ‘We’re interested in something else at the moment. Please explain to Geralt all of the reasons why the missing Princess Ciri is an object of wide search by the agents of the Four Kingdoms.’

‘In the girl’s veins runs the blood of Queen Calanthe,’ said Fenn in a voice expressing surprise at having needed to explain such simple facts. ‘She is the last descendant of the royal line. Cintra has a significant strategic and political value. Lost, somewhere far from the sphere of influence, a successor to the throne is a bother, it not a danger when in a sphere of the wrong influence. Like a Nilfgaardian sphere of influence, for example.’

‘As I recall,’ said Geralt. ‘The Cintran law of succession excludes women.’

‘True,’ confirmed Fenn and smiled again. ‘But a woman can always become somebody’s wife and the mother of a male descendant. The Intelligence agencies of the Four Kingdoms found out about the frantic search for the princess started by Rience and assumed that this was the reason. It was then decided to prevent the princess from becoming somebody’s wife and mother. In the simplest and most reliable way.’

‘But the princess is dead,’ added Codrigher quickly, seeing the change in Geralt’s face caused by dwarf’s words. ‘The agents learned it and called off the search.’

‘They have for now,’ the witcher made an effort to sound cool and collected. ‘One of the aspects of a lie is that it never works for long. Besides, the royal agents are only one of the players in this game. The agents, as you yourselves said, were hunting for Ciri in order to thwart the plans of other hunters. Those other ones might be much less susceptible to disinformation. I have hired you so that you would find a way of ensuring the child’s safety. What are your propositions?’

‘We have a certain idea,’ Fenn shot a look at his partner but didn’t find an order of silence. ‘We want to spread, discreetly but widely, a notion that not only Princess Cirilla, but also her potential male descendants, have no right to the throne of Cintra.’

‘In Cintra the distaff side doesn’t take part in the succession,’ explained Codrigher struggling with a new coughing attack. ‘Only the spear does.’

‘Exactly,’ nodded the legist. ‘Geralt said so himself. It’s an old law, even that she-devil Calanthe failed to invalidate it, despite the attempts.’

‘She tried to override it using an intrigue,’ said Codrigher. ‘An unlawful kind of an intrigue. Tell him, Fenn.’

‘Clanthe was the only daughter of King Dagorad and Queen Adalia. After their deaths, she had defied the nobility, which saw in her solely a wife for the new king. She wanted to rule alone. She did agree for a Prince Consort, just to ensure continuity of the dynasty, but his position and authority would be comparable to that of a ragdoll. The old aristocratic families opposed fervently. Calanthe’s alternatives were a civil war, an abdication, or a marriage with Roegner, the prince of Ebbing. She chose the third option. She still maintained authority over the country, but together with Roegner. Naturally, she never let herself be subjugated or relegated to the womanly sidelines. She was the Lioness of Cintra. But formally Roegner was the ruler, although nobody would title him a Lion.’

‘And Calanthe,’ added Codrigher, ‘struggled fiercely to become pregnant with a son. In vain. She gave birth to a daughter, Pavetta, then miscarried twice and it became clear that she wouldn’t have any more children. All her plans went down the drain. Women’s lot. Great ambitions spoiled by a ruined uterus.’

Geralt winced.

‘You’re disgustingly trivial, Codrigher.’

‘I know. The truth can be trivial too. Because soon Roegner started to look for a young princess with appropriately wide hips, preferably from a family with fertility practically figuring on their pedigree chart. And Calanthe found herself in deep trouble. Every meal, every cup of wine could have brought her death, every hunting expedition could have ended with an unfortunate accident. It is therefore no wonder that the Lioness of Cintra decided to take the initiative. Roegner died. The country was at the time plagued with a pox, so his death raised no suspicions.’

‘I think I’m beginning to understand,’ said the witcher, seemingly impassive. ‘The news you are going to spread discreetly but widely around the world, that is. Ciri will become known as the granddaughter of a schemer and a murderer?’

‘Don’t be too hasty, Geralt. Go on, Fenn.’

‘Calanthe,’ smiled the dwarf. ‘May have kept her life, but not the crown, which was slipping further and further away. When, after Roegner’s death, the Lioness took full power, the nobility again opposed violations of the law and tradition. The throne of Cintra was reserved for a king, not a queen. It had therefore been decided: the moment little Pavetta started resembling a woman in the least bit; she would be married to somebody who would become the new king. An infertile queen’s remarriage was out of the question. The Lioness of Cintra understood that her best hopes would be to become a Queen Mother. What’s worse,

Pavetta's husband could be someone who would completely remove his mother-in-law from power.'

'Allow me to be trivial again,' said Codrigher. 'Calanthe did everything in her power to postpone Pavetta's marriage. She cancelled the first plans when the girl was ten years old and again, when she was thirteen. The nobility saw through her scheme and demanded Pavetta's fifteenth birthday to be her last birthday as a maiden. Calanthe was forced to comply. But before that happened, she had achieved what she had hoped for. Pavetta stayed a virgin for too long. She got so horny that she eventually got laid by a random stranger, who also happened to have been turned into a monster. There were some additional supernatural circumstances, some prophecies, spells, promises... The so-called Law of Surprise? Right, Geralt? You probably remember what happened next. Calanthe summoned a witcher to Cintra, and that witcher caused a big turmoil. Unaware that he was being used, he removed the curse from the monstrous Hedgehog, enabling him to marry Pavetta. By doing so, the witcher had given Calanthe easier access to the throne. Pavetta's relationship with the uncharmed monster was, to the nobles, such a huge shock that they accepted the sudden marriage of the Lioness and Eist Tuirseach. The Earl of Skellige Islands was, to them, a much better party than some vagabond Hedgehog. In this way, Calanthe could still rule over the country. Eist, like all Islanders, had too much respect for the Lioness of Cintra to oppose her in anything, and the kingship simply bored him anyway. And so he handed her the full power. And Calanthe, stuffing herself with elixirs and medicaments, dragged her husband to the bedroom day and night. She wanted to rule till the end of her days. And if she had to rule as a Queen Mother, then only to her own son. But, like I said, great ambitions...'

'Like you said. No need to repeat yourself.'

'As for Princess Pavetta, the wife of that strange Hedgehog, already during the marriage ceremony she was wearing a suspiciously loose dress. The disheartened Calanthe changed her plans. If not her own son, she decided, then at least Pavetta's. But Pavetta gave birth to a daughter. A curse or what? However, the princess could always have more children. Or rather could have had. Because then a curious accident had taken place. Both her and the Hedgehog died in an unexplainable catastrophe.'

'What are you implying, Codrigher?'

'I'm trying to explain the situation, nothing more. After Pavetta's death Calanthe fell apart, but not for long. Her granddaughter was her last hope: Pavetta's daughter, Cirilla. Wayward little Ciri, running wild around the castle. Apple of the eye for some, especially elders, since she resembled Calanthe from her younger days so much. For the others... a freak, the daughter of a monster, promised to some witcher. And here's the thing: Calanthe's golden girl, evidently being groomed as her successor, was treated almost as if she was her next incarnation; the Lion Cub of the Lionesses blood, was already back then considered by some to be excluded from succession. Cirilla was a child of a low birth. Pavetta had committed a *mésalliance*. She had mixed the blue royal blood with the common blood of a vagabond of unknown origin.'

'Quite cunning, Codrigher. But it won't pass. Ciri's father was not a commoner at all. He was a prince.'

'Really? I wasn't aware. From which kingdom?'

'Somewhere from the south... from Maecht... Yes, definitely Maecht.'

'Interesting,' murmured Codrigher. 'Maecht has been a Nilfgaardian march for a long time now. It's part of the Metinna Province.'

'But it is a kingdom,' objected Fenn. 'The ruler there is a king.'

'The ruler there is Emhyr var Emreis,' retorted Codrigher. 'Whoever is the king there, it's due to Emhyr's grace. But since we're at it, go check who Emhyr did put on the throne over there. I can't remember.'

‘Right away.’ The cripple pushed the wheels of the armchair and moved with a screech in the direction of one of the bookshelves. Once there, he picked up a thick roll of scrolls and began to view them, throwing the unimportant ones on the floor. ‘Hmmm... got it. Maecht Kingdom. Coat of Arms: silver fish and crowns on the blue-red field...’

‘Screw heraldry, Fenn. Who is the king?’

‘Hoet the Righteous. Chosen through an election...’

‘...by Emhyr of Nilfgaard,’ finished Codrigher coldly.

‘...nine years ago.’

‘Not this one.’ The advocate countered quickly. ‘This one is of no interest to us. Who was there before him?’

‘Give me a second. Here. Akerspaark. Died...’

‘Died of acute pneumonia induced by daggers belonging to Emhyr’s stooges, or to that Righteous Fellow,’ Codrigher once again showed his perspicacity. ‘Geralt, does the name Akerspaark ring a bell? Could this possibly be the daddy of our Hedgehog?’

‘Yes,’ nodded Geralt. ‘Akerspaark. I remember Duny mentioning that name.’

‘Duny?’

‘That was his name. He was a prince, son of this Akerspaark...’

‘No,’ interrupted Fenn, gazing into the scrolls. ‘Here’s a list of his children. Legitimate sons: Orm, Gorm, Torm, Horm and Gonzalez. Legitimate Daughters: Alia, Valia, Nina, Paulina, Mamna and Argentina...’

‘I take back my vicious accusations towards Nilfgaard and Righteous Hoet,’ said Codrigher with all seriousness. ‘That Akerspaark wasn’t assassinated. He was simply screwed to death. Because I assume that he also had bastard children, right Fenn?’

‘He did. Quite a lot. But none with the name Duny.’

‘And I don’t expect to see him there. Geralt, your Hedgehog was no prince. Even if he was sired somewhere in the dark by this boor Akerspaark, he’s separated from the title not only by Nilfgaard, but also by the long line of legitimate Orms, Gorms or some other Gonzalezes with their own, probably quite numerous, progeny. So formally, Pavetta did commit a mésalliance.’

‘And Ciri, being the product of this mésalliance, has no right to the throne?’

‘Exactly.’

Fenn screeched his way back to the desktop.

‘It’s a good argument,’ he said, tilting his big head. ‘But only one argument. Keep in mind, Geralt, that we’re not fighting over the crown. The rumors are supposed to make it clear that the girl cannot be used as a means of taking over Cintra. And that such an attempt could easily be challenged. The girl would stop being a figure in the political game; she would be just an unimportant pawn. Therefore...’

‘She would be allowed to live,’ finished Codrigher dispassionately.

‘From the formal point of view,’ asked Geralt, ‘how solid is that argument of yours?’

Fenn looked at Codrigher and then at the witcher.

‘Not very solid,’ he admitted. ‘Cirilla is still of Calanthe’s blood, even if a bit diluted. In normal circumstances she would have probably ended up tossed aside from the throne but the current circumstances can’t be described as normal. Lionesses blood has a political meaning...’

‘Blood...’ Geralt rubbed his forehead. ‘Codrigher, what is the meaning of the phrase ‘Child of the Elder Blood’?’

‘Why do you ask? Did someone use it when speaking about Ciri?’

‘Yes.’

‘Who had?’

‘Never mind. What does it mean?’

‘Luned aep Hen Ichaer,’ mumbled Fenn suddenly, moving away from the desktop. ‘Literally not a ‘Child’ but a ‘Daughter’ of the Elder Blood. Hmm... Elder Blood... I’ve encountered this phrase before. I can’t recall where... I think it has something to do with elven prophecies. In some of the older versions of Ithlinne’s prophecy texts there are, I believe, mentions of the Elder Blood of Elves, or Aen Hen Ichaer. But we don’t have the full text here; we would have to ask the elves...’

‘Let’s just leave it,’ cut Codringher coldly. ‘Too many matters solved at the same time, too many magpies caught by their tails, too many prophecies and secrets. That’s enough for now. Thank you and goodbye. Let’s go, Geralt. We shall return to the guestroom.’

‘Not enough, eh?’ inquired the witcher the moment they settled themselves in the armchairs. ‘The fee is too low?’

Codringher picked up a metal star-shaped object from the top of the desk and spun it around his fingers.

‘Too low, Geralt. Digging in elven prophecies is a huge burden, loss of time and resources. The need of searching for a contact with the elves because nobody else can comprehend their language in all its entirety. Elven manuscripts are usually filled with twisted symbolism, acrostics, sometimes even codes. The Elder Speech always has at least a double meaning and when written it can have dozens of meanings. Elves have never been happy to help anyone trying to crack their prophecies. And in these times, when there’s a bloody war with the Squirrels in the forests and pogroms in the cities, it’s not safe to approach them. It’s a double risk. Elves can take you for a provocateur, humans can accuse you of treason...’

‘How much, Codringher?’

The advocate was silent for a while, constantly playing with the metal star.

‘Ten percent,’ he said finally.

‘Ten percent of what?’

‘Don’t insult me, witcher. It’s a serious matter. I’m less and less sure of what is going on and whenever something isn’t certain then everything is certainly about money. Therefore I’m more content on percentages than fees. You will give me ten percent of whatever you are going to get yourself, discounting the sum already paid. Do we have a deal?’

‘No. I don’t want you to end with losses. Ten percent of nothing equals nothing, Codringher. I, dear colleague, will get nothing out of this.’

‘Don’t insult me, I said. I don’t believe that you are not doing this for cash. I don’t believe that behind it there’s no...’

‘I don’t give a damn about your beliefs. There will be no deal. And no percentages. Make up your mind about the price for the information.’

‘Had it been anybody else,’ Codringher coughed. ‘I would have thrown them out the doors, convinced that they’re trying to deceive me. But such a noble and naive generosity fits an anachronistic witcher like you perfectly. This is so like you, beautifully and pathetically old-fashioned... getting yourself killed for nothing...’

‘Stop wasting time. How much, Codringher?’

‘Double the amount. Five hundred in total.’

‘I regret,’ Geralt shook his head, ‘That I’m unable to afford such a sum. Not at the moment, at least.’

‘In that case, I renew my proposition from when we first met,’ said the advocate slowly, still fiddling with the star. ‘Work for me and you will be able to afford everything. Information and other luxuries.’

‘No, Codringher.’

‘Why not?’

‘You won’t be able to understand.’

‘This time you’re hurting not my heart, but rather my pride. Because I pride myself in always understating everything. The backbone and foundation of our professions lies in wickedness, yet you still prefer the anachronistic one to the modern one.

The witcher smiled.

‘Exactly.’

Codringher started coughing again, wiped his lips and then opened his yellowish-green eyes.

‘Have you taken a peek at the list of magicians which lay on the desktop? The one with Rience’s potential employers?’

‘Yes, I have.’

‘I won’t give it to you until I check it carefully. Don’t put too much trust in what you have read. Dandelion told me that Phillippa Eilhart probably knows who’s backing Rience but she refused to share her knowledge with you. Phillippa wouldn’t bother protecting just any sucker. There must be some important person behind all this.’

The witcher was silent.

‘Watch your step, Geralt. You’re in great danger. Someone is playing a game with you. Someone is watching your every move, maybe even directing them. Don’t let arrogance and confidence take hold of you. The one who’s toying with you isn’t a striga or a werewolf. It’s not the Michelet brothers. Not even Rience. The Child of the Elder blood, my ass. As if it wasn’t enough with the throne, wizards, kings and Nilfgaard, now we also have the elves. Stop this game, witcher, leave it. Ruin their plans by doing something they won’t expect. Break up this insane relationship; don’t let anyone associate you with Cirilla. Leave her to Yennefer, go back to Kaer Morhen and don’t show yourself outside. Hide in the mountains while I peruse the elven manuscripts, slowly, carefully, with no rush. And once I gain the information about the Elder Blood and the wizard, you will gain enough money and we will make the deal.’

‘I can’t wait. The girl is in danger.’

‘True. But I also know that you are believed to be an obstacle on the way to her. An obstacle that must be neutralized. As a result, you are the one in danger. They get to the girl only after eliminating you.’

‘Or after I stop the game and retreat to Kaer Morhen. I paid you too much, Codringher, for advice like this.’

The advocate turned the iron star around his fingers.

‘For the amount which you paid me today. I’ve been working actively for quite some time, witcher,’ he said, coughing. ‘The advice I gave you is well-thought out. Hide in Kaer Morhen; disappear. And then, those who are looking for Ciri shall get her.’

Geralt’s eyes narrowed and he smiled. Codringher didn’t pale.

‘I know what I’m talking about,’ he added looking him straight in the eyes. ‘Ciri’s adversaries will find her and do with her whatever they want. While both you and her will be safe.’

‘Explain, please. But quick.’

‘I found a certain girl. A war orphan from a Cintran noble family. She’s been through the refugee camps and is currently measuring and cutting fabrics in Brugge, having been taken in by a clothier. Seemingly nothing about her stands out. Except one thing. She quite resembles a person from a portrait of the Lion Cub of Cintra... Would you like to see her picture?’

‘No, Codringher. I don’t wish to. And I won’t agree to this sort of thing.’

‘Geralt.’ The advocate closed his eyes. ‘Tell me, what exactly leads you to such decisions? If you want to save your Ciri... then you can’t afford the luxury of contempt. No, sorry. You can’t afford holding contempt in contempt. The times of contempt are approaching, colleague, the times of terrible, boundless contempt. You must fit in. My proposition is

simple. Someone will die, so that someone else can live. A person you love will survive. Some other girl will die, a girl you don't even know, someone whom you've never seen, someone whom...

'Whom I can hold in contempt?' interrupted the witcher. 'Am I supposed to pay for what I love with contempt for myself? No, Codrigher. Leave that other child alone, let her continue measuring fabric. Destroy her picture. Burn it. And for my two hundred and fifty crowns, which you have put inside your drawer, give me something else. Information. Yennefer and Ciri have left Ellander. I'm sure that you know about it. I'm sure that you know where they're going. I'm sure that you know if someone is following them.'

Codrigher tapped his fingers on the desk and coughed.

'The Wolf, unmoved by the warnings, still wants to hunt,' he said. 'He cannot see that he is the prey, that he's running straight into a trap set by the real hunter.'

'Don't be so banal. Be consistent.'

'As you wish. It's not hard to figure that Yennefer is going on the conference of Wizards, which will take place on the Island of Thanedd in Garstang at the beginning of July. She's moving slyly, doesn't use magic, so it's hard to trace her. She was still in Ellander a week ago, so I presume that it will take her three, four more days to reach the city Gors Velen, just a stone throw away from Thanedd. On the way of Gors Velen she will have to go through Anchor village. If you set out now you will be able to take out those who are following her. Because, indeed, she is being followed.'

'I hope,' Geralt smiled nastily. 'That those aren't royal agents?'

'No,' said the advocate, looking at the iron star. 'These are not agents. But it's also not Rience, who's smarter than you because he stopped showing himself in public after the ordeal with the Miechelet brothers. Yennefer is followed by three paid mercenaries.'

'I presume that you know who they are?'

'I know everybody. Which is why my advice is as follows: don't bother them. Don't go to Anchor. I will make use of my links and connections. I will try to bribe the thugs and reverse the contract. In other words, I will send them after Rience. If it works...'

He stopped suddenly and threw the iron star. The weapon howled through the air and pierced the portrait right in the middle of Senior Codrigher's forehead.

'Nice, isn't it?' the advocate smiled broadly. 'It's called an orion. An invention from overseas. I've been practicing for over a month and scoring almost every time. Could be useful. In the range of thirty meters such a star is deadly and in addition to that it can be easily hidden in a glove or hat. Nilfgaardian Special Forces have been using them since last year. Ha, ha, if Rience is indeed spying for Nilgaard it would be ironic if he were found with an orion in the skull... Don't you think?'

'I don't. You're the one supposed to be doing the thinking. You're the one with two hundred and fifty crowns in your drawer.'

'Sure,' Codrigher nodded. 'I assume that you are giving me a free rein in this aspect. Let us commemorate Rience's impending death with a minute of silence. Why the scowl, dammit? Have you no respect for death?'

'Too much to stand still when idiots are jeering at it. Have you ever pondered your own death, Codrigher?'

The advocate coughed again and stared at the handkerchief.

'I have,' he said quietly. 'A lot. But that is none of your business, witcher. Are you going to Anchor?'

'Yes, I am.'

'Ralf Blunden, known as 'Professor'. Heimo Kantor. 'Short' Yaxa. Do any of those names ring a bell?'

'No, they don't.'

‘They’re all good with swords. Better than the Michelets. I advise a better weapon. Like the Nilfgaardian stars. I could sell you a few. I have lots of them.’

‘I’m not interested. They’re impractical. Too much noise.’

‘The noise works in the psychological way. It can paralyze the victim with fear.’

‘It’s possible. But it can also alert. I could dodge it.’

‘If you saw the throw, perhaps. I know that you can dodge the spears... but from behind...’

‘From behind as well.’

‘Bullshit.’

‘Let’s make a bet,’ said Geralt coldly. ‘I will turn in the direction of your moronic father and you will throw the orion at me. If you hit me, then you win. If you don’t, then you lose. If you lose, you will decrypt the elven manuscripts. You will get information about the Child of Elder Blood. Fast. And on credit.’

‘What if I win?’

‘You will do it anyway and pass the results to Yennefer. She will pay. It’s a win-win situation for you.’

Codringher opened the drawer and brought out a second orion.

‘You’re hoping that I won’t accept the challenge.’ It was a statement, not a question.

‘No,’ smiled the witcher. ‘I’m sure that you will.’

‘You’re quite a dare-devil. Did you forget? I have no conscience.’

‘I didn’t forget. After all, the times of contempt are approaching and you are always going with the times. But I have remembered your remarks about my anachronistic naiveté and so this time I’m taking a risk with no hopes for a profit. How’s that?’

‘Very well then.’ Codringher picked up the iron star and stood. ‘My curiosity has always been stronger than reason and mercy. Turn around.’

The witcher complied. He looked at the portrait and then closed his eyes.

The star howled and pierced the wall four inches from the frame.

‘Holy shit!’ yelled Codringher. ‘Son of a bitch, you didn’t even flinch!’

Geralt turned around and smiled. In a very nasty way.

‘Why should I have flinched? I could hear that you aimed so as not to hit.’

The inn was deserted. On a bench, in a corner, sat a young woman with circles under her eyes. Turned modestly to one side, she nursed an infant. A man -- possibly her husband -- dozed next to her, his broad shoulders resting against the wall. In the shadows, behind the stove, sat another person which Aplegatt could not quite distinguish.

The innkeeper raised his head, saw Aplegatt and, upon noticing his uniform and the Aedirn coat of arms on his chest, frowned momentarily. Aplegatt was used to this kind of welcome. He was a royal messenger, and as such had the unquestioned right to a fresh mount. The royal decrees were explicit: in every town, village, inn and county, messengers had the right to a fresh horse, and woe betide those who failed to comply. Messengers, of course, left their own mount behind and issued a receipt for the new one which the innkeeper could present to the local mayor for compensation. But things could go rather differently. As well, messengers were always viewed with fear and suspicion: will he, won’t he? Will he take our Precious to her doom? our little Sparrow, barely weaned? or our beloved Little Crow? Aplegatt had seen it before, children sobbing as their favourite horse was saddled and lead from the stable, clinging to their playmate; more than once he saw the faces of adults pale at the injustice, at their helplessness.

‘I don't need a fresh horse’ he said brusquely. He had the impression that the innkeeper breathed a sigh of relief. ‘I just need to eat, because the road really did me in. Got something in that pot of yours?’

‘There's a bit of soup left, I'll bring it right away, have a seat. Will you be staying with us tonight? It's already getting dark.’

Aplegatt thought for a moment. Two days earlier he had met Hansom, a messenger he knew, and as per the usual orders, they exchanged missions. Hansom was carrying letters and a message for king Demavend, and he took off at great speed through Temeria and Mahakam, towards Vengerberg. As for Aplegatt, having taken the mail for king Vizimir of Redania, he continued towards Oxenfurt and Tretogor. He still had more than three hundred miles to cover.

‘I'll eat and then I'll be on my way’, he decided. ‘It's a full moon, and the road is clear enough’.

‘Your choice’.

The soup he was served was thin and had little flavour, but the messenger didn't notice such details. At home, he savoured his wife's cooking; at work, he ate what he was given. He ingested his meager meal slowly, holding his spoon rather awkwardly with fingers still stiff from holding the reins.

A cat who had been dozing on the bench near the stove raised its head suddenly and hissed.

‘King's messenger?’

Aplegatt shuddered. The question came from the man who had only a moment before been sitting in shadow; now suddenly close to the messenger. His hair was white as milk, plastered to his forehead by a leather headband, and he wore a black jacket covered in silver studs, as well as heavy boots. Above his right shoulder shone the pommel of his sword which he wore across his back.

‘Where does your road take you?’

‘Wherever the royal will takes me’, replied Aplegatt coldly.

He never answered such questions any differently.

The man with the white hair was quiet for a while; watching the messenger intently. His face was abnormally pale with strangely dark eyes.

‘The royal will’, he said finally, his voice unpleasant, a bit hoarse, ‘probably orders you to make haste. You are no doubt anxious to be on your way.’

‘And how does that concern you? Who are you to rush me?’

‘I'm nobody’, said the man with the white hair with a horrible smile. ‘And I'm not rushing you. But if I were you, I'd get out of here as quickly as possible. I wouldn't want anything to happen to you.’

For such statements, Aplegatt had another well worn reply. Short and sweet. Calm and composed, but leaving no doubt by whom a royal messenger was employed and the punishment which met anyone daring to touch even a single hair on his head. But something in the man with the white hair's voice convinced Aplegatt not to use that reply.

‘I've got to let my horse rest a bit, sir. An hour, maybe two.’

‘I understand’. The man with the white hair nodded, then turned his head as if to listen to something outside. Aplegatt listened too, but all he could hear were the crickets. ‘Rest then’, said the man with the white hair as he adjusted the belt of his scabbard which crossed his chest. ‘But don't go out into the yard. No matter what happens, don't go outside.’

Aplegatt refrained from asking any questions. He knew instinctively that it was best not to. He leaned over his bowl and continued fishing for the few pieces of ham floating on the surface of his soup. When he looked up again, the man with the white hair was gone.

A moment later, there was the neighing of a horse and the hammering of horseshoes in the yard.

Three men entered the inn. When he saw them, the innkeeper began feverishly wiping his tankard. The woman with the nursling moved closer to her husband who was dozing and woke him with a jab of her elbow. Discretely, Aplegatt moved the stool where he had set his belt knife closer to him.

As they approached the counter, the men looked over their hosts and sized them up. They walked slowly causing their spurs and weapons to jingle.

‘Welcome, gentlemen’. The innkeeper cleared his throat and spoke. ‘What can I get you?’

‘Hooch’, said one of the men, short and squat, with long arms like a monkey. He wore two crossed Zerrikanian sabers on his back. ‘Want some, Professor?’

‘Gladly’, acquiesced the second man as he adjusted his spectacles -- made of polished crystal, with bluish reflections and gold frames -- which were planted on his hooked nose. ‘As long as the alcohol is unadulterated.’

The innkeeper served them. Aplegatt noticed that his hands were trembling slightly. The men stood with their backs to the counter; they sipped the contents of their clay mugs unhurriedly.

‘My dear innkeeper’, said the man with the glasses suddenly, ‘it has come to my attention that two ladies passed by this establishment, not very long ago; they were heading with alacrity towards Gors Velen.’

‘Lots of people pass through here’, stammered the innkeeper.

‘You could not have failed to notice the ladies in question’, said the man in the glasses, slowly. ‘One of them has black hair, and is of exceptional beauty. She rides a raven stallion. The second, younger, with light hair and green eyes, rides a speckled mare. Did they pass through here?’

‘No.’ Aplegatt, who felt a sudden chill up his spine, beat the innkeeper. ‘They didn't come through here’.

He remembered the words of the young girl: danger with grey feathers; warm sand...

‘Messenger?’

Aplegatt nodded.

‘Where did you come from and where are you going?’

‘Wherever the royal will takes me.’

‘The young ladies I mentioned, you wouldn't have met them, by chance?’

‘No.’

‘You're awfully quick to deny it’, growled the third man, tall and pole thin. His hair was black and shiny, as if it was greased back. ‘And I don't get the impression that you searched your memory very thoroughly.’

‘Leave it, Heim.’ The man with the glasses gestured. ‘He's a royal messenger. Not a troublemaker. What is the name of this establishment, innkeeper?’

‘Anchor.’

‘And how far to Gors Velen?’

‘What?’

‘How many miles?’

‘Me, I never measured it in miles. But it must be three days travel...’

‘By horse?’

‘By cart.’

‘Hey!’ Shorty exclaimed suddenly. He stood and looked out through the mostly open door. ‘Have a look, Professor. Who's that one? Isn't that...’

The man with the glasses also looked outside and his face fell at once.

‘Yes’, he whistled. ‘It's him, positively. We're in luck, it's all falling into place.’

‘We wait for him to come in?’

‘He won't come in. He's seen our horses.’

‘Shut-up, Yaxa. He's saying something.’

‘You have a choice.’ Coming from outside, a voice, slightly hoarse but resonant, which Aplegatt recognized immediately, rang out. ‘Either one of you comes out here and tells me who hired you, and you leave here without any fuss. Or the three of you come out. I'm waiting.’

‘Bastard...’ snarled the man with the black hair. ‘He knows. What do we do?’

Slowly, the man with the glasses put his mug back on the counter.

‘What we were paid to do.’

He spit into his hand, shook his hands and drew his sword. Immediately, the other two also drew their weapons. The innkeeper opened his mouth as if to scream, but quickly closed it again upon seeing the cold, piercing look cast by the man in the blue glasses.

‘Everybody sit down, mouths shut’, said the man. ‘Heim, when the battle starts, try to surprise him from behind. We're off, friends, the shifts gonna fly! Let's go!’

As soon as they were outside, the fight began: groaning, stamping and the clanging of swords could be heard. And then a cry rang out. A cry to make your hair stand on end.

The innkeeper paled, the woman with the circles under her eyes let a muffled scream as she clutched her nursling to her bosom. The cat on the bench stood, arched its back and raised its tail. Aplegatt, still seated, slid quickly into a corner. His knife was on his lap, but he had not yet removed it from its scabbard.

Outside, again there was the sound friction on a plank, a whistling and the clanging of blades.

‘You!’ shouted someone savagely, and this shout, while followed by a rather salty curse, was nonetheless a desperate cry of rage. ‘You!’

The clashing blades whistled through the air. Then suddenly, a very loud piercing noise which seemed to tear the air around it rang out. It was as if a huge sack of grain crashed onto the planks. From one of the hitching posts, the sound of horseshoes was heard, as well as the neighing of the frightened horses.

Again, something heavy crashed loudly onto the planks, the fast, heavy footsteps of someone running echoed in the yard. The woman with the nursling pressed closer to her husband, the innkeeper tried to back further into the wall. Aplegatt took out his knife, still keeping his weapon hidden under the table. The running man was coming towards the inn; it was clear that at any moment he would be at the door. But before he appeared, there was the whistling of a blade.

The man screamed and, immediately after, he staggered into the common room. He nearly fell on the threshold, but managed to stay upright. He took a few steps forward, slowly, wavered and only then collapsed in the very center of the room, sending up a cloud of the accumulated dust between the floorboards. He fell face first, hands at his sides, legs bent. His crystal glasses crashed to the floor and shattered in a million bluish pieces. A dark, shining puddle began to spread beneath his now immobile body.

No one moved. There wasn't even a scream.

The man with the white hair entered the room.

He slipped the sword he held easily into its scabbard on his shoulders. He approached the counter, not even bothering to look at the corpse spread on the floor. The innkeeper shrank back.

‘They were bad people’, said the man with the white hair hoarsely. ‘And now they are dead. When the bailiff comes, he might mention a reward for their heads. Let the bailiff do as he pleases with it.’

The innkeeper nodded fervently.

‘Maybe’, continued the man with the white hair after a moment, ‘some colleagues or friends of these bad people might wonder what happened to them. To them, innkeeper, simply say that the Wolf ate them. The White Wolf. And tell them that they should look behind them often as well. One day, they’ll see the Wolf at their heels.’

It was past midnight when Aplegatt reached the gates of Tretogor, three days later. He was angry because he had been forced to loiter by the moat, he had nearly ripped out his throat shouting to wake the guards: these guards slept with the angels and were none too quick to open the gate. Aplegatt didn’t fail to curse them generously, going back at least three generations. Later, he was pleased to hear their commander, once wakened, roundly complete the list of insults he had himself muttered about the mothers, grandmothers and great-grandmothers of these no-goods. Naturally, there was no question of seeing king Vizimir in the middle of the night. Anyway, he had given up the idea. He hoped to rest until the morning bells. He was kidding himself. Rather than being shown somewhere to rest, he was taken post haste to the guard house. It wasn’t the City Guard that awaited him inside, but the other one, the big one, the gigantic one. Aplegatt knew him, it was Dijkstra, the king of Redania’s intelligence man. Dijkstra – the messenger knew – was used to hearing news destined exclusively for royal ears. Aplegatt gave him his letters.

‘You have oral messages?’

‘I do, milord.’

‘I’m listening.’

‘From Demavend to Vizimir’, Aplegatt recited with his eyes closed. ‘First, the Masqueraders are ready for the second night after the full moon in July. Second, I will not be gracing the assembly of the Crafty on Thanedd Island with my presence, and I advise you to do the same. Third, the Lion Cub is dead.’

Dijkstra winced slightly and drummed his fingers on the table...

‘Here are the letters for king Demavend. And for the oral message... listen carefully and use that memory of yours. You will relay it to your king, word for word. To him alone, and no one else. Nobody, got it?’

‘Got it, milord.’

‘The information is as follows: ‘From Vizimir to Demavend. Contain absolutely the Masqueraders. There has been a betrayal. The Flame has gathered an army in Dol Angra and is waiting for any excuse.’ Repeat.’

Aplegatt did so.

‘Good.’ Dijkstra nodded. ‘You will leave at sun up.’

‘I’ve been on the road five days, milord.’ The messenger rubbed his buttocks. ‘If I could only sleep until at least mid-morning... Would you allow me?’

‘Is your king, Demavend, sleeping right now? And me, am I sleeping? For even asking, boy, I should punch you in the face. You’ll be fed, and you can stretch your legs a bit on the grass. After that, you’ll hit the road before sunrise. I’ve asked that you be given a little thoroughbred stallion. You’ll see, he runs like a hurricane. And stop moping. There’s still this small purse for you, it’s a bonus, a little extra. So you don’t go saying Vizimir is stingy.’

‘Thanks to you, milord.’

‘When you reach the woods along the Pontar, be careful. Squirrels were seen there. Not to mention that those countries don’t lack for regular bandits.’

‘Oh yes! I’m aware of that, milord. Oh dear! When I think of what I saw three days ago!’

‘What did you see?’

Aplegatt quickly related the events in Anchor. Dijkstra listened, his powerful arms folded across his chest.

‘The Professor...’, he said thoughtfully. ‘Heimo Kantor and Little Yaxa. Slain by a witcher. At Anchor, on the road to Gors Velen, or Thanedd, Garstang... And the Lion Cub is dead?’

‘What are you saying, milord?’

‘It’s of no importance.’ Dijkstra looked up. ‘At least, not to you. Rest. And at dawn, go.’

Aplegatt ate what he was given, and stretched out a bit. He was so tired, he barely had time to blink. Before dawn he had already passed the city gates. His stallion was certainly frisky, but reluctant. Aplegatt didn’t like that kind of horse.

On his shoulders, between his left shoulder blade and his spine, something itched unbearably; no doubt, some flea had bitten him while he dozed in the barn. And no way to scratch it.

The stallion pranced and whinnied. The messenger spurred it and took off at a gallop. Time was of the essence.

‘*Gar’ean*’, whistled Cairbre. Hidden behind the branches of a tree, he watched the road. He leaned. ‘*En Dh’oine aen evall a stráede!*’

Toruviel leapt up, she grabbed her sword and adjusted it; with the tip of her boot, she kicked Yaevinn, who was sleeping near her in a clearing, in the thigh. The elf jumped, and cursed, burned on the hot sand where he placed his hand.

‘*Que suecc’s?*’

‘A horse on the road.’

‘A horse?’ Yaevinn grabbed his bow and quiver. ‘Cairbre? Just one?’

‘Yes. He’s getting closer.’

‘Well! Let’s fix him. That’ll make one less *Dh’oine*.’

‘Leave it.’ Toruviel grabbed him by the sleeve. ‘What’s the point? We’re supposed to be scouting, then it’s back to the commando. Must we really kill civilians on the road? Is this what the fight for liberty has come to?’

‘Exactly, yes. Move.’

‘If we leave a body on the road, the next patrol that passes will sound the alarm. The army will come after us. They’ll be watching the fords. We might have trouble crossing rivers.’

‘Hardly anyone comes this way. We’ll be long gone by the time they find the body.’

‘This rider is long gone too’, said Cairbre from his treetop perch. ‘Instead of chatting, you should have shot. Now you won’t be able to hit him. He’s at least two hundred yards away.’

‘With my sixty-six pounds?’ Yaevinn caressed his bow. ‘With my lovely thirty inch engine? Anyway, that’s not two hundred yards. One fifty, max. *Mire, que spar aen’le.*’

‘Yaevinn, leave it...’

‘*Thaess aep*, Toruviel.’

The elf spun his cap around so that the squirrel tail attached to it was out of his line of sight, drew his bow up to his ear with strength, aimed with precision and let go the string.

Aplegatt never heard the arrow. It was a silent arrow, specially fletched with long, narrow grey feathers. The arrow was equipped with a grooved shaft to make it lighter and more rigid. The point with its three razor sharp blades, quickly reached its target in the middle of the back, between his left shoulder blade and his spine. The blades were mounted such that they radiate from the center; upon entering the body, the point turns like a screw and eviscerates the tissue, and shatters the bone. Aplegatt slumped forward onto his mount's neck, then slid to the ground, inert like dead weight.

On the ground, the sand was warm, burning even in the beating sun. But the messenger never felt it. He was killed instantly.

To say that I knew her would be an exaggeration. I think that no one, save the Witcher and the Sorceress, had really come to know her. The first time I saw her, she didn't make a big impression on me, even despite the unusual circumstances surrounding our meeting. I've known people who claimed that from the moment they'd seen her they could feel the breath of death following the girl. To me, however, she appeared perfectly ordinary even though I knew that she was anything but – which is why I earnestly tried to see, to discover, to feel the oddity in her. But I couldn't see nor feel anything. Anything that would be a signal, an omen or a foreshadowing of the tragic events to come. Those that happened because of her. And those that she'd caused herself.

Dandelion. *'Half a century of poetry'*

Chapter Two

Near the crossroads, right where the forest ended, nine poles were erected. A carriage wheel was attached to each. Above the wheels, a flock of ravens and crows picked and shredded corpses tied to the rims. The height of poles and the number of birds made it impossible to tell for sure who the remains belonged to, but they were undoubtedly dead. There was no other possibility.

Ciri turned her head away from the sight and wrinkled her nose. The wind was blowing from the direction of the poles, so the nauseating stench of the rotting corpses was sprawling over the crossroads.

'Splendid decoration,' Yennefer bent in the saddle and spit onto the ground, temporarily forgetting that not so long ago she had scolded Ciri for doing just that. 'Colorful and smelling of roses. But why here, at the edge of the forest? Usually such things are placed right before the city walls. Am I not right, my good men?'

'It's the Squirrels, my lady,' explained one of the traveling merchants, halting his horse. 'Elves. Up there, on the poles. That's why they're placed here. As a warning for other Squirrels.'

'Does this mean,' the sorceress glanced at him, 'that every Scoia'tael caught alive is brought here...'

'Elves, my lady, rarely let themselves be captured alive,' the merchant interrupted. 'And even when warriors manage to catch one, they're taken to a town, since that's where resident non-humans dwell. But an elf struck in a battle is brought to the crossroads and strapped to a pole. Often, they're brought from afar, all rotten and stinky...'

'And to think,' muttered Yennefer, 'that we were forbidden from practicing necromancy on account of respect for the majesty of death and remains deserving reverence, peace, ceremonial burial...'

'What do you mean, my lady?'

'Never mind. Let us not waste time, Ciri; better to leave this place. Pfeh, I feel like I've already been contaminated by that stench.'

'Me too, eueueee!' said Ciri, overtaking merchant's wagon. 'Let's ride at a gallop, okay?' 'Fine... Ciri! I meant a gallop, not a frenzy!'

They soon approached a city: huge, surrounded by walls, bristling with spike-shaped towers. Sea could be seen behind it, blue-green, sparkling in the morning sun, dotted with white spots of sails. Ciri stopped her horse at the edge of the sandy cliff, stood on stirrups and greedily inhaled the wind and the smell.

'Gors Velen,' said Yennefer, riding up to her. 'We've finally arrived. Let's go back on the road.'

They took off at a gallop again, leaving behind few wagons and wood-carrying pedestrians. Once they were alone, the sorceress slowed down and nodded at Ciri to do the same.

'Come,' she said. 'Closer. Take the reins and lead my horse. I'll need both hands.'

'What for?'

'Take the reins, I said.'

Yennefer took out a silvery mirror, wiped it and quietly murmured a spell. The mirror slipped out of her hands and floated above stallion's neck, right across her face.

Ciri sighed in admiration; licked her lips.

The sorceress took off her bonnet and for a moment energetically combed her hair. Ciri was silent. She knew that Yennefer was not to be disturbed when making her hair. The beautiful and seemingly incidental disorder of her curly, lush locks needed a lot of work and attention.

The sorceress reached to the packs again, then put on diamond earrings and bracelets. She took the scarf off and unbuttoned her shirt, exposing neck and the black necklace adorned with an obsidian star.

‘Ha!’ Ciri finally lost patience. ‘I know why you’re doing this! You want to look pretty, because we’re visiting a city! Am I right?’

‘You are.’

‘What about me?’

‘What about you?’

‘I want to look pretty too! I will make my hair...’

‘Put your bonnet back on,’ ordered Yennefer harshly, still regarding her reflection. ‘Back where it was. Cover your hair.’

Ciri hissed angrily but obeyed. She had long since learned to read various tones of the sorceress’ voice. She knew when to try arguing and when to stay silent.

Yennefer, having finished arranging the curls on her forehead, retrieved from her pack a small green-stained glass jar.

‘Ciri,’ she said in a softer tone. ‘It’s a secret journey we’re on. And this journey hasn’t ended yet. Which is why you have to hide your hair under the bonnet. There are men before every gate who are being paid for being watchful of all new-comers. Do you understand?’

‘No,’ Ciri retorted tactlessly, pulling the reins of the raven stallion. ‘You decked yourself out so much that those observers from before the gates will have their eyes pop out of the sockets! Some secrecy!’

‘The city we’re heading to,’ Yennefer smiled, ‘is Gors Velen. I don’t need to camouflage myself in Gors Velen, rather the opposite. With you, it’s another matter. You are not to be remembered by anybody.’

‘Those who will be gazing at you are bound to notice me as well!’

The sorceress uncorked the jar which smelled of lilac and gooseberry. She dipped her finger in the liquid and rubbed some of it under her eyes.

‘I doubt,’ she said, still smiling mysteriously, ‘that anyone’s going to notice you.’

A long line of riders and wagons stood before the bridge and travelers were crowding before the gates waiting for their turn. Ciri grumbled at the perspective of a long wait. Yennefer, however, straightened herself in the saddle and continued trotting, her gaze high above the heads of the travellers – who quickly stepped aside and made way, not sparing the shaft of spears on the reluctant ones.

‘This way, this way, honourable lady!’ called one of the guards, staring at Yennefer with a reddened face. ‘This way, please! Move aside! Move aside, plebes!’

The commander of the guards emerged from the garrison grumpy and angry, but once he caught sight of Yennefer he brightened up, opened widely his eyes and mouth, and bowed.

‘I humbly welcome you in Gors Velen, my lady,’ he stuttered, straightening and still staring. ‘At your service... How can I help you, madam? Perhaps you need an escort? A guide? Shall I call somebody?’

‘There’s no need.’ Yennefer looked down at him ‘I won’t stay for long. I’m heading to Thanedd.’

‘Naturally...’ The warrior shifted weight from one leg to the other, never taking eyes off sorceress’ face. Other guards were gazing at her as well. Ciri proudly lifted her head but quickly realized that nobody was looking at her. As if she were invisible.

‘Naturally...’ repeated the commander. ‘To Thanedd, yes... For the conference. I understand, naturally. Therefore I wish...’

‘Thank you,’ the sorceress hurried her horse, clearly uninterested in commander’s wishes. Ciri followed. Guards were bowing before Yennefer, not sparing the girl so much as a glance.

‘They didn’t even ask for your name,’ she muttered, catching up with Yennefer and carefully leading her mount through the mud-covered ruts. ‘Nor for our destination point! Did you cast a spell on them?’

‘Not on them. On myself.’

The magician turned around and Ciri gasped loudly. Yennefer’s eyes were burning with a violet flame and her face radiated with beauty. Dazzling. Provocative. Dangerous. And unnatural.

‘The green jar!’ guessed Ciri. ‘What was that?’

‘Glamarye. An elixir. Or rather, an ointment for special occasions. Ciri, do you really have to ride into every puddle?’

‘I want to clean horse’s hooves.’

‘It didn’t rain for a month. This is swill and horse-piss, not water.’

‘Aha... Say, why did you use that elixir? Were you really so desperate to...’

‘This is Gors Velen,’ cut Yennefer. ‘The city which owes its prosperity in big part to wizards. Sorceresses, to be precise. You’ve seen how sorceresses are treated here. I didn’t feel like introducing myself or proving who I am. I wanted it to be obvious at the first sight. When we pass that red house, we’re turning left. Slower, Ciri. Keep your horse in check or you will run over some child.’

‘Why did we come here?’

‘I told you that already.’

Ciri hissed, tightened her lips and prodded the horse with her heel. The mare danced, barely missing a coach. The driver stood up and looked like he was about to give her a piece of his mind, but once he saw Yennefer he sat back down and indulged in analyzing his shoes.

‘Do that again,’ uttered Yennefer, ‘and I’ll get upset. Quit acting like a juvenile lass. You’re an embarrassment.’

‘You want to send me to some school, right? I don’t want to go!’

‘Quiet. People are staring.’

‘They’re staring at you, not at me! I don’t want to go to no school! You promised me that we’ll always be together, and now you want to leave me! All alone! I don’t want to be alone!’

‘You won’t be. There are many of your peers at this school. You will have plenty friends.’

‘I don’t want friends. I want to be with you and with... I thought...’

Yennefer turned around instantly.

‘You thought what?’

‘I thought we were going to Geralt.’ Ciri looked up unashamedly. ‘I know what you were thinking all the way. And why you were sighing at night...’

‘Enough,’ hissed the sorceress and the blaze of her eyes caused Ciri to hide her face in horse’s mane. ‘You’ve become insolent. I would like to remind you that the time when you could resist me has long gone. It was your own decision. Now, you must be obedient. You will do what I say. Understood?’

Ciri nodded.

‘I know what’s best for you. I always do. And so, you’ll listen and obey. Is that clear? Stop the horse. We’re here.’

‘This is the school?’ grumbled Ciri, eyeing the impressive exterior of the building, ‘It’s already...’

‘Not a word more. Get down. And show proper manners. This isn’t the school; the school’s in Aretuza, not Gors Velen. This is a bank.’

‘What do we need a bank for?’

‘Ponder it on your own. Dismount, I said. Not right into a puddle! Leave the horse, service will take care of it. Take off your gloves. It’s not proper to enter a bank in riding gloves. Look at me. Adjust your bonnet and collar. Stand straight. You’re not sure what to do with your hands? Then don’t do anything!’

Ciri sighed.

The service, which had greeted them bowing and scraping, was made up entirely of dwarves. Ciri gazed at them intently. Although just as short, husky-built and bearded, they didn’t resemble her friend Yarpén Zigrin nor his ‘boys’. The servants were dull, uniformed, bland. And humble, which was the last thing one could say about Yarpén and his boys.

They entered the building. The magic elixir was still working, so Yennefer’s sight immediately caused a great stir, a lot of running, and more bowing and scraping which was cut only by the appearance of incredibly fat, richly dressed dwarf with white beard.

‘Honourable Yennefer!’ roared the dwarf, tinkling the golden chain hanging down his neck, long past his white beard. ‘What a surprise! And such an honour! Please, please come to the office! And you all stop standing and gaping! Back to work, to the counting frames! Wilfli, immediately bring to the office a bottle of Castel de Neuf, year... you pick which one. Be quick! Make yourself welcome, Yennefer. I’m truly happy to see you. You look... eh, damn, breathtaking!’

‘You too,’ smiled the sorceress, ‘seem to be doing all right, Giancardi.’

‘Of course. Come in, please, to the office. But no, no, ladies first. You know the way, Yennefer.’

The office was dark and pleasantly cool; air carried the scent which Ciri recognized from the tower of Jarre, the scribe: the scent of ink, parchment and dust covering the oak furniture, gobelins and old books.

‘Sit down, please,’ the banker offered a chair to Yennefer and a questioning gaze to Ciri. ‘Hmm...’

‘Give her a book, Molnar,’ said the sorceress, noting the look. ‘She loves books. She’ll sit at the other end of the table and won’t bother us. Right, Ciri?’

Ciri deemed it pointless to answer.

‘A book, hem, hem,’ muttered the dwarf, coming up to the cupboard. ‘What do we have here? Oh, revenue and expense ledger... No, not that. Customs duties and port charges... that won’t do. Credit and reimbursement? No. Oh, how did it get here? Devil knows... but it might suit you. Take it, child.’

The book was titled ‘Physiologus’; it was very old and very tattered. Ciri cautiously turned the cover and several pages. The content immediately caught her interest, as it was about mysterious monsters and beasts and full of pictures. For the next few moments she tried to share her interest between the book and the conversations between the dwarf and the sorceress.

‘Got any letters for me, Molnar?’

‘No.’ The banker poured wine for Yennefer and himself. ‘No new post. The last ones, from month ago, I passed to you through established means.’

‘I received them, thank you. Has anybody... shown an interest in those letters?’

‘Not in here,’ smiled Molnar Giancardi. ‘But you’re aiming at the right board, my dear. The bank of Vivaldi’s has confided in me about an attempt to track those letters. Their branch

in Vengerberg has also discovered an attempt to keep track on the history of your account. One of the men in service turned out to be disloyal.'

The dwarf stopped and looked at the sorceress from under the bushy eyebrows. Ciri listened intently. Yennefer was silent, playing with her obsidian star.

'Vivaldi,' Molnar carried on, lowering his voice. 'Either couldn't or didn't want to start an investigation about this matter. The disloyal and corruptible clerk fell into the moat while drunk and drowned. Unfortunate accident. Pity. Too soon, too hasty...'

'No need to cry over spilt milk,' the sorceress pouted her lips. 'I know who was interested in my post and account, Vivaldi's investigation wouldn't have brought a new light.'

'If you say so...' Giancardi scratched his beard. 'You're heading to Thanedd, Yennefer? For that huge conference of the wizards?'

'Indeed.'

'To decide on the fate of the world?'

'Let's not exaggerate.'

'There are many rumours around,' the dwarf said dryly. 'And many things are happening.'

'What events, if I may inquire?'

'Since last year,' replied Giancardi, stroking his beard. 'One can see strange changes in the fiscal policy... It's not in your interests, I know...'

'Elaborate.'

'Poll tax and winter tax were doubled, the taxes which directly fund the army pay. All merchants and businessmen must make additional payments to Royal Treasury: the 'tithe', a whole new tax, one tenth of all profits. Dwarfs, gnomes, elves and halflings pay higher poll tax. If they're involved in commerce or manufacture they're also burdened with the 'nonhuman' income tax, a ten out of every hundred. Because of all this, I have to give up to state more than sixty percent of my income. My bank, all branches included, pays the Four Kingdoms annually six hundred marks. Allow me to elaborate: it's almost three times the charge of a noble duke or count with a huge estate.'

'Humans are not burdened with additional payment for the military?'

'No. They only pay the poll tax and the winter tax.'

'In other words,' nodded the sorceress. 'It is the dwarfs and other nonhumans who fund the campaign against Scoia'tael, taking place in the forests. I've been expecting something like this. But what is the relation between taxes and the conference on Thanedd?'

'After those conferences of yours,' muttered the dwarf. 'Something always happens. This time I'm hoping that nothing will. I'm hoping that your conference will stop things from happening. I would've been glad, for example, if those curious price shocks would cease.'

'Clarify, please.'

The dwarf leaned back in his chair and clasped fingers on his belly.

'I've been working in this business a decent number of years,' he said. 'Long enough to be able to relate some currency movements with certain facts. And lately, there's been a rise in prices for gems. Because there's a high demand for them.'

'Coins are being exchanged for jewels to evade losses from fluctuation and parity of the coin?'

'That too. Gemstones also have one important quality. A pocket-size pouch of diamonds equals some fifty marks, while the same value in coins would weigh twenty-five pounds and need a big sack to carry it. It's easier to flee with a pouch than a sack. And both hands are free, which isn't pointless. One hand can hold a wife, while the other can be used to punch some fucker in the gob, if the need arises.'

Ciri snorted quietly but Yennefer silenced her with a frown.

'So,' she raised her head. 'Some are already preparing to escape. Where to, I wonder?'

‘Far North is most popular. Hengfors, Kovir, Poviss. Not only is it farthest from here but these states are neutral and have good relations with Nilfgaard.’

‘I see,’ mischievous smile didn't vanish from magician's face. ‘Jewels in the pocket, wife in hand and going up North... Isn't it too early yet? Ah, nevermind this. What else is growing more expensive, Molnar?’

‘Boats.’

‘What?’

‘Boats,’ repeated the dwarf and grinned. ‘All boatbuilders from the coast are busy with commissions from quartermasters of King Foltest's army. Quartermasters pay well and keep making new purchases. If you're looking to invest in something, Yennefer, then invest in boats. Golden business. Producing boats of reed and bark, issuing an invoice to lonboards from the best pine, sharing with the quartermaster...’

‘Stop teasing me, Giancardi. Explain.’

‘Those boats,’ said the banker casually, staring at the ceiling, ‘are transported south. To Sodden and Brugge, to Yaruga river. But, to my knowledge, they are not used by the fishermen. They are being hidden in the forests on the right bank. It's said that the army is training the boarding.’

‘Aha.’ Yennefer bit her lip. ‘But why are people so eager to get north? Yaruga is south.’

‘There's a justified concern,’ murmured the dwarf, glancing at Ciri. ‘that emperor Emhyr var Emreis will not be pleased by news about aforementioned boats being launched. Some believe that such a launching might enrage Emhyr and when it happens it's safer to be far from the Nilfgaardian border... Damn, let the harvest come quick. If anything is going to happen, it will be before harvest.’

‘Granaries will be full.’ said Yenenfer slowly.

‘Indeed. Horses won't graze on barren land and fortresses with full granaries can withstand long siege... Weather seems promising for the crops... Yes, weather is truly great. The sun is shining, mushrooms await rain in vain... And the Yaruga is very shallow in Dol Angra... Easy to cross. From both sides.’

‘Why Dol Angra?’

‘I presume,’ the banker glared sharply at the sorceress while stroking his beard, ‘that I can trust you?’

‘You always could, Giancardi. Nothing has changed.’

‘In Dol Angra,’ said the dwarf slowly. ‘There's Lyria and Aedirn, which are in military alliance with Temeria. You don't suppose that Foltest, who's buying the boats, is going to use them all for himself?’

‘No,’ replied the magician. ‘I suppose not. Thank you for your information, Molnar. Who knows, maybe you're right? Maybe our conference really will manage to change the fate of the world and it's inhabitants?’

‘Don't forget the dwarves,’ snorted Giancardi. ‘And their banks.’

‘We won't. Speaking of which...’

‘I'm all ears.’

‘I have expenses, Molnar. And if I try to pay them from the account at Vivaldi's bank, someone might end up drowning again, so...’

‘Yennefer,’ the dwarf interrupted. ‘I owe you unlimited credit. A long time has passed since the pogrom in Vengerberg. Perhaps you have forgotten it, but I never will. No member of Giancardi family will. How much do you need?’

‘Fifteen hundred temerian orens, transferred to the Cianfanelli bank in Ellander, for the temple of Melitele.’

‘Done. Good transfer, donations to temples don't get taxed. Anything else?’

‘How high is the annual tuition fee in Aretuza school?’

Ciri pricked her ears up.

'Twelve hundred novigrad crowns,' replied Giancardi. 'There's also a matriculation for new students, about two hundred crowns.'

'Damn, it's gotten higher.'

'Every price has. Students don't lack anything, they live in Aretuza as if they were princesses. And half of the city earns their living from them: tailors, shoemakers, confectioners, suppliers...'

'I'm aware of that. Transfer two thousand into the account of the school. Anonymously. With a note, that it's all for the matriculation and tuition fee... for one student.'

The dwarf put down his pen, glanced at Ciri and gave her an understanding smile. Ciri, still pretending to be busy with the book, listened carefully.

'Is that all, Yennefer?'

'I'd also like to ask for three hundred novigrad crowns, in cash. I will need at least three dresses for the Thanedd conference.'

'What do you need cash for? I can give you a check. For five hundred crowns. The prices of imported fabrics also rose hellishly much, and wool or linen is not up to your standard. And if you need anything - for yourself or for the soon-to-be student of Aretuza - my shops and stores are open for you.'

'Thank you. What interest rate shall we agree on?'

'You have already paid your interest,' the dwarf raised his head, 'for the whole Giancardi family, Yennefer, during the pogrom in Vengerberg. Let's not talk about it anymore.'

'I don't like debts like that, Molnar.'

'Neither do I. But I'm a merchant, a businessdwarf. I know what it means to be indebted. Allow me to repeat: Let's not talk about it. You may consider everything you asked for to be done. The thing you didn't ask for, as well.'

Yennefer raised her eyebrows.

'A certain witcher, dear to you,' Giancardi chuckled, 'had recently visited the town Dorian. I've been informed that he had taken a loan of a hundred crowns. The usurer is working for me. I shall erase the debt, Yennefer.'

The sorceress glanced briefly at Ciri, frowning deeply.

'Molnar,' she said coldly. 'Let sleeping dogs lie. I doubt that he still considers me dear to him, and if he finds out about the erased debt, he will hate me even more. You know him, how obsessed with honour he is. How long ago was he in Dorian?'

'About ten days ago. He has been spotted later in Little Meadow. From there, as I was informed, he rode to Hirundum, answering the notice of local peasants. A monster, as usual.'

'And he will be paid next to nothing for dealing with it, as usual.' Yennefer's voice changed a bit. 'And, as usual, it will barely cover the costs of medical treatment, if the beast maims him. As usual. If you truly wish to do something for me, Molnar, then get involved in this. Contact the peasants and raise the reward. So he'll earn a living.'

'As usual,' snorted Giancardi. 'What if he finally figures it out?'

Yennefer glared at Ciri, who was watching them and listening, not even pretending to be interested in the Physiologus.

'Pray, tell,' she retorted. 'Who will break it to him?'

Ciri lowered her gaze. The dwarf smiled, stroked his beard.

'Before heading to Thanedd, are you going to stop by Hirundum? Accidentally, of course?'

'No,' the sorceress turned her head away. 'I'm not. Let's change the subject, Molnar.'

Giancardi continued stroking his beard and looking at Ciri. Ciri lowered her head, coughed, shifting in her chair.

‘Indeed,’ he agreed. ‘It’s time to change the subject. But your pupil seems to have gotten bored with the book... and with our conversation. And the thing I want to discuss with you now will bore her even more, no doubt... Fate of the world, fate of the dwarfs, fate of their banks, such a boring subject for young maidens, future graduates of Aretuza... Let her out from under your wings for a while, Yennefer. Let her take a walk in the town...’

‘Oh, yes!’ cried out Ciri.

The sorceress frowned and opened her mouth to protest but suddenly changed her mind. Ciri wasn’t sure, but suspected that it was influenced by a wink from the banker.

‘Let the girl take a look at the marvellous old town of Gors Velen,’ added Giancardi, smiling widely. ‘She deserves a bit of freedom before... before Aretuza. And we will have a talk about other matters... hmm, private matters. No, I’m not suggesting that the girl should walk alone, although it’s a safe town. I shall give her a companion and a guard. One of my best clerks.’

‘Forgive me, Molnar,’ Yennefer didn’t return the smile. ‘but I doubt than in current times, even in such a safe town, the company of a dwarf...’

‘It didn’t even cross my mind,’ Giancardi said offensively, ‘to pick a dwarf for her companion. The clerk I’ve been thinking of is a son of a respected merchant. A full-blooded human. Do you think that I only hire dwarves? Oi, Wilfi! Call Fabio here, lively!’

‘Ciri,’ the sorceress came up to her and whispered, ‘don’t get any foolish ideas, please. Don’t cause me any shame. And keep your mouth shut when you’re with that clerk, understood? Promise me that you’ll be careful. Don’t nod. Vows ought to be made in clear voice.’

‘I promise, Mistress Yennefer.’

‘Don’t forget to look at the sun from time to time. You will return at noon. Be punctual. And if... No, I doubt anyone will recognize you. But if you notice anyone staring at you...’

The sorceress reached to her pocket, taking out a tiny chrysoprase marked with runes and shaped like an hourglass.

‘Hide it in your sack. Don’t lose it. If the need arises... Do you remember the spell? But be discreet, because the active amulet emits strong vibrations and the activation itself leaves an echo. If you are close to someone sensitive to magic you will not conceal yourself but rather reveal your presence. Ah, and here you can have... in case you want to buy anything.’

‘Thank you, Mistress Yenenfer.’ Ciri put the amulet and coins to the sack and stared curiously at the boy entering the office. The boy had freckles and wavy auburn hair, reaching the collar of his grey uniform.

‘Fabio Sachs,’ Giancardi announced. The boy bowed with respect.

‘Fabio, this is Lady Yennefer, our honourable guest and client. And this young lady, her pupil, wishes to tour the town. You will accompany her, guide and protect her.’

The boy bowed again, this time in the direction of Ciri.

‘Ciri,’ said Yennefer coldly. ‘Stand up, please.’

She complied, surprised, knowing the customs enough to be aware that such gesture isn’t required of her. Suddenly, a realisation hit her. The clerk appeared to be her peer, yet he was a head shorter than her.

‘Molnar,’ sighed the sorceress. ‘Who is supposed to watch over whom? Could you give this task to someone with a bit more impressive posture?’

The boy blushed and gazed at his master searching for permission. Giancardi nodded with encouragement. The clerk bowed once again.

‘Honourable lady,’ he started smoothly and with no hesitation. ‘I may not be tall but you can rely on me. I know the town and surroundings well. I will take care of the young lady best I can. And when I, Fabio Sachs Junior, son of Fabio Sachs, swear to do something the best I can then... then many a man cannot compete.’

Yennefer gazed at him for a while, then turned to the banker.

‘Congratulations, Molnar,’ she said. ‘You know how to pick your staff. This young clerk will be of great use to you in the future. Indeed, a diamond in the rough. Ciri, I entrust you to the care of Fabio, son of Fabio, for it is a man of honour and can be relied on.’

The boy flushed red as a tomato. Ciri realised that she had too.

‘Fabio,’ the dwarf opened a casket, rummaging through its contents. ‘Here’s a half-noble and three... and two fivers. In case the young lady has any wishes. If she doesn’t have any, you will return them. Now, off you go.’

‘Noon, Ciri,’ reminded Yennefer. ‘Not a second later.’

‘I know, I know.’

‘I’m Fabio,’ said the boy, once they ran down the stairs onto a busy street. ‘And your name is Ciri, right?’

‘Yes.’

‘What would you like to see in Gors Velen, Ciri? The Main Street? Goldsmith’s Lane? Seaport? Or maybe the town square and the market?’

‘Everything.’

‘Hmm,’ pondered the boy. ‘We only have time until noon... We should go to the town square then. It’s a market day today, so you can see a lot of interesting things. But before that, we’ll climb up the wall, from which you can see the whole Bay and the famous Thanedd Island. What do you think?’

‘Let’s go.’

The street was full of rumbling carts hauled by horses and oxen; coopers rolling barrels; noise and haste. The disorder made Ciri a bit dizzy – clumsily, she stepped down the wooden pavement and fell ankle-high into mud and manure. Fabio offered his hand but she rejected the help.

‘I can walk by myself!’

‘Hmm... of course. Let’s go then. The place we’re in right now is the main streets of the town. It’s called Kardo and it connects both gates, The Main Gate and the Sea Gate. This way here leads to the town hall. Do you see that tower with the golden weathervane? That’s the town hall. And that place with the colorful sign is a tavern called the Unlaced Corset. But there, hmm... we won’t go there. We’ll take a route through the fish market on Circuit Street.’

They made a turn in the alley and entered a tiny square pressed between the walls of houses. The square was filled with stalls, barrels and vats smelling of fish. Merchants and buyers were involved in loud negotiations, as if trying to outcry the seagulls circling above their heads. Cats were lying underneath the wall, pretending not to be interested in fish in the slightest.

‘Your mistress,’ said Fabio suddenly, ‘seems very firm.’

‘I know.’

‘She’s not a close relative of yours, right? It’s plain at first sight!’

‘It is? How?’

‘She’s very beautiful,’ answered Fabio with the cruel, disarming honesty of a youth. Ciri spun abruptly, but before she had a chance to retort with a biting remark alluding to his height and freckles, the boy was already dragging her between the trolleys, barrels and stalls, while explaining that the turret adjoining the square is called The Thief’s Tower, that it was built of stones found at the bottom of the sea, and that the trees growing beneath it are called sycamores.

‘You sure are quiet, Ciri,’ he noticed after a while.

‘Me?’ she feigned surprise. ‘Nothing of the sort! I’m just listening to what you’re telling me. You’re very informed, you know. I was meaning to ask...’

‘Ask away.’

‘If it far from here to... to the town Aretuza?’

‘Not at all! But Aretuza isn’t a town. Let’s climb up the wall, I’ll show you. The stairs are over there.’

The wall was high and the stairs were narrow. Fabio had a hard time catching his breath, as he never stopped talking. Ciri was informed that the wall surrounding Gors Velen was a fairly new construction, much younger than the town itself, which had been built by the elves; that it was thirty five feet tall and that this type of a construction was called a casemate wall, made of hewn stone and adobe brick, because this sort of material was best-suited to withstand blows from a battering ram.

Cool marine wind blew at the top. Ciri gladly inhaled it after the thick air of the town. She laid her elbows on the edge of the wall, looking down at the seaport, rich in colors from the sails.

‘What is that, Fabio? That mountain?’

‘Thanedd Isle.’

The isle appeared to be very close. And it didn’t resemble an island at all. It looked like a giant stone pole emerging from the waves; a huge ziggurat engirdled by a spiral path, zigzags of stairs and terraces. Terraces were engulfed in green from the amount of groves and gardens, and the green was adorned with soaring white towers stuck to the rock like swallow nests, and by decorative domes crowning the buildings surrounded by galleries. The building didn’t appear to have been put up. They seemed to have been carved in the slopes of that mountain in the sea.

‘All of this was built by the elves,’ explained Fabio. ‘By the use of elvish magic, it is said. But for as long as we can remember, Thanedd belongs to the wizards. Near the peak, close to those shiny domes, there’s Garstang palace. In a few days, a big conference of the wizards will take place there. And look, there at the very top, that high, lone tower with crenellations – that’s Tor Lara, Seagull’s Tower...’

‘Can it be accessed from the land? It’s quite close.’

‘It’s possible. There’s a bridge connecting the shore with the island. We can’t see it from here because it’s behind the trees. Can you see the red roofs at the feet of the mountain? That’s Loxia palace. That’s where the bridge leads. Only through Loxia you can get to the path leading to the upper terraces...’

‘And what’s at that place with all those beautiful groves and ponds? And gardens? I don’t know why it doesn’t fall off the rock... What is the name of this palace?’

‘This is Aretuza, the one you were asking about. That’s where the famous school of sorceresses is.’

‘Ah,’ Ciri licked her lips. ‘So that’s where... Fabio?’

‘Yes?’

‘How often do you see the students of this school? This Aretuza?’

The boy gaped at her, clearly surprised.

‘Never! No one ever sees them! They’re not allowed to leave the island and go out to the town. And no one from outside is allowed at the school grounds. Even the Count and the Bailiff, when they want something from the sorceresses, go only as far as to Loxia. On the lowest level.’

‘Just as I thought,’ Ciri nodded, gazing at the shiny roofs of Aretuza. ‘This isn’t a school but a prison. On an island, on a rock, above an abyss. Nothing but a prison.’

‘Maybe a bit,’ admitted Fabio. ‘It must be difficult to get out of there... But no, it’s not the same as being in prison. The students are young ladies, after all. They need to be guarded...’

‘Against what?’

‘Well...’ the boy was stammering. ‘You know...’

‘No, I don’t.’

‘Hmm... I think... Oh, Ciri, they’re not locked up there by force. They want it themselves...’

‘Yeah, right,’ Ciri grinned mischievously. ‘They wanted it, so now they’re stuck in this prison. If they hadn’t, then they wouldn’t let themselves be locked up. It’s not hard; the key is to make a run early. Before they get there, because it might be difficult later...’

‘What do you mean? Run? Where to...?’

‘These poor souls,’ she interrupted, ‘probably had nowhere to run. Fabio? Where’s the town... Hirundum?’

The boy gave her a confused look.

‘Hirundum’s not a town,’ he corrected. ‘It’s a huge farm. There are orchards and gardens providing vegetables and fruit to all towns in the region. There are also many ponds with carps and other fish...’

‘How far is Hirundum? Which way is it? Show me.’

‘Why would you need to know that?’

‘I asked you to show me.’

‘See that road, leading west? The one the wagons are at? That’s the road to Hirundum. About fifteen miles, through the woods.’

‘Fifteen miles’, Ciri repeated after him. ‘Not far for a good horse... Thank you, Fabio.’

‘What for?’

‘Never mind. Now take me to the market. You promised.’

‘Let’s go then.’

Ciri had never before seen such a hustle and bustle like the one at the square in Gors Velen. The noisy fish market they had just crossed seemed quiet as a temple in comparison. The square itself was gigantic and yet so crowded that it appeared as if they would only be able to see it from afar, because getting anywhere close to it would be a miracle. Fabio, however, managed to get through the rabble, pulling Ciri behind him.

Vendors were yelling, customers were even louder, children lost in the crowd cried and screamed. Cattle were bellowing, sheep were bleating, birds were clucking and quacking. Dwarven blacksmiths keenly hit some plates with hammers, stopping every now and then to drink and curse. The sounds of pipes and dulcimer could be heard from several directions. In addition to that, someone hidden in the rabble continuously blew into a zurna. It was certainly not a professional musician.

Ciri dodged before a squealing swine and fell onto chicken cages. Someone pushed her and she stepped on something soft and meowing. She leapt away, almost falling between the hooves of a huge, stinking and terrifying animal.

‘What was that?’ she groaned, regaining her balance. ‘Fabio?’

‘A camel. Don’t be scared.’

‘I’m not scared!’

She took a curious look around. She watched the halflings, busy crafting decorative goatskins, she cooed over beautiful dolls sold by a pair of half-elves. She gazed at products made of malachite and jasper, offered by a grim and gloomy gnome. She regarded with connoisseurship swords at the blacksmiths’ workshop. Afterwards, she observed for a while girls weaving wicker baskets and came to the conclusion that there’s nothing in the world that would be worse than work.

The zurnist stopped blowing. Someone probably killed him.

‘What is this wonderful smell?’

‘Doughnuts,’ Fabio groped the pouch. ‘Do you wish to try one?’

‘I wish to try two.’

The vendor handed three doughnuts, took a fiver and gave a change of four pennies, one broken in half. Ciri watched the breaking of the penny, hungrily devouring the first doughnut.

‘Is this,’ she asked, while reaching for the other one, ‘where the saying ‘halfpenny’s worth’ comes from?’

‘Indeed,’ Fabio bit on his doughnut. ‘Didn’t you have halfpennies at your home?’

‘No,’ Ciri licked her fingers. ‘At my home we had golden ducats. Besides, the whole breaking thing was stupid and pointless.’

‘Why?’

‘Because I wish to try one more.’

The plum filling of the doughnuts worked magic. Ciri was in high spirit and the bustling square ceased to terrify and began fascinating her instead. She no longer followed Fabio, now she was the one who dragged the other in the biggest crowd, to a place where someone spoke to the mob from a makeshift platform supported on barrels. The speaker was a fat, old man. Judging by his shaved head and grey robe Ciri assumed him to be an errant priest. She had seen some of them when they visited the Melitele Temple in Ellander. Mother Nenneke always called them, ‘the insane fanatics.’

‘There’s only one law in the world,’ bellowed the fat priest. ‘God’s law! All of nature is subjected to it, the whole earth and everything living on it! But magic and spells are defying this law! And so wizards are cursed and the day of retribution is nigh, the day when holy fire will destroy their accursed isle! The walls will fall, of Loxia, Aretuza and Garstand, the walls in which these pagans are gathering right now to plot and scheme. The walls will fall...’

‘And then I’ll have to put them bloody things back up again,’ complained the journeyman mason in a lime-stained coat, who stood next to Ciri.

‘I’m warning you, good, god-fearing men!’ yelled the priest. ‘Don’t trust wizards; don’t turn to them in your need! Don’t let them trick you with their beauty nor learned speak, for let it be known that wizards are like whitewashed graves, clean from the outside, stinking on the inside!’

‘Look at ‘im,’ said a young maiden with a basket full of carrots. ‘All them big words... ‘e’s barkin’ at magicians out of spite, no doubt!’

‘Sure thing,’ agreed the mason. ‘Himself bald like an egg, beard tanglin’ between his knees. And wizards neither grow fat nor go bald... And sorceresses, heh, what beauty...

‘For that beauty they sold their souls to the devil!’ cried a short man with cobbler’s hammer hooked at his belt.

‘You’re a fool, shoemaker. If not for kind ladies of Aretuza, you would’ve gone out of business long ago! Their money pays for your stew!’

Fabio pulled Ciri’s sleeve and they dove back into the crowd which was moving to the center of the square. They could hear the rumbling of the drums and loud calls for silence. The mob wasn’t willing to obey but the town crier didn’t seem bothered by it. He had a sonorous voice and experience in using it.

‘It is hereby announced,’ he shouted, unrolling a parchment. ‘That Hugo Ansbach, halfling-born, has become an outlaw, for he has given room and hospitality to elven bandits going by the name of Squirrels. The same applies to Justin Ingvar, a blacksmith, born a dwarf, who had been forging arrows for those scoundrels. Therefore, the Count has issued arrest warrants for both. Whoever captures them shall receive a reward: fifty crowns in cash. And whoever offers them shelter or food shall be regarded as an accomplice and punished as severely as the criminals themselves. And if they are found in a field or a village, then the whole farm or village shall be held accountable...’

‘Who would,’ yelled one of the spectators, ‘give shelter to a halfling? Search the farms of their brethren and you’ll find them there, and then throw them all, nonhuman scum, in the scorpion pit!’

‘To the gallows with them, not the pit!’

The town crier continued reading announcements of the Count and town council, but Ciri lost interest. She was just about to leave the crowd when she felt a hand groping her bottom. It was in no way accidental, completely tactless and surprisingly skilled. The narrow space made it almost impossible to turn, but Ciri had learned in Kaer Morhen how to move in places where it's difficult to do so. She spun around, creating a bit of commotion in the process. The bald priest standing behind her grinned with arrogance. The grin appeared to say - What are you going to do now? Blush cutely and nothing more, yes?

The priest clearly never dealt with Yennefer's ward.

‘Keep your paws to yourself, baldie!’ Ciri hissed with fury. ‘Grab your own ass, you... you whitewashed grave!!!’

Taking advantage of the fact that priest couldn't move while trapped in the crowd, she tried to kick him, but Fabio prevented her, quickly drawing her away from the clergyman. Seeing her shake with anger he proceeded to calm her down with sugar-sprinkled funnel cake, the sight of which immediately turned Ciri's thought away from the incident. They stopped next to a stall which offered them a good view at the scaffold and pillory. The pillory, however, hoed no wrongdoer and the scaffold itself was decorated with flower garlands and was used by a troupe of wandering musicians, playing on fiddles and blowing bagpipes and shawms. A young, dark-haired girl in a sequin-embroidered jerkin was dancing and singing, shaking a tambourine and merrily stepping with her tiny boots.

A sorceress bit viciously by serpents cold and vile,

Observed the reptiles choke and die as she did herself smile!

The crowd around the scaffold cheered loudly and clapped to the rhythm. The seller of funnel cake threw a new portion in the boiling oil. Fabio licked his fingers and pulled Ciri by the sleeve.

There were plenty of stalls and many offered various snacks. They ate a creampuff each, then – together – a smoked eel, as well as some very peculiar thing, fried and served on a stick. Afterwards, they made a stop at the barrels with sauerkraut and pretended to be interested in buying to get a sample. When they stuffed themselves and left without buying anything, the merchant called them little shits.

They moved ahead. Fabio spent the rest of his money on a basket of bergamot pears. Ciri looked up at the sun but decided that it wasn't yet noon.

‘Fabio? What it's in those tents and booths under the wall?’

‘Various attractions. Would you like to take a look?’

‘I do.’

People standing before the first tent were all men, shifting their legs with excitement. Sounds of flute came from the inside.

‘Dark-skinned Leila,’ Ciri deciphered the lopsided sign on the side. ‘Reveals in her dance all secrets of her body... How silly! What kind of secrets...’

‘Let's go, let's go,’ urged Fabio, flushing pink. ‘Oh, look, this is interesting. It's the clairvoyant's booth. I have two pennies left, it should be enough...’

‘Such a waste of money,’ scoffed Ciri. ‘A two-penny prophesy! One has to be a real prophet to know the future. Propheying is a great talent. Even among the sorceresses only one out of every hundred has this ability.’

‘My oldest sister,’ disagreed the boy, ‘was foretold that she would marry and she really did. Don't be petty, Ciri. Let's go in....’

‘I don't want to marry! I don't want any prophecies! It's hot and this booth is stinking of incense, I'm not going inside. If you want to, then go alone, I'll wait. I don't know why you need a prophecy so badly. What do you want to know?’

‘Well...’ stammered Fabio. ‘What I want to know most is... if I will become an explorer. I want to be an explorer in the future. To travel the whole world...’

He will, Ciri realized suddenly, feeling her head spin. He will be sailing on huge white ships... He'll reach lands no one has seen before... Fabio Sachs, the great explorer... A cape will be named after him, a headland of a continent which is yet to be named. At fifty-four he will have a wife, son and three daughters, but he will die far from his home and family... Of a disease which is yet to be named.

‘Ciri! What's wrong?’

She rubbed her face with her palm. She felt like she'd just emerged from water, swimming towards the surface from the bottom of a deep, ice-cold lake.

‘It's nothing...’ she muttered, looking around. ‘I feel a bit dizzy... It must be the heat. And the incense...’

‘I think it might be that sauerkraut,’ said Fabio with seriousness. ‘We shouldn't have eaten so much. My tummy feels weird too.’

‘I'm fine!’ Ciri boldly raised her head, indeed feeling much better. The realization which had struck her now dispelled, lost from memory. ‘Come, Fabio. Let's go ahead.’

‘Want another pear?’

‘Sure I do!’

Under the wall, a group of youths were playing a spinning top game for money. The top was spun with a pull of the string in such a way that it rolled around the chalk circles. Ciri had outplayed most boys from Skellige and all girls at the Melitele Temple. She was considering the possibility of joining the game and taking from the urchins not just their money, but their patched breeches as well, when her attention was drawn away by loud shouts.

At the very end of the line of tents and booths, cramped between the wall and stone stairs, stood a curious, half-round construction, formed by sheets spanned over copper rods. Between two such rods was an entry, guarded by a tall, pockmarked man, dressed in gambeson and striped pants. Before him a crowd had formed. People lined up to throw a handful of coins into the man's hand and then disappear under the sheet. The pockmarked man put the money in a metal box and shook it crying hoarsely.

‘Come, good men! Come! See with your own eyes the most terrifying monster the gods have made! Shock and horror! A living basilisk, the venomous terror of zerrikanian deserts, devil incarnated, hungry for human flesh! You've never seen a monster like it, men! A fresh catch from the Corrabian Seas! See him; see the living, stern basilisk with your own eyes, because you will never see another anywhere else! This is your only chance! Here, at my tent, for just three fivers! Two fivers for women with kids!’

‘Ha!’ exclaimed Ciri, brushing off the wasps buzzing around the pears, ‘A basilisk? A living one too? I must see it. I've only seen pictures of it. Let's go, Fabio.’

‘I don't have any money left...’

‘But I do. I'll pay for us both. Let's make haste.’

‘That will be six fivers,’ the pockmarked individual peered at the coins dropped on his hand. ‘Three fivers each. Lower price only for women with kids.’

‘He,’ Ciri pointed her pear at Fabio, ‘is a kid. And I am a woman.’

‘Lower price only for women with kids in their arms.’ Growled the man. ‘Add two more fivers, witty lass, or make way for others. Make haste, people. Only three more tickets left!’

Under the canvas, spectators were gathered, surrounding a makeshift podium on which stood a wooden cage, covered with a carpet. When the tent was full, the pockmarked man stepped onto the podium, grabbed a long rod and knocked off the carpet. The stench of carrion sprawled around. The mob rustled and backed away.

‘Smart move, my good men,’ commented the man. ‘It's not safe to get too close!’

Inside the cage, clearly too small for it, lay a curled up reptile, whose skin was covered in scales forming a curious pattern. When the pockmarked man poked the cage, the reptile tussled, stretched its neck and hissed furiously, exposing its pointy, sharp, white teeth. The spectators sighed loudly. A small, fluffy dog yipped from the arms of a woman, who looked like a merchant.

‘Observe it well, my good men,’ yelled the pockmarked man. ‘And be happy that abominations like this one don’t live in our vicinity! This is a monstrous basilisk from Zerrikania! Don’t come any closer, because even locked in a cage, it can still kill you with its breath!’

Ciri and Fabio made their way to the front.

‘The basilisk,’ the men on the podium went on, ‘is the most venomous creature in the world! For the basilisk is the king of all reptiles! If there were more of them around, the world would be doomed! Fortunately, it’s a very rare monster, because it can only be born from an egg laid by a rooster. And as you all know, no rooster lays eggs but for a deviant who offers his rump to another like a hen would.’

The spectators burst into laughter at the joke. The only one who didn’t laugh was Ciri, staring at the creature which attacked the bars annoyed by the noise, trying in vain to unfurl its maimed wings.

‘Eggs laid by this rooster,’ continued the pockmarked man, ‘must be brood by a hundred and one venomous snakes! And once the basilisk hatches...’

‘This is no basilisk.’ Stated Ciri, biting on the pear. The pockmarked man glared at her.

‘And once the basilisk hatches, I said,’ he repeated, ‘it devours all the snakes from its nest, absorbing their venom. It absorbs so much that it can kill not just with a scratch of its teeth and the touch of its scales, but even with its breath alone. And if a knight impales it with his spear, then the poison spreads all the way to his arm, killing the rider and the horse at the same time!’

‘That’s an untrue untruth!’ said Ciri, spitting out a seed.

‘It’s the truest truth!’ objected the man. ‘It will kill the rider and it will kill the horse!’

‘As if!’

‘Quiet, girl!’ scolded the merchantess with the dog. ‘Don’t interrupt! We want to hear more!’

‘Let it go, Ciri.’ Advised her Fabio, nudging her side. Ciri hissed at him, reaching for the next pear.

‘From the basilisk,’ the pockmarked man raised his voice, ‘runs every living thing, the moment they hear its hiss. Every living thing, even the dragon, even the crocodile, and the crocodile is a terrifying creature in itself, you know if you’ve seen it. There is just one animal which doesn’t fear the basilisk and that is the marten. The marten seeing the basilisk in the desert rushes quickly to the forest, searching for a secret herb known only to it and eats it. Then the basilisk’s venom no longer works on the marten and it can bite the monster to death...’

Ciri sneered loudly.

‘Oi, smartypants!’ the pockmarked man lost control. ‘If you don’t like it then get lost! There’s no point in listening and looking at the basilisk!’

‘It’s not a basilisk.’

‘Oh, yes? What is it then, miss know-it-all?’

‘A wyvern.’ Replied Ciri, licking her fingers. ‘A simple wyvern. Young, rather small, starved and dirty. But still just a wyvern.’

‘Oh, look!’ yelled the man. ‘What an expert! Better shut your mouth or...’

‘Enough!’ spoke a fair-haired youth in a velvet beret and squire’s clothes, who was supporting by the arm a fragile-looking lady in apricot-colored dress. ‘Manners, sir monster-

catcher. Do not threaten a lady or I'll be forced to scold you with my steel. And the whole affair feels like a scam to me!'

'What scam, honorable knight?' the pockmarked man bridled up. 'The brat is -- I mean, the young lady is wrong. It's definitely a basilisk!'

'It's a wyvern.' Repeated Ciri.

'This is no vern! Its a basilisk! Look how ferocious it is, how it hisses, how it bites the bars! Look what huge fangs it has. Fangs like a...'

'Like a wyvern.' Ciri pulled a face.

'If you're so knowledgeable,' the man gazed at her like a true basilisk, 'then come closer! Come and let its breath sweep over you! Do it and everyone will see you drop dead! Come on!'

'Gladly.' Ciri wrestled her arm from Fabio's grip and took a step forward.

'I won't allow it!' cried the fair-haired squire, leaving behind his apricot companion and standing in Ciri's way. 'I won't let you endanger yourself, my lady!'

Ciri flushed at the title, gazed at the squire and fluttered her eyelashes at him in the way she had practiced on Jarre the scribe.

'There is no risk, my chivalrous knight.' She smiled seductively, forgetting Yennefer's warnings and her story about the idiot and the cheese. 'No harm will happen to me. That whole poisonous breath is a bluff.'

'Nevertheless,' the youth lay his arm on the hilt of his sword, 'I wish to be by your side. For your safety and protection... will you let me?'

'I will.' Ciri couldn't figure out why the expression of anger on apricot-lady's face filled her with so much delight.

'I'm the one who's caring for her safety!' Fabio threw the squire a challenging glare. 'And I will go with her too!'

'My good men,' Ciri was swelling with pride, 'Show some dignity. Do not fight. There's enough room for you both.'

The surrounding crowd babbled when she approached the cage, almost feeling the breaths of both boys on the back of her head. The wyvern hissed furiously and tussled, its reptilian stench attacking their nostrils. Fabio grunted loudly but Ciri didn't back off. She came even closer and reached to the cage, almost touching it. The monster threw itself on the bars, scratching them with its fangs. The crowd rustled, someone cried out.

'So?' Ciri boasted, turning around. 'Am I dead? Have I been poisoned by his supposedly venomous creature? If this is a basilisk then I am...'

She paused, seeing her companions' faces suddenly go pale. She spun abruptly and watched how the bars bend under pressure of the enraged beast.

'Everyone escape!' she yelled. 'The cage is breaking!'

Screaming spectators ran to the exit. Some were trying to make way under the sheets but they only got themselves and others entangled in it. The squire caught Ciri's arm at the exact same moment she tried to leap away; as a result they both lost foothold and fell down, taking Fabio with them. The merchantress' fluffy dog was yipping, the pockmarked man was cursing and the apricot lady gave a piercing shriek.

The bars broke with a crack and the wyvern emerged from the cage. The pockmarked man jumped down from the podium and tried to keep it back with a stick but the monster disarmed him with one blow and whipped its spiky tail at him, making a bloody mess of his pockmarked cheek. Hissing and unfurling its maimed wings, the wyvern flew down from the podium and pounced at Ciri, Fabio and the squire, who were trying to pick themselves up from the ground. The apricot lady fell unconscious. Ciri considered leaping away but realized that she wouldn't make it in time.

They were saved by the fluffy dog, which had escaped the merchantress, who was now entangled in the sheet and her own dresses. Yipping madly, the dog pounced at the monster. The wyvern hissed, raised its body, caught the dog in its claws and sunk teeth in its neck. The dog whimpered loudly.

The squire rose to his feet and reached to his side, but he didn't find his sword, because Ciri was quicker. She drew the sword with one rapid move and made a roundhouse jump. The wyvern rose, dog's severed head hanging from its jaws.

It seemed to Ciri as if all the moves she had learned in Kaer Morhen had executed themselves without her will. She cut the surprised wyvern in the belly and dodged when the reptile jumped at her. The beast fell onto the sand, bleeding profusely. Ciri jumped over it, aptly dodging the tail, walloped the monster in the neck with precision, swerved, performed an unnecessary dodge out of a habit, and gave the opponent another blow, this time crushing its spine. The wyvern curled up and lay motionless, with the exception of its tail, which still writhed and banged, raising a cloud of sand.

Ciri quickly shoved the blood-stained steel into the squire's hand.

'Everything's alright!' she yelled to the gathering spectators. 'The monster is dead! This brave warrior killed it!'

Suddenly, she felt a clench in her throat and stomach and her vision darkened. Something had given her a mighty blow in the ass. She looked around disoriented and realized that said something was, in fact, the ground.

'Ciri...' whispered Fabio kneeling beside her, 'What's wrong? Gods, you're pale as a ghost...'

'It's a pity,' she muttered, 'that you can't see yourself.'

People were gathering around them. Some were poking the wyvern's corpse with sticks and brooms, some were checking on the pockmarked man; the rest was applauding the heroic squire, fearless dragon-slayer, the one who prevented a massacre. The squire was trying to revive the apricot lady, still staring with confusion at the hilt of his sword, covered in dried blood.

'My hero...' the apricot lady regained consciousness and threw her arms around squire's neck. 'My saviour! My beloved!'

'Fabio,' murmured Ciri, seeing town guards making their way through the crowd. 'Help me up and take me away from here. Fast!'

'Poor children...' a fat townswoman nodded at them when they were sneaking away from the commotion. 'You sure were lucky. If not for the brave warrior your mothers would cry their eyes out after you!'

'Find out whom the youth is working for!' yelled craftsman in a leather coat, 'He deserves to be knighted for this deed!'

'And the monster-catcher to the pillow! He deserved a good whipping! Bringing such a beast into a town, among the people...'

'Water, quick! The lady has lost consciousness again!'

'My poor Princess!' wailed the merchantress leaning above whatever was left of the dog. 'My poor baby! Peopleee! Catch his girl, this rogue who annoyed the dragon! Where is she? Capture her! It's not the monster-catchers fault, but hers!'

The guards, helped by many volunteers, began combing the crowd. Ciri managed to get over her dizziness.

'Fabio,' she whispered, 'We need to split up. We'll meet in the same alley we arrived here from. Go. And if someone stops you and asks about me, feign ignorance.'

'But... Ciri...'

'Go!'

She squeezed Yennefer's amulet and activated the spell. The spell worked immediately and just on time. The guards, who were already making way in the crowd towards her, stopped confused.

'The Hell?' moaned one, looking directly at the place Ciri stood. 'Where she at? I've just seen her 'round here!'

'Over there! Over there!' yelled the other one, pointing in the opposite direction.

Ciri turned around and walked away, still a bit dizzy from the rush of adrenaline and activation of the amulet. The amulet worked exactly the way it was supposed to – nobody could see her. Nobody at all. As a result, before getting out of the crowd, she was shoved countless times, kicked and stepped on. She missed by a heartbeat a crate thrown down from a wagon. She was almost stabbed with a pitchfork. Spells, it seemed, had a bad side as well as a good side – and just as many values as flaws.

The amulet didn't operate for long. Ciri didn't have enough power to control it and prolong its work. Fortunately, the spell stopped working at the right moment – just as she stepped out of the rabble and saw Fabio waiting for her.

'Oh, dear!' sighed the boy, 'Oh dear, Ciri. You're here. I was so worried...'

'You were worried for nothing. Let's go back. The noon has passed already, we must make haste.'

'You sure dealt with that monster well.' The boy gazed at her with respect. 'You were moving so fast! Where did you learn to move like that?'

'Like what? The wyvern was killed by the squire.'

'Not true. I saw it myself...'

'You saw nothing! Please, Fabio, don't tell anybody about it. Not one soul. And definitely not lady Yennefer. Oh, she would scold me so hard if only she knew...'

She was quiet for a while.

'These people there,' she nodded at the square, 'were right. I was the one who provoked the wyvern... it's all because of me...'

'It's not your fault,' disagreed Fabio. 'The cage was rotten and badly-built. It could burst at any moment: an hour from now, tomorrow, the day after... It's better that it happened then, because you could save...'

'The squire saved!' yelled Ciri, 'The squire did! Get it into your thick skull! I swear if you let the word out I'll change you into... into something terrible! I know magic! I will magic you into...'

'Oi!' exclaimed a voice from behind their backs, 'Enough of this!'

One of the women following them had dark, evenly combed hair, sparkling eyes and thin lips. She wore a short, violet silk coat trimmed with dormice fur.

'Why aren't you in school, student?' she asked coldly, glaring at Ciri.

'Wait, Tissaia,' said the other woman, younger, tall and blond, in a green dress with a considerable neckline. 'I don't recognize her. I don't think she's...'

'She is.' Cut the dark-haired one. 'I'm certain that she's one of your girls, Rita. You can't possibly know them all. She must be one of those who sneaked out through Loxia during the chaos when the students changed quarters. And now we shall wait for her explanation. Well, student?'

'What?' Ciri frowned.

The woman pursed her thin lips and evened the cuffs of her gloves.

'Where did you steal that amulet from? Or perhaps someone had given it to you?'

'What?'

'Don't test my patience, student. Tell us your name, class and name of your preceptress. Now!'

'What?'

‘Are you playing dumb, student? Your name! What is your name?’

Ciri clenched her teeth and her eyes shot green flames at them.

‘Anna Ingeborga Klopstock’ she hissed tactlessly.

The woman raised her hand and Ciri immediately understood the seriousness of her mistake. Yennefer had demonstrated to her paralyzing spells only once, tired with her long whining. The feeling had been considerably unpleasant. It was the same now.

Fabio cried terrified and leaped towards her but the other woman, the blond one, caught him by the collar and forced him to stay in place. The boy jerked his arm but the woman had an iron grip. Ciri couldn’t move. The dark-haired one bent down and glared at her.

‘I am not in favour of corporal punishment,’ she drawled her words coldly, evening her cuffs yet again, ‘But I will ensure that you’re whipped, student. Not for misbehaviour, not for the theft or elopement. Not even for wearing illicit clothes, walking out with a boy and telling him about things you were forbidden from discussing. No, you will be whipped for being unable to recognize an Archmistress.’

‘No!’ yelled Fabio. ‘Don’t hurt her, Ma’am! I am a clerk at Molnar Giancardi’s bank and this lady is...’

‘Shut up!’ yelled Ciri. ‘Shut....’ The gagging spell was casted quickly and brutally. She could taste blood in her mouth.

‘Well?’ the blond woman urged Fabio.

‘Speak. Who is this haughty little miss?’

Margarita Laux-Antille emerged from the pool with a splash.. Ciri could not stop herself from taking a peek. She saw Yennefer in the nude many times and she didn’t think anyone could have a more beautiful figure. She was wrong. At the sight of a naked Margarita Laux-Antille even marble statues of goddesses and nymphs would sob with jealousy.

The Sorceress grabbed the bucket of cold water and poured it on her breasts, while swearing obscenely and shaking it off.

‘Hey, girl,’ she nodded at Ciri, ‘be so good and pass me a towel. Come on, stop pouting.’

Ciri hissed quietly, still offended. When Fabio let out who Ciri was, the sorceresses dragged her through half of the city, exposing her to public mockery. In Giancardi’s bank the whole incident was immediately explained. The Sorceresses apologized to Yennefer, explaining their behaviour. The misunderstanding was caused by the disciples of Aretuza, who were temporarily transferred to Loxia as the school facilities were turned into rooms for the guests and participants of the conference. Some adepts took advantage of the chaos during the move and fled from Thanedd to the city. Alarmed by the activation of Ciri’s amulet, Margarita Laux-Antille and Tissaia de Vries mistook her for one.

The sorcerers’ apologized to Yennefer, but none of them thought of apologizing to Ciri. Yennefer was looking at her while listening to the apology, and Ciri felt like her ears were burning. And the most unfortunate one was Fabio - Molnar Giancardi scolded him so harshly that the boy had tears in his eyes. Ciri felt sorry for him, but she was also proud of him - Fabio kept his word and he revealed nothing about the wyvern.

Yennefer, as it turned out, knew Tissaia and Margarita. The Sorceresses had invited them to the Silver Heron, the best and most expensive inn in Gors Velen where Tissaia had stayed upon arrival, avoiding, for reasons known only to her, approaching the island. Margarita Laux-Antille, who was the Principal of Aretuza, had accepted the invitation of the older Sorceress and for a time shared a room with her. The inn was real luxury. They were in the basement baths, which Margarita and Tissaia had rented for their exclusive use, paying for it an unimaginable amount. Yennefer and Ciri of course, were encouraged to use the restrooms

and as a result they had all soaked alternately in the pool and had spent a few hours sweating in the sauna, as well as non-stop chatting.

Ciri gave the towel to the sorceress. Margarita patted her gently on the cheek. Ciri snorted and jumped and splashed into the pool of scented rosemary water.

‘Floats like a little leaf’, smiled Margarita as she lay down next to Yennefer on a wooden couch. ‘And she is as well formed as a nymph. You’re giving her to me, Yenna?’

‘That is why I brought her here.’

‘For a year I take it? She knows the basics?’

‘She knows, but let her start like everyone else, from the beginning. It would not do her any harm.’

‘Good thinking’, said Tissaia de Vries, who was busy ordering the drinks that, were on the marble table covered with a layer of vapour droplets. ‘Good thinking, Yennefer. It will be easier on the girl if she starts together with the other novices.’

Ciri emerged from the pool and sat down on the edge of the timbering, twirling her hair and splashing her feet in the water. Yennefer and Margarita chatted idly, occasionally wiping their faces with cold, wet towels.

Tissaia, modestly wrapped in a sheet, did not join the conversation, giving the feeling of being totally absorbed in bringing order to the table.

‘I apologize humbly to the noble ladies!’, Exclaimed a voice from above from the unseen innkeeper. ‘Excuse me for daring to disturb, but... an officer urgently wants to see Madame De Vries! They say that this will suffer no delay!’

Margarita Laux-Antille chuckled and winked at Yennefer, after which both, as if commanded, withdrew the towels from their bosoms and adopted a position convoluted and highly challenging.

‘Let the officer enter!’ Cried Margarita, holding back laughter. ‘Go Ahead! We are ready!’

‘Like children’, sighed Tissaia de Vries, shaking her head ‘Cover yourself, Ciri.’

The officer entered, but the trick of the sorceresses completely fizzled out. The officer was not disturbed by the sight before their eyes, didn’t blush, never opened their mouth, nor averted their eyes. Because the officer was a woman. A tall woman, slender, with a thick black braid and a sword at her side.

‘Madame,’ said the woman dryly, making a slight bow towards Tissaia de Vries, resulting in a rattle of chain mail. ‘I bring news that your orders have been executed. I request permission to return to the barracks.’

‘Granted,’ Tissaia said. ‘Thank you for the escort and for your help. Happy journey.’

Yennefer sat on the couch, and looked at the insignia on the shoulder of the warrior which had the colours black, yellow and red.

‘Do you know who I am?’

The warrior bowed stiffly, wiped her sweaty face. The bath was hot and she wore chain mail and a leather jacket.

‘I’m often in Vengerberg,’ she said. ‘Lady Yennefer. My name is Rayla.’

‘Judging by your badge, you serve in the special forces of King Demavend.’

‘Yes, Madam.’

‘What rank?’

‘Captain.’

‘Very good,’ laughed Margarita Laux-Antille. ‘I see that the army of Demavend have finally begun to give official patents to soldiers who have ovaries.’

‘Can I retire?’ The warrior stood up straight, placing her hand on the hilt of her sword.

‘You can.’

‘I noticed the hostility in your voice, Yenna’ said Margarita finally. ‘What do you have against the Lady Captain?’

Yennefer got up and took two cups from the table.

‘Have you seen the posts that are along the roadside?’ She asked. ‘You should have seen them; you should have smelled the stench of rotting corpses. These posts are her idea and her work. Her and her subordinates from the Special Forces. They are a band of sadists!’

‘This is war, Yennefer. This Rayla has had to see on more than one occasion her comrades-in-arms who have been taken alive into the hands of the Squirrels. Hung by their wrists in the trees as a targets for arrows. Blinded, castrated with their feet burned in bonfires. The atrocities committed by the Scoia’ael would not shame Falka herself.’

‘The methods of the special forces also closely resemble the methods of Falka. However this is not it Rita. I do not pity the fate of the elves. I know what war is. I also know how to win a war. You win with soldiers with conviction and sacrifice defending the country, defending their homes. And not with such as this Rayla, with mercenaries fighting for money, who cannot and do not want to sacrifice themselves for anyone. They do not even know what it is to sacrifice. And if they do, they despise it.’

‘To the Club, with your sacrifice and contempt. What does it matter to us? Ciri, run up above and bring us another carafe. Today I want to get drunk.’

Tissaia De Vries sighed and shook her head. This did not escape the attention of Margarita.

‘Fortunately,’ she laughed ‘we are no longer in school, dear teacher. We are free to do what we want.’

‘Even in the presence of a future adept?’ Tissaia asked venomously. ‘When I was Principal of Aretuza ...’

‘I remember, we remember’ Yennefer cut in with a smile. ‘Although we would like to, we did not forget. Go for the carafe, Ciri.’

Above, while waiting for the carafe, Ciri witnessed the departure of the warrior and her unit, consisting of four soldiers. With curiosity and admiration she contemplated their appearances, faces, clothes and weapons. Rayla, the captain with the black braid, was in an argument at that moment with the proprietor of the inn.

‘I will not wait for the sunrise! And I don’t give a fuck that the door is closed! I want to leave the city immediately! I know that the inn has its own stables and postern gate! I command you to open it!’

‘The laws ...’

‘Bullshit, what do I care for laws. I execute the orders of the great teacher de Vries!’

‘All right, Captain, do not shout, I will open ...’

The aforementioned gate, as discussed, was a narrow and firmly secured exit leading directly across to the other side of the wall of the city. Before Ciri could take the carafe from the hands of the maid she watched as the postern gate was opened and Rayla and her unit went outside into the night.

She was thoughtful.

‘Well, finally,’ Margarita said happily although whether it was from seeing Ciri or the carafe that she was carrying. Ciri put the carafe on the table, obviously wrong, because Tissaia de Vries immediately move it. In serving, Yennefer destroyed the entire composition on the table and once again Tissaia started sorting it. Ciri imagined with horror Tissaia in the role of teacher.

Margarita and Yennefer resumed their conversation not forgetting the carafe. Ciri realised that she would soon have to go for another. She sank into her thoughts while listening to the conversation of the sorceresses.

‘No, Yenna’, Margarita shook her head. ‘You are not someone I see on a regular basis. I broke up with Lars. It’s over. *Elaine deireadh*, as the elves say.’

‘Is that why you want to get drunk?’

‘Among other things’, confirmed Margarita ‘I am sad, I am not hiding. At the end of the day we’ve been together four years. But I had to break up with him. A stick is not a boat ...’

‘Especially,’ snorted Tissaia de Vries staring into the golden wine that swayed in her cup ‘given that Lars is married.’

‘It is,’ the sorceress shrugged her shoulders ‘irrelevant. All the attractive men of that age that I am interested in are married, I cannot help it. Lars loved me, and I seemed for a time I also found that I loved him ... Ah what can I say. He wanted too much from me. He threatened my freedom and I gag just thinking about monogamy. At the end of the day, I have you as an example, Yenna. Remember that conversation in Vengerberg? When you decided to break with your Witcher? I advised you then that love is not just lying in the street. Yet it was you who were right. Love is love and life is life. Love passes ...’

‘Do not listen to her Yennefer.’ Tissaia said with an icy voice. ‘She is full of sadness and bitterness. Do you know why she is not going to the banquet of Aretuza? Because she is embarrassed to be there alone, without the man with whom she associated with for four years. They envied her. But she lost it because she could not appreciate his love.’

‘Wouldn’t it be better to speak of other things?’ Yennefer proposed, apparently unconcerned but her voice had changed somewhat. ‘Ciri, serve us. Damn this carafe is almost empty. Come on, be good and bring us another.’

‘Bring two,’ smiled Margarita ‘As a reward you will get a sip and sit down with us, you will no longer have to strain your ears from a distance. Your education starts here, now, from me before you reach Aretuza.’

‘Education!’ Tissaia rolled her eyes. ‘Gods!’

‘Hush dear teacher.’ Margarita gave a wet slap to her thigh feinting anger. ‘I am now the Principal of the school! You do not get to throw me into the final exams!’

‘Well, too bad.’

‘Note that from me too. Now would be a private consultation, like Yenna’s and should not tire the adept, she wouldn’t have to clean up the snot of the mourners, nor quarrel with the proud. Ciri, listen and learn. A sorceress always acts. For better or worse, that we’ll see later. But we must act, courageously and grab life by the horns. Believe me, little one, the only regret is having been inactive, indecisive, hesitant. Although sometimes the action and the decision produce grief and sadness, one does not repent of them ever. Look at this lady so serious that is sitting there, gesturing pedantically and ordering everything on hand. This is Tissaia de Vries, a great teacher, who educated tens of sorceresses. Teaching them to act. That indecision ...’

‘Leave it, Rita’

‘Tissaia is right,’ Yennefer said, looking at a corner of the baths. ‘Leave it. I know that you are sad because of Lars, but do not turn this into a lesson for life. The girl will still have time for this kind of lessons. And she will not learn them in school. Ciri, go get another carafe.’

Ciri rose. She was already fully dressed.

And completely determined.

‘What?’ Yennefer screamed. ‘What? What do you mean gone?’

‘She told me ...’ muttered the innkeeper, turning pale and pressing back against the wall. ‘She told me to saddle a horse ...’

‘And you listened to her? Instead of asking us?’

‘Lady! How was I to know? I was sure she was following orders .. the thought did not cross my mind...’

‘Fucking idiot!’

‘Easy, Yennefer,’ Tissaia pressed a hand to her forehead ‘Do not get carried away by emotions. It is night. They will not let her out beyond the gates.’

‘She asked,’ whispered the innkeeper ‘that they open the postern gate ...’

‘And why did they open it?’

‘Because of the conference,’ the innkeeper dropped his eyes, ‘the village is full of sorcerers ... People are afraid, nobody dares to cross their path ... How could I refuse? She spoke just like you Madame, the very same voice ... And she even looked the very same way ... no one even dare to look her in the eye, let alone ask questions ... She was like you ... the very same thing ... She told me to get her a pen and ink ... and wrote a letter’

‘Give it to me.’

Tissaia de Vries was faster.

‘Lady Yennefer,’ she read aloud.

Forgive me, I'm going to Hirundum because I want to see Geralt. I want to see him before going to school. Forgive my disobedience, but I have to do it. I know you will punish me, but I will not regret the indecision and hesitation. If I have to regret let it be by action and decision. I am a sorceress. Grab life by the horns. I'll be back as soon as I can.

Ciri.

‘Is that all?’

‘There is a postscript:

Tell Mrs Rita, that the school will not have to wipe my nose.

Margarita Laux-Antille shook her head in disbelief. And Yennefer cursed. The innkeeper blushed and his mouth fell open. He had heard many curses before, but not that one.

The wind was blowing from the mainland towards the sea. Waves of clouds moved towards the moon hanging over the forest. The road to Hirundum was plunged into darkness. Galloping had become too dangerous. Ciri slowed the horse down and started to trot. Slowing the horse to a walk never crossed her mind. She had to hurry,

She heard in the distance the rumble of a storm approaching, from time to time the glow of lightning shone on the horizon; highlight the sawtooth form of the tree tops.

She stopped the horse. She was at a crossroads, the road forked into two, with both forks looking identical.

Why had Fabio not said anything about the crossroads? Ah, who cares if I don't know the way, I always know where to go ...

So why now do I not know which fork to take?

A huge shape noiselessly moved over her head. Ciri's heart felt like it leaped into her throat. The horse whinnied, kicked and galloped off in a rush, choosing the right fork. She stopped it after a while.

‘It's just a ordinary owl.’ she whispered, trying to calm herself and the horse. ‘An ordinary bird ... There is no reason to be afraid ...’

The wind intensified, dark clouds covered the moon completely. But before her, in view of the road on the path that twisted through the forest, there was a clearing. She rode faster, the dirt sprayed out from under the hooves of the horse.

Soon she had to stop. Before her was a cliff and the sea from which arose the familiar black cone of the island. From here she could not see the lights of Garstang, Loxia or Aretuza. She only had eyes for the slender, solitary and ornate tower of Thanedd.

Tor Lara.

It thundered and a moment later a blinding flash of lightning ribboned across the cloudy sky and joined with the top of the tower. Tor Lara windows flashed like red eyes, it seemed as if the inside of the tower had been on fire for a second.

Tor Lara ... The Tower of Seagulls... Why does this name awaken in me such terror?

The wind shook the trees, the branches rustled, Ciri squinted her eyes, dust and leaves hit her on the cheeks. The horse snorted and twisted below her. Ciri managed to recover control. Thanedd Island was to the north, she had to head in westward direction. The sandy road lying in the darkness was as clear as a white line. She moved the horse into a gallop.

The thunder boomed again. Suddenly, in a flash of lightning, Ciri saw riders. Dark, fuzzy, silhouettes moving on both sides of the road. She heard a scream.

'Gar'ean!'

Without thinking Ciri spurred the horse, pulled the reins, turned and went into a gallop. Behind her there was shouting, whistling, neighing and the clatter of hooves.

'Gar'ean! Dh'oine!'

Galloping hooves, the rush of wind. A darkness in which shone the white trunks of the birch trees along the road. Thunder. In the flash of lightning, Ciri could see two horses were trying to cut off the road. One man stretched out his hand, trying to seize her reins. In his hat was pinned the tail of a squirrel. Ciri dug her heels into her horse, and laid low across its neck, her momentum throwing the hand aside. Behind her, screams, whistles, a roar of thunder. A flash of lightning.

'Sparle, Yaevinn!'

Galloping, galloping! Faster, horse! Thunder. Lightning. Fork in the road. To the left! I'm never mistaken. Another fork. To the right! Gallop horse! Hurry, hurry!

The road started to lead up, but the sand under the horse's hooves, although being spurred on, started to slow it down...

At the top of the rise Ciri looked around. Another flash of lightning illuminated the road. It was completely empty. She listened but could hear nothing but the leaves rustling in the wind. The thunder rumbled.

There was no one there. The Squirrels ... Were just a recollection of Kaedwen. The Rose of Shaerrawedd... I found it. The is not a soul here, not one follows me...

The wind hit her. *The wind is blowing from inland*, she thought, *and I feel it on my right cheek ... I am lost.*

Lightning flashed again, its light reflecting off the shining surface of the sea, on its background the black cone of Thanedd Island. And Tor Lara. The Tower of Seagulls. The tower which pulls me like a magnet... But I do not want to go to that tower, I am going to Hirundum. Because I have to see Geralt.

The lightning flashed again.

Between her and the cliff stood a black horse. And on it sat a knight wearing a helmet decorated with wings of a bird of prey. Suddenly the wings fluttered, and the bird takes flight...

Cintra!

A paralysing fear gripped her. Her hands clenched painfully around the reins. Lightning flashed. The Black Knight reared up on his horse. Instead of a face he wore a monstrous mask. The wings fluttered...

Her horse without any urging went into a gallop. Darkness, punctuated by lightning.

The forest came to an end and under the horses hooves there was a splash, and the sounds of a swamp. The sound followed her from the wings of a bird of prey. Closer... Closer...

A furious gallop, her eyes wept for more speed. The lightning raced across the sky. In its light Ciri could see alders and willows lining both sides of the road. But they were not trees. They were the servants of the King of Alders. Servants of the Black Knight, who galloped

behind her, and the wings of the bird of prey rustling on his helmet. Grotesque monsters on both sides of the road stretch out their hands towards her shoulders, laughing wildly, opening the black maws of their mouths. Ciri was thrown forward onto the horse's neck. Branches whistled, whipped, and hooked on her clothing. Deformed trunks creaked, the holes opened and closed, and then become covered in a mocking smile...

Young lion of Cintra! Child of the Elder Blood!

The Black Knight was right behind her, Ciri could feel his hands trying to grab her hair. The horse fuelled by her screaming, jumped forward, and beyond an invisible barrier, breaking branches with a crack...

Ciri pulled the reins and leaned into the saddle, she turned the panting horse about. Shouting wildly, furiously. She drew her sword from its sheath and swung it over her head.

This is not Cintra! I'm not a little girl! I'm not unarmed! I will not let you...

'I will not let you! You will not touch me anymore! You will not touch me ever again!'

Her horse with a splash and a squelch landed in water, which reached up to its belly. Ciri leaned forward and screamed, then struck the stallion with her heels and turned it back towards the bank. *A pond*, she thought. *Fabio said something about fishponds. This is Hirundum. I was right. I'm never wrong...*

Lightning. Behind her was a dike, and beyond that the black wall of the forest, penetrating into the sky like a saw. And nobody else. Only the howling of the wind cut through the silence. Somewhere in the swamp a duck quacked in fright. No one. There is nobody on the dike. No one was following me. It was a phantom, a nightmare. Memories of Cintra. I only imagined it.

Off in the distance was a light. A streetlight. Or a fire. It's a farmhouse. Hirundum. It is close. Only a little further...

Lightning flashed. One, two, three. With no thunder. The wind died suddenly. The horse neighed, then tossed its head and reared.

In the black sky appeared a milky film, which cleared quickly, twisting like a snake. The wind blew again, and from the dike arose a dust storm of dead leaves and grasses.

In the distance, the light faded away. It sank and melted into a flood of a million little fires which suddenly glow blue and cover the entire swamp.

The horse snorted, neighed, the dike raged. Ciri with difficulty remained in the saddle.

Nightmarish riders appeared like a ribbon that crossed the sky. As they moved closer Ciri was able to get a better look at them. Their helmets were bristling with buffalo horns and their plumes were frayed. Under the helmets were the white masks of the dead. The riders rode on skeletal horses covered with ragged blankets. The wind howled with anger among the alder trees, a sword of lightning split the black sky relentlessly. The wind howled even louder. *No*, she thought, *not the wind*. It was a ghostly song.

The nightmarish parade turned directly towards her. The hooves of their horses pass through the ghostly lights hanging over the swamp. At the head of the host rode the King of the Wild Hunt. A rusty helm sat upon his cadaverous face, his eye sockets gaping holes where a livid fire burned. Frayed robes fluttered around his body. He wore a breastplate covered in rust, upon which rattled a necklace, empty like a pod of beans. Once it contained precious stones. But these had fallen out during the wild chase across the sky. And they had become the stars...

This is not real! This is not! It is a nightmare, a hallucination, a delusion! It only seems like it to me!

The King of the Wild Hunt spurred his skeletal steed and broke into a wild and hideous laughter.

'Child of the Elder Blood! You belong to us! You are ours! Join the procession, join our Hunt! Let us run, run to the end of eternity, until the limit of existence! You are ours,

daughter of Chaos! Join us and know the joy of the Hunt! You are ours, you're one of us! Your place is among us!'

'No!', she cried 'Be gone! You're dead!'

The King of the Wild Hunt laughed, his rotten teeth tapped on his rusted armor. His burning eye sockets peered from his skull mask.

'Yes, we are dead. But you are death.'

Ciri clutched her horses' neck and dug her heels into its side. The horse ran along the dike at a dizzying gallop. Behind her she could feel the spectral pursuers.

Bernie Hofmeier, a Halfling and a farmer from Hirundum, raised his curly head, listening to the sound of distant thunder.

'A dangerous thing,' he said 'this storm without rain. Lightning strike in the wrong place and there'll be fires...'

'A little rain would not hurt,' sighed Dandelion, who was tightening the strings of his lute. 'because the air is that thick it can be cut with a knife... My shirt is glued to my back, the mosquitoes surround us... But I think it going to remain in the clouds. The storm will circle us and will fall somewhere else in the north. Perhaps the sea.'

'It's falling in Thanedd,' confirmed the Halfling. 'It is the highest point in the surrounding area. That tower on the island, Tor Lara, draws fucking lightning. During a storm, it looks like it is wreathed in flame. It is surprising that it doesn't fall apart...'

'It's magic,' The troubadour said with conviction. 'Everything about Thanedd is magical, down to the rocks. And the wizards are not afraid of the lightning. But what am I saying? Did you know, Bernie, That they can catch lightning?'

'Don't fuck with me! You're lying, Dandelion.'

'May the Gods strike...' the Poet paused, glanced anxiously at the sky. 'May a duck bite me if I'm lying. I'm telling you Hofmeier, wizards capture lightning. I've seen it with my own eyes. Old Gorazd, the one who was slain on Sodden Hill, once captured lightning right before my very eyes. He took a long length of wire, one end fasten to the top of his tower, while the second...'

'The other end of the wire is put into a bottle,' suddenly spoke the shrill voice of Hofmeier's son sitting on the porch, he was a small Halfling with a thick head of curly hair like a sheep's fleece. 'In a glass demijohn, like the one that my dad uses stores his wine.'

'Home, Franklin!' Shouted the farmer. 'To bed, to sleep! It's almost midnight and we have work to do tomorrow! And there will be no fooling with bottles and wire during a storm, or you'll get the strap. You'll not be sitting on your ass for two weeks! Petunia, take the boy from here. And bring us more beer!'

'You've had enough,' Petunia Hofmeier said angrily as she carried the child inside. 'You've put enough already in your gullet.'

'Do not growl. Soon the Witcher will return. It is proper to treat a guest.'

'When the Witcher comes back, you can go get it for him.'

'Oh stingy woman' Hofmeier growled, but so that his wife could not hear. 'All of her family, the Biberveldts of Knotweed, are to a man, misers... The Witcher has been gone a long time. He went over to the ponds and disappeared. A strange man he is. Did you see the way he was looking at the girls Cinni and Tanderinki this evening when they were playing in the yard? Strange look in his eye. And now... I get the impression he went to be alone. And that he took lodging in my house because it is on the outskirts, away from the others. You know him better Dandelion, tell me... '

‘Know him?’ The Poet killed a mosquito on his neck and strummed his lute as he watched the black silhouette of alder trees by the pond. ‘No, Bernie. I don’t know him. I don’t think anyone knows him. But something happened to him, I can see it. Why did he come here, to Hirundum? To be closer to Thanedd island? And when I proposed yesterday riding together to Gors Velen, from where you can view Thanedd Island, he refused without hesitation. What keeps him here? Did you offer him a lucrative job?’

‘Well there,’ muttered the Halfling ‘If I’m being honest, I do not believe that there really is a monster. The child that drowned in the pond may have had a cramp. But the point is everyone started shouting that it was a Vodyanoi or a Kikimora and that we must call a Witcher... And they offered him a soldier’s fortune. And what did he do? He spends three nights by the dikes, then sleeps during the day or sits without saying a word, watching the children like a mother... Strange. I would say even, peculiar.’

‘Well one might say.’

Lightning flashed, illuminating the farm and buildings. For a moment shone the ruins of an Elven palace across the dike. For an instant the orchards rattled with the sound of thunder. Violent winds sprang up, trees and reeds rustled over the pond and marred the mirrored surface of the water crumpling and tarnishing the tips of the floating water lilies.

‘The storm is headed this way.’ Said the farmer glancing at the sky. ‘Maybe it’s the island magicians with their spells? Thanedd must house over two hundred of them... What do you think, Dandelion, what are they going to discuss at this conference of theirs? And will it do any good for us?’

‘For us? I doubt it.’ The troubadour strummed his fingers along the strings of the lute. ‘These meetings are usually a fashion show, gossiping, backbiting and the opportunity for internal wrangling. Quarrels about whether to generalize magic or make it more elitist. Fights between those who are kings, and those who prefer to exert pressure on kings from a distance...’

‘Ha!’ Bernie Hofmeier said. ‘Then I see that this meeting on Thanedd will be no worse than thunder in a storm.’

‘Maybe, But what do we care?’

‘You do.’ said the Halfling grimly ‘Because you strum the lute and sing. You look at the world around and see only rhymes and music. But no more than twice in the past week did the army trample our cabbages and turnips beneath the hooves of their horses. The army chases the Squirrels, the Squirrels run and disappear and the path of both passes over our cabbages...’

‘No time to mourn the cabbages when the forest burns.’ recited the Poet.

‘You, Dandelion,’ Bernie Hofmeier looked at him askance ‘when you say something I do not know whether to laugh, cry or kick you in the ass. I’m serious! And I say that terrible times have come. With posts on the highways, gallows, the dead in the fields and the roads, this country is starting to feel like the times of Falka. And how can we live like this? By day people come with threats from the king that we will be put in the stocks for helping the Scoia’tael. And at night the elves show up and you try to refuse them help! Thus, very poetic, see how the night takes on a reddish appearance. It is so poetic it makes me want to vomit. And so we are caught in the crossfire...’

‘You’re counting on the Congress of Sorcerers to make a difference?’

‘Count on it. You said yourself that there are two factions among the Sorcerers. There were already times when Sorcerers mitigated kings, put end to wars and rebellions. After all it was the Sorcerers who made peace with Nilfgaard three years ago. They can now...’

Bernie Hofmeier paused and pricked up his ears. Dandelion’s hand muted the string of the lute.

From the darkness emerged the witcher from the direction of the dike. He walked slowly towards the house. Again the lightning flashed. When the thunder struck, the witcher was already with them, on the porch.

‘What happened, Geralt?’ Dandelion asked to break the awkward silence. ‘Did you get the monster?’

‘No. This is not a night to track. It’s a restless night. Restless... I’m tired, Dandelion.’

‘Then sit down and rest.’

‘You misunderstand me.’

‘Indeed,’ muttered the Halfling, looking at the sky and listening. ‘A restless night, something evil is brewing... The animals are crowded in the barn... and screams can be heard in the wind...’

‘The Wild Hunt’ the witcher said quietly. ‘We’ll close the shutters, Mr Hofmeier.’

‘The Wild Hunt?’ Bernie was terrified ‘Ghosts?’

‘Do not fear. It flies high. In the summer it always flies high. But it may wake the children. The Hunt brings nightmares. Better close the shutters.’

‘The Wild Hunt’ Dandelion said, glancing nervously up. ‘heralds war.’

‘Nonsense. Superstition.’

‘But shortly before the attack on Cintra by Nilfgaard...’

‘Quiet!’ The witcher interrupted with a gesture, straightening up suddenly, staring into the darkness.

‘What is...’

‘Horses.’

‘Damn it’ Hofmeier hissed, springing up from the bench. ‘at night it can only be Scoia’ael...’

‘One horse’ the Witcher interrupted, taking up his sword which he had placed on the bench. ‘One real horse, the rest are the ghosts of the Hunt... Damn, it is not possible... In the Summer?’

Dandelion also rose, but he was ashamed to flee, as neither, Geralt or Bernie had made a move to escape. The Witcher drew his sword from its sheath and ran towards the dike, the Halfling without hesitation rushed after him, arming himself with a pitchfork along the way. Lightning flashed again, illuminating on the dike a galloping horse. And behind the horse came something vague, something that was irregular, woven with darkness with glowing flashes, a whirlpool, mirage. Something that gave rise to panic, disgusting, visceral horror that twisted the entrails.

The Witcher cried, raising his sword. The rider saw him and hastened their gallop, steering the mount towards him. The Witcher cried again. Thunder boomed overhead.

There was a flash again, this time it was not lightning. Dandelion crouched next to the bench and would have crawled under it, but it proved to be too low. Bernie dropped his pitchfork. Petunia Hofmeier ran from the house screaming.

In a blinding flash materialized a transparent sphere, inside loomed a figure which was rapidly gaining form and shape. Dandelion recognized her immediately. He knew those black curls and that obsidian star on a velvet ribbon. What he did not know and had never before seen was her face. The face of Fury and Rage, the face of the Goddess of Vengeance, Destruction and Death.

Yennefer raised her hands and shouted a spell, from her hands poured a hissing spiral of sparks that cut the night sky and reflected thousands of times from the surface of the pond. The spirals darted like spears through the tangled cloud chasing the lone rider. The cloud gurgled, and to Dandelion it seemed that he heard the cries of ghosts, and he saw nightmarish silhouettes of spectral horses. He saw it only for a split second because the cloud suddenly shrunk, collapsed into a ball and sped up into the sky, stretching with the momentum and

dragging behind it a tail like a comet. Darkness fell, lit only by the glow of a lantern that Petunia was holding.

The rider led the horse into the courtyard before the house and jumped from the saddle, then hesitated. It was then that Dandelion realized who it was. He had never seen this lean, ashen haired girl. But her immediately recognized her.

‘Geralt...’ The girl said quietly. ‘Lady Yennefer... I’m sorry... I had to. You know...’

‘Ciri’ said the Witcher. Yennefer had taken a step towards the girl, but stopped. She was silent.

To which of the two will she go to first, thought Dandelion. The witcher, or the sorceress, or none of them. To whom will she first approach? To him? Or her?

Ciri did not approach any of them. She could not choose. So she passed out.

The house was empty, the Halfling and his family had gone to work at dawn. Ciri pretended to sleep, so she heard when Geralt and Yennefer left. She slipped out of bed, dressed quickly and quietly slipped out of the room, following behind them out into the courtyard.

Geralt and Yennefer turned towards the dike between the white and yellow water lilies. Ciri hid behind a ruined wall and watched both of them through a crack. She had thought that Dandelion, a famous poet, whose poems she often used to read, was still asleep. But she was wrong. Dandelion the poet was not sleeping. And caught her red-handed.

‘Hey,’ he said, approaching suddenly and laughing. ‘Is it nice to spy and eavesdrop? More discretion, little one. Let them be alone for a while longer.’

Ciri blushed, but quickly opened her mouth.

‘First, I’m not little.’ She whispered proudly. ‘And secondly I do not think I’m bothering them, right?’

Dandelion grew serious.

‘Probably not,’ he said. ‘In fact you might even be helping.’

‘How, In what way?’

‘Don’t pretend. You were very clever yesterday. But you didn’t fool me. You pretended to faint right?’

‘Yes,’ she muttered, turning her face away. ‘Lady Yennefer realized, but not Geralt...’

‘They brought you inside the house together. Their hands touched. They sat next to your bed almost until dawn, but didn’t say a word to each other. It’s only now that they have decided to talk. There, at the dike, by the pond. And you decided to eavesdrop on what they are saying... To spy on them through a hole in the wall. Are you so interested in what they are doing there?’

‘They aren’t doing anything there. A little talking and that’s it.’

‘And you’ Dandelion sat down on the grass under an apple tree and leaned his back against the trunk, but not before examining to make sure there were no ants or caterpillars, ‘Would like to know what they are talking about?’

‘Yes... No! And anyway... Anyway, I can’t hear anything. They are too far away.’

‘If you want,’ the bard laughed ‘I’ll tell you.’

‘Any how would you know?’

‘Ha, ha. Noble Ciri, I’m a poet. A poet knows all about these kind of issues. I’ll tell you something else: Poets know more about such matters than the people who are involved.’

‘Sure!’

‘I give you my word. The word of a Poet.’

‘Yes? Well... Well, tell me what they are saying. Explain to me what it all means!’

‘Look out through the hole again and then tell me what they are doing.’

‘Hmm...’ said Ciri biting her lower lip, then leaning down and peered through the crack. ‘Lady Yennefer is standing by the willow... Pulling off the leaves and playing with her star... She isn’t saying anything and she isn’t looking at Geralt... And Geralt is at her side. He lowered his head. And said something. No, he is silent. Oh, what a face... What a funny face he has...’

‘Child’s play.’ Dandelion found an apple in the grass which he started to rub against his pants and then examined critically. ‘He is asking her to forgive him for his various foolish words and actions. He apologizes for his impatience, lack of faith and hope, his stubbornness, his viciousness, his anger and attitude which is unworthy for a man. He apologizes for what he once did not understand, for which you would not understand...’

‘Impossible, that’s a lie!’ Ciri straightened and pulled her bangs violently back from her forehead. ‘You’re making it up!’

‘Apologizes for what he understands only now.’ Dandelion stared at the sky and his voice began to take the proper rhythm for ballads. ‘For he wants to understand, but is afraid that he does not have time... And what they have he’ll never understand. He apologizes and asks for forgiveness... Hmm, hmm... Meaning ... Conscience... Purpose? All trivial, shit...’

‘That’s not true!’ Ciri stamped her foot. ‘Geralt doesn’t say those things! He... doesn’t say anything. I saw him, he stands with her silently...’

‘This is the task of poetry, Ciri. Speaking of what other would keep silent.’

‘What a silly task. And you made it up!’

‘This is also the task of poetry. Hey, I hear voices coming from the pond. Quickly, take a look at what is happening.’

‘Geralt’ Ciri said, eye again peering through the hole in the wall, ‘stands with his head lowered. And Yennefer is yelling at him horribly. Yelling and waving her arms. Oh... What does this mean?’

‘Child’s play’ Dandelion again stared at the clouds floating in the sky. ‘Now it is she who is apologizing to him.’

*'I take thee to my wedded wife, to have and to holde from this day forwarde, for better, for
wurse, for richer, for poorer, in sickenes, and in health, to love and to cherishe, til death us
departe.'*

iaiii

Old marriage vows

We don't know much about love. Love is like a pear: it's sweet and it has a distinct shape.

Try to define the shape of a pear.

Dandelion, *Half a century of poetry*

Chapter Three

Geralt had reasons to believe – and so he did – that the banquets of wizards looked different from feasts and revels of regular mortals. However, he didn't expect them to differ so drastically.

Yennefer's offer to accompany her to the banquet at the eve of the conference was surprising, though not dumbstruckingly. It wasn't the first such offer. Before, when they were still living together, Yennefer desired his company at conferences and gatherings. Back then, he refused. He was certain that wizards would treat him as a freak and a spectacle at best, and as an intruder or pariah at worst. Yennefer laughed his fears off, but didn't insist. Since in all other situations she could be so insisting that the whole house shook and creaked, it only served to reinforce Geralt's belief that his suspicions were true.

This time he agreed. Without hesitation. The offer was made after a long, sincere and emotional talk. After the talk, which brought them back together, putting aside former conflicts, the talk which melted the ice of bitterness and pride. After the talk at Hirundum's dike, Geralt would agree to every, virtually every offer from Yennefer. He wouldn't refuse even if she proposed a visit to hell in order to drink a glass of boiling tar while having a small talk with a bunch of fiery demons.

And there was Ciri, without whom that talk would have been impossible – that meeting wouldn't have taken place. Ciri, who, according to Codrigher, was an object of interest to some wizard. Geralt hoped that his presence at the conference would provoke the wizard and force him to make a move. But he didn't say a word about this to Yennefer.

They set off from Hirundum straight to Thanedd; him, her, Ciri and Dandelion. At first, they made a stop at the huge Loxia palace, at the south-eastern bottom of the mountain. The palace was bustling with guests and their companions, but Yennefer was able to quickly acquire lodgings. They stayed there one whole day. Geralt spent it talking with Ciri; Dandelion on running around gathering and sharing rumours; and the sorceress on picking clothes. And once the evening came, the witcher and Yennefer joined the colourful procession on the way to Aretuza – the banquet's destination. And now, in Aretuza, Geralt was experiencing wonder and surprise, even though he had promised himself not to.

The giant hall was T-shaped. The longer part had windows, narrow and unbelievably high, almost reaching the ceiling. The ceiling was high as well. So high, that it was difficult to make sense of the murals which adorned it, least of all the gender of the nude figures which made a repeated appearance in the paintings. Windows were of stained glass, which must have cost a fortune, and yet the hall was uncomfortably cool. Geralt wondered why the candles hadn't gone out yet, but stopped after taking a closer look. The candelabras were magical, perhaps even illusory. Either way, they gave a lot of light, much more than regular candles.

When they entered, close to a hundred guests were already entertaining themselves inside. The hall, in the witcher's opinion, could accommodate at least three times that, even if tables were to be placed in the middle, in the shape of a horseshoe, in accordance with the custom. But the traditional horseshoe was missing. It seemed that they were to feast while standing, wandering tirelessly alongside the walls decorated with tapestries, garlands and pennants fluttering in the wind. Under the tapestries and garlands stood rows of long tables with piles of fancy food on even more fancy plates between fancy flowery compositions and fancy ice

figures. Upon taking a closer look, Geralt decided that there was more of the fancy than of the food.

‘No benches.’ He stated grimly, smartening up the short, black, snug-fitting jacket Yennefer picked for him. The jacket of this kind was known as a doublet and it was the newest fashion trend. The witcher had no idea where its name originated from and didn't wish to find out.

Yennefer didn't react. Geralt didn't expect her to, as he knew that the sorceress rarely reacted to statements of this sort. But it didn't discourage him. He kept whining. He just felt like whining for a bit.

‘No music. Cold as hell. Nowhere to sit. Are we supposed to eat while standing?’

The sorceress gave him a look.

‘Indeed,’ she said, surprisingly calm. ‘We shall dine while standing. Furthermore, care to remember that longer stops near the tables with food are considered a breach of etiquette.’

‘I shall take note of that,’ he murmured. ‘Especially considering that there's not much to stop for, as I see.’

‘Unrestrained drinking is a huge breach of etiquette.’ Yennefer continued to instruct him, dismissing his complaints. ‘Avoiding small talk, in turn, is an inexcusable breach...’

‘And how much of a breach,’ he interrupted, ‘does that gaunt idiot in goofy pants make by pointing at me to his companions?’

‘A tiny one.’

‘What are we going to be doing in here, Yen?’

‘Walking around the hall, making acquaintances, complimenting, conversing... Stop messing up your hair.’

‘You didn't let me tie it up...’

‘Your ponytail looks pretentious. Come, take my hand and let's go forward. Standing near the entrance is a breach of etiquette.’

They wandered around the hall, which was slowly filling with guests. Geralt was hungry as all hell but he quickly realised that Yennefer wasn't exaggerating. It was clear that the customs of the wizards truly demanded to eat and drink little and be casual. On top of that, every stop at the table required the use of etiquette. Someone always noticed, projected joy from the meeting and greeted with fake enthusiasm. After a mandatory kiss of air before the cheeks or an inadequately firm handshake, after fake smiles and even more fake compliments, came a short and wearisome talk about nothing in particular..

The witcher looked around, searching for familiar faces, mostly out of hope that he wasn't the only odd one out. Yennefer assured him that he wouldn't be and yet he didn't notice or couldn't recognize anyone else who didn't belong to the wizarding fraternity.

The pages were going from guest to guest, offering wine. Yennefer didn't drink at all. The witcher wanted to, but couldn't. The doublet was uncomfortably tight beneath the arms.

With an apt use of her arm, the sorceress dragged him away from the table and led him to the center of the hall, which was at the same time the center of everyone's attention. Resistance was useless. He knew what it was all about. It was a simple demonstration.

Geralt knew what to expect, therefore he quietly withstood the looks of insatiable curiosity from the sorceresses and enigmatic smiles of the wizards. Despite Yennefer's insistence that the etiquette forbade the use of magic on such parties, he didn't believe that wizards could control themselves, especially with Yennefer provocatively bringing him out in the public's view. And he was right. He could feel the vibrations from his medallion as well as the sting of magical impulses. Some, women in particular, were tactlessly trying to read his mind. He prepared himself for that beforehand, so he knew how to respond. He looked at Yennefer at his side, at the black-white, sparkling with jewels Yennefer, with her raven hair and violet

eyes, and the eavesdropping magicians were losing focus and retracting abashed, to his utter satisfaction.

Yes, he said in his thoughts, yes, you are correct. There's only her, her at my side, here and now, and this is all that matters. Here and now. And where she was before, with whom she was, doesn't matter in the slightest. Now, she is with me, here, among you. With me and no one else. That's what I'm thinking about; thinking about her, all the time, feeling the scent of her perfume and the warmth of her body. And you can choke on the envy.

The sorceress clasped at his arm and pressed herself to his side.

'I appreciate that,' she murmured, leading him back to the tables. 'But avoid excessive ostentation, please.'

'Do you wizards always take sincerity for ostentation? Is it because you doubt sincerity even when you see it in somebody's thoughts?'

'Yes, it is.'

'And yet, you appreciate it?'

'Because I don't doubt you.' she clasped his arm even harder, then reached for a plate. 'Put some salmon on it for me, witcher. And some crabs.'

'These crabs are from Poviss. They were probably fished out a month ago and days are blistering hot. Aren't you afraid...'

'These crabs,' she cut in, 'have been crawling at bottom of the sea this morning. Teleportation is a wonderful invention.'

'Indeed.' He agreed. 'Worth making available for the public, don't you think?'

'We're working on it. Make haste, I'm hungry.'

'I love you, Yen.'

'I asked you to spare me the ostentation...' she stopped suddenly, jerked her head up, pulled her dark locks from her face and opened her violet eyes widely. 'Geralt! This is the first time you've said it!'

'Impossible. You're fooling with me.'

'I'm not. Up until now you've only ever said in in your thoughts, never aloud.'

'Does it make any difference?'

'A huge one.'

'Yen...'

'Don' speak with full mouth. I love you too. See what I meant? Gods, you're about to choke to death! Raise your arms, I'll pat your back. Take a deep breath.'

'Yen...'

'Breathe, breathe, it will pass.'

'Yen!'

'Yes. My sincerity for yours.'

'Do you feel well?'

'I've been waiting for this.' She squeezed out lemon juice onto the salmon. 'It wouldn't be proper to react to confessions made in thoughts. I've heard the words, I could respond to them and I did. I feel very well.'

'What happened?'

'I'll tell you later. Eat. The salmon's delicious, I swear on the Power, truly delicious.'

'Can I kiss you? Here, now, in front of everybody?'

'No.'

'Yennefer!' a dark-haired sorceress freed her arm from her companion and came up to them. 'So you've decided to come after all? Oh, how wonderful! I haven't seen you in ages!'

'Sabrina!' Yennefer smiled so brightly that that everyone, sans Geralt, might have been fooled. 'Dear! So good to see you!'

The sorceresses embraced each other cautiously and kissed the air next to their diamond-onyx earrings. The earrings, in the shape of a grape bunch, were identical – the atmosphere cooled in an instant.

‘Geralt, allow me to introduce you to my schoolmate, of Ard Carraigh.’

The witcher bowed down and kissed the offered hand. He had learned long ago that all sorceresses expected a kiss on the hand upon the greeting, a gesture worthy of a duchess at least. Sabrina Glevissig raised her head, her earrings jingling. Quietly, yet conspicuously.

‘I’ve always wanted to meet you, Geralt,’ she smiled. Like all sorceresses, she didn’t bother with honorifics or other courtesies. ‘I’m glad to make acquaintance with you. You finally stopped hiding him from us, Yenna. I’m surprised how long it took you. There’s nothing to be ashamed of.’

‘I think so too.’ Yennefer replied casually, squinting her eyes a bit and ostensibly brushed her hair aside, revealing her earring a bit more. ‘Beautiful bodice, Sabrina. Breathtaking even. Am I right, Geralt?’

The witcher nodded. Sabrina’s bodice, weaved of black chiffon, revealed absolutely everything that could be revealed, and there was quite a bit of that. Carmine skirt, with a silver belt and rose-shaped buckle, had a cut at the side with accordance to the latest fashion trend. The trend, however, required the cut to reach the thigh, while Sabrina’s reached the hip. A nicely-shaped hip.

‘What news from Kaedwen?’ asked Yennefer, pretending not to notice what Geralt was staring at. ‘Is your king, Henselt, still wasting money and time on hunting Squirrels in the forests? Is he still considering a punitive expedition against the elves in Dol Blathanna?’

‘Let us forget politics.’ smiled Sabrina. The predatory look in her eyes and the slightly longer than regular nose resembled the classic portrayal of a witch. ‘Tomorrow, at the conference, we will spend enough time discussing it. And listening to plenty of moralising About peaceful coexistence... About friendships... About the need to take a solid stance in the face of plans of our kings... What else are we going to hear about, Yennefer? What else do Vilgefortz and the Council have in store for us?’

‘Let us forget politics.’

Sabrina Glevissig laughed and her earrings jingled loudly.

‘Rightly so. Let’s wait until tomorrow. Tomorrow... Tomorrow everything will be explained. Ah, politics, never ending disputes... They have a terrible effect on beauty. Fortunately, I have a wonderful cream; trust me, darling, it works magic on wrinkles... Would you like a recipe?’

‘Thank you, dear, but I don’t need it. Really.’

‘Ah, I know. I’ve always envied you skin back in school. Dear Gods, how many years has it been?’

Yennefer pretended to greet back someone in the distance. Sabrina, on the other hand, smiled at the witcher and with one swift move presented everything the black chiffon didn’t cover. Geralt swallowed, trying his hardest not to gape too much at the pink nipples, perfectly visible under the transparent cloth. He looked with fright at Yennefer. The sorceress was smiling but he knew her too well to be fooled. She was furious.

‘Oh, forgive me.’ she said suddenly. ‘I see Philippa; I have something urgent to discuss with her. After me, Geralt. Bye, Sabrina.’

‘Bye, Yenna.’ Sabrina Glevissig looked the witcher straight in the eyes. ‘Let me congratulate you on your... taste.’

‘Thank you.’ Yennefer’s voice was suspiciously cool. ‘Thank you, my dear.’

Philippa Eilhart was accompanied by Dijkstra. Geralt, who had met him before, had something to be thankful for – he finally saw a familiar face, someone who wasn’t a wizard. But he was far from happy.

‘I'm happy to see you, Yenna.’ Philippa kissed the air next to Yennefer's earring. ‘Welcome, Geralt. You both know count Dijkstra, am I right?’

‘Who doesn't know him.’ Yennefer nodded and offered Dijkstra her hand, which the spy kissed with reverence. ‘I'm glad to meet you again, count.’

‘It's a pleasure,’ stated the chief of king Visimir's secret service, ‘for me as well, Yennefer. Especially in such a pleasant company. My deepest regards, mister Geralt...’

Geralt, failing to ascertain that his regards were even deeper, shook hands with the man – or at least tried to, because the size of the hand was well above the norm and made the handshake tough to execute.

The huge spy was dressed in a beige doublet, rather informally unbuttoned. It was plain that he felt at ease in it.

‘I thought I saw you talking with Sabrina?’ said Philippa.

‘I did talk with her,’ hissed Yennefer. ‘Did you see what she's wearing? One must have neither taste nor shame to... Gods, she's years older than me... Nevermind. If only she had anything to show! Damn bitch!’

‘Was she trying to interrogate you? Everyone knows that she's spying for Henselt of Kaedwen.’

‘Really?’ Yennefer feigned ignorance, which was rightly accepted as a great joke.

‘And how are you, count?’ inquired Yennefer, once Philippa and Dijkstra finished laughing.

‘Quite well.’ Visimir's spy bowed.

‘Considering,’ smiled Philippa, ‘that the count is here on a business trip, such statement is like a compliment. And, like all compliments, it's not very sincere. Barely a minute ago he confessed to me that he'd prefer a good familiar shadow, the smell of burning torches and roasted meat. He also misses the traditional table, soaked with beer and gravy, which he could bang on with his mug to the rhythm of indecent songs of the drunkards, and which he could gracefully pass out under to sleep among the dogs eating the scraps. And all my arguments proving the superiority of our feasting traditions were, believe it or not, dismissed.’

‘Is this so?’ the witcher gave at the spy a much warmer look. ‘And what arguments were those, if I may ask?’

This time, his question was treated as a wonderful joke, as both sorceresses burst into laughter.

‘Ah, men,’ sighed Philippa. ‘You don't understand anything. How is it possible to impress everyone with your dress and body shape while in the dark and half-hidden by the table?’

Geralt, unable to think of a retort, bowed. Yennefer squeezed his arm.

‘Ah,’ she exclaimed. ‘I see Triss Merigold over there. I have an urgent matter to discuss with her... Forgive us. See you later, Philippa. I'm sure we'll find enough time for chatting. Isn't that right, count?’

‘Certainly.’ Dijkstra smiled and bowed deeply. ‘I'm at your service, Yennefer. Just give me a nod.’

They approached Triss, who was sparkling with shades of blue and aquamarine. Upon seeing them, Triss cut the talk with two male wizards, laughed brightly, hugged Yennefer and performed the ritual of air-kissing. Geralt took the offered hand but decided to act against the customs – he embraced the sorceress and kissed her soft, peachy cheek. Triss blushed lightly.

The wizards introduced themselves. One was called Drithelm of Pont Vanis, the other was his brother Dethmold. Both in the service of Esterad of Kovir. Both very taciturn. Both hurriedly left.

‘You talked with Philippa and Dijkstra from Tretogor,’ noted Triss, playing with a heart-shaped necklace of lapis lazuli, framed in silver and diamonds. ‘You are, of course, aware who Dijkstra really is?’

‘We are,’ confirmed Yennefer. ‘He talked with you? Tried to interrogate you?’

‘He did,’ the sorceress giggled. ‘With significant caution. But Philippa was a great disturbance to him. I honestly thought they were in better terms.’

‘They’re on great terms,’ Yennefer warned her. ‘Be careful, Triss. Don’t let out one word about... you know whom.’

‘I know. I’ll be careful. And by the way...’ Triss lowered her voice. ‘How is she? Will I be able to meet her?’

‘If you finally decide to teach in Aretuza,’ Yennefer smiled, ‘you’ll be able to see her everyday.’

‘Ah!’ Triss’ eyes widened. ‘I see. Is Ciri...’

‘Quiet, Triss. We’ll discuss it later. Tomorrow. After the council.’

‘Tomorrow?’ Triss smiled in a very strange way. Yennefer frowned, but before she had a chance to inquire, a disturbance reigned in the hall.

‘They’re here,’ Triss coughed. ‘They’ve finally arrived.’

‘Yes,’ agreed Yennefer, moving her gaze from her friend’s eyes. ‘They’re here. Geralt, you finally have an opportunity to meet the members of the Chapter and the Highest Council. If we have time, I’ll introduce you to them, but for now it will be good if you get to know who’s who.’

The wizards stepped aside, bowing to the entering celebrities. The first one was an aged but robust man in surprisingly modest wool clothing. At his side was a tall woman with sharp features and dark, evenly combed hair.

‘This is Gerhart of Aelle, known as Hen Gedyndeith, the eldest of the living wizards,’ explained Yennefer. ‘The woman next to him is Tissaia de Vries. She’s not much younger than Hen, but elixirs are not beneath her dignity.’

Behind the pair was an attractive woman with very long, golden hair, wearing a lace dress in the colour of mignonette.

‘Francesca Findabair, known as Enid an Gleanna, ‘Daisy of the Valley’. Don’t gape at her, witcher. She’s commonly considered to be the most beautiful woman in the world.’

‘She’s a member of the Chapter?’ he was surprised. ‘She looks quite young. Also the work of magic?’

‘Not in her case. Francesca is a pure-blooded elf. Take note of her companion. It’s Vilgefortz of Roggeveen. That one’s young, indeed. But remarkably talented at the same time.’

The term ‘young’, as Geralt was aware, was used in reference to the wizards up to the age of a hundred. Vilgefortz looked no more than thirty-five. He was tall and well-built, he wore a short doublet in the style of a knight but without the coat of arms. He was also hellishly good-looking. It was striking even with Francesca Findabair at his side, with her huge, doe-like eyes and astonishing beauty.

‘The short man next to Vilgefortz is Artaud Terranova.’ explained Triss Merigold. ‘The five of them compose the Chapter.’

‘And that woman with a strange face behind Vilgefortz?’

‘It’s his assistant, Lydia van Bredevoort.’ stated Yennefer coolly. ‘A person of no importance, but staring at her face is a big breach of etiquette. You should look at the three men behind her, instead, these are the members of the Council. Fercart of Cidaris, Radcliffe of Oxenfurt and Carduin of Lan Exeter.’

‘This is the whole Council? I thought it was bigger than that.’

‘The Chapter has five members and the Council likewise. Philippa Eilhart is also in the Council.’

‘There's still one person missing,’ he shook his head and Triss giggled.

‘You didn't tell him? You really don't know, Geralt?’

‘About what?’

‘Yennefer's a member of the Council. Since the battle of Sodden. You didn't want to brag, my dear?’

‘No, my dear,’ the sorceress looked her friend in the eyes. ‘Firstly, I don't like to brag. Secondly, I had no time to do so. I haven't seen Geralt for a very long time, there's a lot to catch up with. We have a long list of things to do and we will get things done in accordance to that list.’

‘Of course,’ Triss nodded meekly. ‘Hmm... After such a long time... I understand. There's a lot to discuss...’

‘Discussions,’ smiled Yennefer, giving the witcher a lust-filled look, ‘are at the end of the list. At the very end, Triss.’

The auburn-haired sorceress flinched and flushed.

‘I understand,’ she repeated, playing with the heart-shaped jewel.

‘I'm glad to hear it. Geralt, bring us wine. No, not from this page. From the one further away.’

He obeyed, recognizing the tone of her voice. While lifting the goblets from the page's plate, he discreetly watched the sorceresses. Yennefer spoke fast, though quietly, Triss listened with her head low. When he returned, Triss was gone. Yennefer didn't show any interest in the wine, so he put the unnecessary goblets on the table.

‘I hope you weren't too harsh?’ he uttered. Yennefer's eyes glowed violet.

‘Don't try to fool me. You think I don't know about you two?’

‘If it's about that...’

‘Yes, that,’ she cut. ‘Don't make faces and refrain from making comments. But most of all, don't lie. I've known Triss for longer than I've known you, we like each other, we understand each other and we always will, regardless of any... incidents. Yet now I could sense she had some doubts. I dispelled them, that's all. Let's not divulge.’

He didn't wish to. Yennefer brushed hair from her face.

‘I'll leave you alone for a while, I must speak with Tissaia and Francesca. Eat something, I can hear your stomach growling. And be cautious. Someone will surely try to interrogate you. Don't let them trick you, and be sure not to bring me shame.’

‘Rest assured.’

‘Geralt?’

‘Yes?’

‘A moment ago you asked if you could kiss me here, in front of everybody. Does the offer still stand?’

‘Yes.’

‘Mind the lip-gloss, please.’

He threw a glance at the rest of the guests. They watched the kiss but unobtrusively. Philippa Eilhart, standing in the distance with a group of young wizards, winked at him and pretended to clap.

Yennefer jerked her lips away from his and sighed.

‘Such a small thing and yet so satisfying,’ she murmured. ‘Well, I'll be going now. As for later, after the banquet... hmm...’

‘What is it?’

‘Don't eat any garlic, please.’

Once she was gone, the witcher relinquished formalities, unbuttoned the doublet, drunk from both goblets and tried to make do with food. Ineffectively.

‘Geralt.’

‘Count.’

‘Don't use titles with me,’ Dijkstra winced. ‘I'm no count. Visimir ordered me to introduce myself as one so as not to irk the magicians with my plebeian descend. Well, how do you fare with impressing everyone with the dress and body shape? And pretending to be having fun?’

‘I don't need to pretend anything. I'm not on duty.’

‘That's interesting,’ smiled the spy. ‘But this only confirms the rumours that you are unique and exceptional. Because everyone else here is, in fact, on duty.’

‘Just as I feared,’ Geralt didn't smile back. ‘I expected to be exceptional. As in, completely out of place.’

The spy inspected the plates, reached towards one and picked a big, green pod of a vegetable unknown to Geralt.

‘By the way,’ he said, ‘I must thank you for the Michelet brothers. Many in Redania sighed with relief after you butchered all four of them at the docks in Oxenfurt. I sure had a laugh when the medic called by the investigation, after having been shown the injuries, stated that the weapon used must have been a scythe arched edgewise.’

Geralt declined to comment. Dijkstra bit on the second pod.

‘It's a pity,’ he went on, chewing, ‘that you didn't contact the mayor afterwards. There was a reward for them, dead or alive. Quite a sum.’

‘Too much trouble with the tax return,’ the witcher also decided to try the green vegetable, which turned out to taste like a soaped celery. ‘Besides, I needed to make haste because... Oh, but I must be boring you, Dijkstra, after all you know everything already.’

‘Let's not exaggerate,’ grinned the spy. ‘Surely not everything. Where from, besides?’

‘From Philippa Eilharts mouth, for one.’

‘Reports, stories, rumours. I must hear them out, such is my job. But my job also requires of me to sieve them all through a very dense mesh. Recently, for example, I've heard the news of someone killing the infamous Professor and his two comrades. Everything took place in a tavern in Anchor. The person responsible for that also didn't bother to seek the reward.’

Geralt shrugged.

‘Rumours. Sieve them through a dense mesh and not much will be left.’

‘I don't need to. I know exactly what will be left. Most of the time, what is left is an attempt of deliberate misinformation. Speaking of which, how's little Cirilla, the poor, sickly girl who died of dysentery? In good health, I hope?’

‘Cease while you're at it, Dijkstra,’ replied the witcher coldly, looking the spy in the eyes. ‘I know you're here on duty, but don't get too eager.’

The spy snickered. Two passing sorceresses gave them looks of confusion. And curiosity.

‘King Visimir,’ explained Dijkstra, ‘pays me extra for every uncovered secret. Eagerness secures my future. You may find it funny, but I have a wife and children.’

‘I see nothing funny about that. Work for securing your family's future, but not at my expense, if I may ask. This hall, it seems, doesn't lack in secrets.’

‘Not exactly. The whole of Aretuza is a one big riddle. Surely, you've noticed? Something's up, Geralt. And I'm not talking about the candelabra.’

‘I don't understand.’

‘I do believe it. I don't understand either. But I truly wish to. Wouldn't you? Ah, sorry. You probably know everything already, don't you? From your charming Yennefer of Vengerberg, that is. And to think that there used to be time when I, too, learned things from the charming Yennefer. But, oh, how long has it been?’

‘I honestly don't know what you're going on about, Dijkstra. Could you speak your mind more clearly? Try. But not if it's a part of your duty. Forgive me, but I'm not going to work on your extra pay.’

‘You think I want to deceive you?’ the spy pulled a face. ‘Trick you into providing me with information? You're hurting me, Geralt. I'm merely curious if you notice, in this hall, the same patterns I do.’

‘What patterns do you see?’

‘Aren't you surprised by the complete absence of the crowned heads at this conference?’

‘Not one bit,’ Geralt managed to pierce a marinated olive onto a stick. ‘The kings likely prefer the traditional kind of feasts, at the table, which they can gracefully pass out under in the morning. Moreover...’

‘What?’ Dijkstra devoured four olives he unashamedly picked from the plate with the use of fingers.

‘Moreover,’ the witcher pointed at the crowd, ‘the kings need not bother. They sent an army of spies in their stead. Those in the fraternity, and those excluded from it. Probably so that they would find out what is up.’

Dijkstra spit out the olive pips, picked up a long fork and started poking around a crystal salad-bowl.

‘And Vilgefortz,’ he noticed, ‘took a great care not to omit a single spy. He has all royal spies on one plate. Why would Vilgefortz need to gather all spies on one plate, I wonder?’

‘I have no idea. And I don't care. I told you I'm off duty. I'm, so to speak, beyond the plate.’

Visimir's spy fished a small octopus out of the bowl and studied it with revulsion.

‘They eat it,’ he shook his head with false compassion, then turned back to Geralt.

‘Listen carefully, witcher,’ he uttered quietly. ‘Your conviction to your impartiality, your conviction that you don't care about anything and don't need to care... It frustrates me and forces me to gamble. You like to gamble?’

‘What do you mean?’

‘I'm proposing a wager,’ Dijkstra raised the fork with the octopus. ‘I'm betting that in the course of the following hour, Vilgefortz will ask for a talk with you. I'm betting that during this talk he will prove to you that you are not impartial and that you are, in fact, on his plate. If I'm wrong, then I'll eat this shit in your full view, with the tentacles and all. Do you accept the wager?’

‘What will I have to eat, if I lose?’

‘Nothing,’ Dijkstra looked around quickly. ‘If you lose, you will recount Vilgefortz's speech to me.’

The witcher was silent for a while, looking calmly at the spy.

‘Excuse me, count,’ he said finally. ‘Thank you for the chat. It was very informative.’ Dijkstra was disturbed.

‘So much...’

‘So much.’ Geralt cut him off. ‘Goodbye.’

The spy shrugged, dropped the octopus back in the bowl, turned and walked away. Geralt didn't watch him leave. He moved to another table, led by a desire to try some of the huge, pinkish-white shrimps, mounting to the silver plate among lettuce and limes. They seemed tasty, but feeling the curious stares cast at him, he wanted to eat the crustaceans in a dignified manner, in accordance with etiquette. He approached the shrimps ostensibly slowly, plucking appetizers from other plates.

At the second table stood Sabrina Glevissig engaged in a conversation with a red-haired sorceress. The red-haired one had a white skirt and a white georgette bodice. The bodice, like Sabrina's, was also completely transparent, but it had some strategically placed embroideries.

The embroideries, Geralt noticed, had an interesting quality: they covered and revealed alternatively.

The sorceresses talked while stuffing themselves with slices of lobster in mayonnaise. They spoke quietly and in Elder Speech. Although they weren't looking at him, they were clearly discussing him. He strained his sensitive witcher hearing discreetly, while pretending to be busy with the shrimp.

'...with Yennefer?' repeated the red-head, playing with a pearl necklace bound around her neck so tightly that it resembled a collar. 'Are you kidding me, Sabrina?'

'Not at all,' denied Sabrina Glevissig. 'You won't believe it, but it's been going on for several years. I'm surprised - how can he stand that harpy.'

'What's so surprising? She cast a spell on him - keeps him charmed. How many times have I done that myself?'

'He's a witcher. They cannot be charmed. Not for so long, at least.'

'In that case, it must be love,' wistfully sighed the red-head. 'And love is blind.'

'He is the blind one,' grimaced Sabrina. 'Would you believe, Marti, that she had the audacity to introduce me as her schoolmate? *Bloede pest*, she's years older than me... Nevermind. I'm serious, she's hellishly possessive of this witcher. The little Merigold just smiled at him and this hag cursed her and chased her off. And even now... just look at her. She's standing there with Francesca but she doesn't take her eyes off him.'

'She's scared,' giggled the red-head, 'that we'll steal him from her, if only for one night. How about it, Sabrina? Shall we give it a try? The man's attractive, so unlike those uppity snobs of ours, with their complexes and complaints...'

'Speak lower, Marti,' hissed Sabrina. 'Stop gaping and flashing your teeth at him. Yennefer is watching us. Keep class. You want to seduce him? It would be tactless.'

'Hmm, you're right,' agreed Marti. 'But what if he suddenly came up to us with the proposition?'

'If so,' Sabrina threw a predatory look at the witcher, 'then I would offer myself in the blink of an eye, even if we were to do it on a rock.'

'And I would do the same,' giggled Marti, 'even on a hedgehog.'

Staring at the tablecloth, the witcher hid his face behind the shrimps and cabbage leaves, glad that the mutation of his blood vessels disabled blushing.

'Witcher Geralt?'

He swallowed the shrimp and turned around. A wizard with familiar features smiled slightly, touching the embroidered lapels of his violet doublet.

'Dorregaray of Vole. We know each other. We've met...'

'I remember. Forgive me, I didn't recognize you at first. I'm glad to see you...'

The wizard smiled a bit wider, taking two goblets from the page's plate.

'I've been watching you for some time,' he admitted, offering Geralt one of the goblets. 'You said that to everyone Yennefer introduced you to. Is it a deceit or just a non-critical approach?'

'Politeness.'

'For them?' Dorregaray pointed at the crowd 'Trust me, they're not worth it. They're a conceited, envious, mendacious bunch; they won't appreciate your politeness and may even take it for a sarcasm. With them, witcher, one needs to converse in their own way, basely, arrogantly, rudely; you may even impress them then. Will you have a drink with me?'

'The swill served here?' smiled Geralt pleasantly, 'With all distaste. But if it suits you... I shall force myself.'

Sabrina and Marti, eavesdropping from behind their table, burst into laughter. Dorregaray glared daggers at them, turned and clinked their cups, with a sincere smile this time.

‘Point for you,’ he acknowledged with ease. ‘You learn fast. Curses, where have you gained such wit, witcher? On the roads you stride in search for dying species? To your health. You might not believe it, but you’re one of the few here for whose health I honestly want to drink.’

‘Is this so?’ Geralt took a sip, savouring the taste. ‘Even despite the fact that I butcher dying species for a living?’

‘Don’t gripe at my words,’ the wizard patted his arm. ‘The banquet has just started. You’ll probably speak to more people, so you ought to save some of your glib remarks. As for your occupation... You, Geralt, have at least enough dignity not to keep trophies. But take a look around. Go ahead, forget the etiquette, they like to be stared at.’

The witcher obediently fixed his gaze on Sabrina Glevissig’s breasts.

‘Look closely.’ Dorregaray grasped his sleeve, pointing at the passing sorceress. ‘Shoes made of horned agama’s leather. Have you noticed?’

He nodded - insincerely, as he only took notice of what remained uncovered by the transparent tulle bodice.

‘Oh, and there we have a rock cobra,’ the wizard correctly identified another pair of shoes parading through the hall. The fashion, which had recently shortened the dresses, helped him with the task. ‘And over there... white iguana. Salamander. Wyvern. Spectacled caiman. Basilisk... All of them, without exception, endangered species. Curses, why not stick to veal and pork leather?’

‘You’re going on about leatherworking, Dorregaray, as always?’ asked Philippa, approaching them. ‘About tanning and shoemaking? What a trivial and repulsive subject.’

‘Different strokes for different folks,’ scowled the wizard. ‘That’s some delightful embroideries you have there, Philippa! Diamond ermine, if I’m not mistaken? Very dainty, indeed. You are, of course, aware that this species had been brought to extinction twenty years ago for its beautiful fur?’

‘Thirty years ago,’ Philippa corrected him, stuffing herself with the leftover shrimps. ‘I know, I know, the species would undoubtedly be brought back from extinction, had I ordered the milliner to embroid my dress with mops of tow. I have considered it. Unfortunately, the colours wouldn’t match.’

‘Let’s move to the other table,’ proposed the witcher. ‘I saw a decent bowl of caviar. And since lake sturgeons are also close to extinction, we ought to make haste.’

‘Caviar in your company? I’ve been dreaming of this,’ Philippa winked, slid her arm under his, smelling of cinnamon and nard. ‘Let’s make haste, then. Will you keep us company, Dorregaray? No? See you later, then; have fun.’

The wizard snorted and turned around. Sabrina Glevissig and her red-haired friend watched them leave with looks more poisonous than the venom of endangered cobras.

‘Dorregaray,’ whispered Philippa, unashamedly pressing herself to Geralt’s side, ‘is a spy for king Ethain of Cidaris. Stay vigilant. The talk about reptiles and fur is a prelude to interrogation. And Sabrina Glevissig was pricking up her ears...’

‘...because she’s spying for Hanselt of Kaedwen,’ he finished for her. ‘I know, you’ve mentioned it before. And that ginger one, her friend...’

‘She’s dyeing her hair. Don’t you have eyes? It’s Marti Sodergren.’

‘Whom is she spying for?’

‘Marti?’ Philippa laughed, her teeth flashing from behind spicy red lips. ‘For nobody. Marti’s not interested in politics.’

‘Outrageous. I had the impression that everyone here is a spy.’

‘Many are,’ the sorceress winked. ‘But not all. Not Marti Sodergren. Marti is a healer. And a nymphomaniac. Ah, damn it, look! The caviar’s been eaten! Every last grain! Someone’s licked the bowl! What shall we do now?’

‘Now,’ Geralt smiled innocently, ‘you will announce that something's up. You'll tell me that I need to shed neutrality and make a choice. You will propose a wager. I cannot even imagine what my prize could be if I win. But I know what I will have to do if I lose.’

Philippa Eilhart was silent for a long while, not taking her eyes off him.

‘I should have known,’ she said quietly. ‘Dijkstra lost it. He gave you an offer. Even though I told him about your contempt for spies.’

‘I have no contempt for spies. I have contempt for spying. And for the contempt in itself. Don't propose any wagers, Philippa. I also feel that something's up. And let it be. I'm not involved and I don't care.’

‘You've already said it once. In Oxenfurt.’

‘I'm glad you remember. I hope you remember the circumstances as well?’

‘Perfectly. I didn't disclose to you the identity of Rience's master back then. I let him escape. Oh, how mad at me you were...’

‘That's an understatement.’

‘Now it's time to make amends. I'll give you Rience tomorrow. Don't interrupt, don't make faces. This is no wager. It's a promise, and I keep my promises. No questions, please. Wait till tomorrow. Now we shall concentrate on caviar and trivial talk.’

‘There's no caviar.’

‘Give me a moment.’

She looked around, moved her hand and whispered a spell. The silver vessel, shaped like a fish in motion, immediately filled with roe of the endangered lake sturgeon. The witcher smiled.

‘Can you satisfy hunger with an illusion?’

‘No. But it's enough for a craving. Try some.’

‘Hmm... Indeed... Seems more tasty than the real thing...’

‘And you won't gain weight,’ the sorceress proudly exclaimed, squeezing lemon juice onto the next spoonful of caviar. ‘Would you mind getting me a glass of white wine?’

‘Not at all. Philippa?’

‘I'm listening.’

‘Etiquette supposedly forbids the use of magic here. Wouldn't it be more appropriate to conjure up an illusion of taste alone? Just a sensory illusion? I'm sure you could...’

‘Of course I could,’ Philippa Eilhart looked at him through the glass. ‘The construction of such a spell would be easier than the construction of a flail. But sticking to a sensory illusion would rid us of the pleasure provided by the act of eating. The process, the movement, the gestures... The talk accompanying it, the eye contact... Allow me to entertain you with a humorous comparison, will you?’

‘I'm laughing already.’

‘I could conjure up an orgasm too.’

Before the witcher regained speech, they were approached by a short, slim sorceress with long, straight, fair hair. He recognized her right away – it was the lady in shoes made of horned agama's leather and green, tulle bodice which didn't even hide a detail as tiny as the small spot above her left breast.

‘Forgive me,’ she said, ‘but I must interrupt your flirting. Philippa, Radcliffe and Dethmold are asking for few minutes of your time. It's urgent.’

‘Well, if so, then I will go. Bye, Geralt. We shall flirt another time!’

‘Aha!’ the blonde confronted him with her eyes. ‘Geralt. The witcher Yennefer is crazy about? I've been watching you and wondering who the hell might you be. I was truly bothered by it!’

‘I know that feeling,’ he remarked, smiling politely. ‘I'm experiencing it right now.’

‘Excuse my blunder. I'm Keira Metz. Oh, it's caviar!’

‘Careful, it's an illusion.’

‘Devil take it, you're right!’ the sorceress dropped the spoon as if it were a tail of some dangerous scorpion. ‘Who could be so tactless... You? You can cast illusions of the fourth degree? You?’

‘Me,’ he lied, never ceasing to smile. ‘I'm a master magician, pretending to be a witcher in order to remain incognito. Did you really believe that Yennefer would fall for a simple witcher?’

Keira Metz stared him in the eyes, scowling.

On her neck was a medallion in the shape of an ankh cross, silver and lined with rhinestones.

‘Would you like some wine?’ he offered to cut the uncomfortable silence. He feared that his joke wasn't received well.

‘No, thank you... colleague magician,’ said Keira coldly. ‘I don't drink. I cannot. I'm about to get pregnant tonight.’

‘With whom?’ asked the passing dyed friend of Sabrina Glevissig, dressed in transparent georgette bodice with strategically placed embroideries. ‘With whom?’ she repeated, fluttering her eyelashes innocently.

Keira turned around and looked her up from the white iguana shoes to the pearl tiara.

‘What business is it of yours?’

‘None at all. Occupational curiosity. Won't you introduce me to your companion, the famous Geralt of Rivia?’

‘With displeasure. But I know we won't be able to get rid of you otherwise. Geralt, this is Marti Sodergren, a healer. She specializes in aphrodisiacs.’

‘Must we speak of business? Oh, you left some caviar for me? How kind of you.’

‘Careful,’ the witcher and Keira said in unison. ‘It's an illusion.’

‘Indeed!’ Marti Sodergren bent, wrinkling her nose, then reached for a cup and studied the traces of red lipstick. ‘Philippa Eilhart, no surprises there. Who else would have the audacity? What a shrew. Did you know that she's spying for Visimir of Redania?’

‘And she's a nymphomaniac?’ risked the witcher. Marti and Keira snorted at the same time.

‘Were you counting on it when you were coming onto her?’ asked the healer. ‘If so, then you should know that someone must have fed you false information. Men don't figure in Philippa's preferences anymore.’

‘Or maybe you're a woman?’ Keira Metz puffed out her lips. ‘Maybe you're only pretending to be a man, colleague master magician? To stay incognito? You know, Marti, he confessed to me a moment ago that he likes to pretend.’

‘He likes and he does,’ Marti smiled maliciously. ‘Right, Geralt? Not so long ago I saw you pretending to have bad hearing and not to know the Elder Speech.’

‘He has many flaws,’ said Yennefer coldly, coming up to them and possessively clutching witcher's arm. ‘He has nothing but flaws. You're wasting your time, girls.’

‘It seems so,’ agreed Marti Sodergren, still grinning. ‘We wish you fun. Come, Keira, let's go get a drink of something... lacking alcohol. Perhaps I will, too, decide on something tonight?’

‘Uff,’ he sighed once they left. ‘Great timing, Yen. Thank you.’

‘You're thanking me? Probably insincerely. In this hall there's a total of eleven women showing off their tits through transparent clothes. I left you for half an hour, only to catch you talking with two of them...’

Yennefer stopped, staring at the fish-shaped dish.

‘... and eating an illusion,’ she added. ‘Oh, Geralt, Geralt. Come. There's an opportunity to introduce you to people who are worth it.’

‘Is one of those people Vilgefortz?’

‘How curious,’ the sorceress squinted her eyes, ‘that it’s him you’re asking about. Yes, Vilgefortz asked to meet you and speak with you. I must warn you that this talk may appear trivial and light-hearted, but don’t let it fool you. Vilgefortz is an experienced and intelligent player. I don’t know what he wants from you, but stay vigilant.’

‘I will be,’ he sighed. ‘But I doubt that this experienced player of yours will be able to surprise me. Not after all the things I’ve gone through here. I’ve been apprehended by spies, drowned in dying reptiles and ermines. I’ve been fed non-existent caviar. Nymphomaniacs with no interest in men have doubted my manhood, threatened me with rape on a hedgehog, pregnancy and even an orgasm of the kind that does not require any movements. Ugh...’

‘Have you been drinking?’

‘Only a bit of white wine from Cidaris. But there was probably an aphrodisiac in it... Yen? After my talk with Vilgefortz can we return to Loxia?’

‘We won’t go back to Loxia.’

‘What?’

‘I want to spend this night in Aretuza. With you. Aphrodisiac, you say? In the wine? Interesting...’

‘Oh my, oh my,’ sighed Yennefer, stretching on the bed and laying her thigh onto the witcher’s. ‘Oh my, Oh my, my. It’s been so long since I’ve made love this way... So very long.’

Geralt disentangled his fingers from her hair, but didn’t reply. Firstly, because he feared the hidden provocation in her statement. Secondly, because he didn’t want the words to wipe the taste of her pleasure from his lips.

‘It’s been so long since I’ve made love with a man who would profess his love for me, and whom I would love back,’ she murmured after a while, once it became clear that the witcher wasn’t going to fall for the trick. ‘I’ve almost forgotten what it feels like. Oh my, Oh my.’

She arched her back even more, stretching her arms and clutching at the corners of the pillow, and the sight of her breasts basking in moonlight sent a shiver down his back. He embraced her and they lay motionlessly, silent and still in the afterglow.

Shrill cries of cicadas could be heard from outside, as well as the faraway voices and laughs, indicating that the banquet was not yet over, despite the late hour.

‘Geralt?’

‘Yes, Yen?’

‘Tell me about it.’

‘About the talk with Vilgefortz? Now? I’ll tell you in the morning.’

‘Now, please.’

He stared at the little cabinet at the corner of the chamber. Books were piled on it, sketchbooks and other items left by one of the students temporarily evicted to Loxia. Supported by the books sat a plump ragdoll in a frilly dress, rumpled by the excessive hugging. *She left her dolly*, he thought to himself, *to be spared ridicule in Loxia’s dormitory. She left behind her beloved doll. And now she’s probably unable to fall asleep without it.*

The doll’s button-eyes stared back at him. He turned his gaze away.

When Yennefer was introducing him to the Chapter, he watched the wizardly elite closely. Hen Gedyndeth gave him just a single, weary look – it was clear that the banquet had already managed to tire the elderly man. Artaud Terranova bowed slightly with a dubious grin, leading his gaze from him to Yennefer, but it quickly melted under the glares of other people present. The azure eyes of Francesca Findabair were impenetrable and hard like ice.

The Daisy of The Valley smiled when they were introduced to each other. Her smile, beautiful as it was, had terrified the witcher. Tissaia de Vries, seemingly busy with constantly improving her cuffs and jewellery, smiled a lot less beautifully but considerably more warmly. It was Tissaia who initiated the talk first, recounting one of his chivalrous witcherly deeds, which he couldn't recall and which was probably made-up.

And then Vilgefortz joined the discussion. Vilgefortz of Roggeveen, the wizard of impressive posture, magnificent beauty and sincere voice. Geralt knew that people with his looks were completely unpredictable.

They spoke shortly, feeling the concerned looks directed at them. Yennefer's for the witcher. Vilgefortz, in turn, was gazed at by a sorceress with kind eyes who was constantly trying to hide the lower half of her face with a fan. They exchanged a few conventional comments, after which Vilgefortz proposed moving the talk to a more secluded place. Geralt was under the impression that Tissaia de Vries was the only person surprised by this.

'Have you fallen asleep, Geralt?' urged Yennefer, breaking him out of his thoughts. 'You were about to recount to me your talk with Vilgefortz.'

The doll was staring at him down from the cabinet.

'Once we've entered the cloister,' he began, 'That girl with the strange face...'

'Lydia van Bredevoort. Vilgefortz's assistant.'

'Yes, right, you've mentioned it. The person of no importance. Well then, once we were in the cloister, said person of no importance stopped, looked at him and asked him something. Through the use of telepathy.'

'It wasn't a breach. Lydia cannot use her voice.'

'I thought so. Because Vilgefortz didn't answer in that manner. He said...'

'Yes, Lydia, it's a great idea,' said Vilgefortz. 'Let's take a walk through the Gallery of Glory. You'll have the honour of taking a peek into the history of magic, Geralt of Rivia. I'm sure you know it well, but this time you'll see it visualised. If you're a connoisseur of art, it may terrify you. Most of these paintings were made by the enthusiastic students of Aretuza. Lydia, be so kind and let some light in this shadow.'

Lydia van Bredevoort made a sign with her hand and the corridor became brighter in an instant.

The first painting featured an ancient ship, tossed by the waves among the rocks outcropping from the whirling deep. At the prow stood a man in white robes, his head adorned by a halo.

'The First Landing,' guessed the witcher.

'Indeed,' confirmed Vilgefortz. 'Ship of the Exiles. John Bekker subdues the Power. He calms the waves, proving that magic need not be just evil and destructive, but can be used to save lives as well.'

'Is this an authentic event?'

'I doubt it,' smiled the wizard. 'Most probably Bekker and the rest of the crew were throwing up over the brim. The Power was subdued only after the landing, which happened to be peaceful. Let's move forward. Here you can see John Bekker again, forcing water out of stone near the first settlement. And there we have Bekker, surrounded by kneeling settlers, dispersing the clouds and stopping the storm from destroying the crops.'

'And that one there? What event does it portray?'

'The Finding of the Chosen. Bekker and Giambattista test the children of arriving settlers in order to find the Sources. Selected kids will be taken from their parents and brought to Mirthe, the first domicile of the wizards. You're looking at a historic moment. As you can

see, all kids are scared, only that resolute brunette reaches to Giambattista with a trusting smile. This is the famous Agnes of Glanville, the first female wizard. The woman behind her is her mother. She looks quite sad, for some reason.'

'And the scene with a gathering?'

'Novigrad Union. Bekker, Giambattista and Monck make a truce with the chiefmen, priests and druids. Something to do with a pact of non-aggression and the separation of magic from the politics. Terribly corny. Let's go on. Here we have Geoffrey Monck setting off up the Pontar river, known at the time as Aevon y Pont ar Gwennelen, the Riven of Alabaster Bridges. Monck was sailing to Loc Muinne in order to convince the elven mages to school a group of children. You might be interested in the fact that among these children was a boy called Gerhart of Aelle. You've met him today. That boy is now known as Hen Gedyndeith.'

'This particular scene,' the witcher looked at the wizard, 'Lacks in drama. After all, only a few years after Monck's successful expedition, the army of Marchal Raupenneck from Tretogor carried out a massacre of Loc Muinne and Est Haemlet, killing all elves regardless of age or gender. And so began a war, which ended with the slaughter in Shaerrawedd.'

'Your admirable knowledge in history,' smiled Vilgefortz, 'ought to make you acknowledge the fact that none of the respectable wizards took part in this war. Therefore no student felt inspired to paint it. Let's continue.'

'Very well. And what is this depiction? Ah, I know. It's Raffard the White ending the feud between kings and marking the end of the Six Years War. And over there, Raffard declines to accept the crown. Beautiful, noble gesture.'

'You think so?' Vilgefortz cocked his head. 'Well, a gesture it was. However, Raffard did accept the post of a Royal Counsellor which put him the place of true ruler, as the king was retarded.'

'The Gallery of Glory...' muttered the witcher, coming up to the next canvas. 'And here?'

'The historic moment of the vocation of the first Chapter and the resolution of the Law. From the left: Herbert Stammelford, Aurora Henson, Ivo Richert, Agnes of Glanville, Geoffrey Monck and Radmir of Tor Carnedd. For the sake of accuracy, this painting also lacks in drama. Soon afterwards a very brutal war broke out, and all who opposed the Chapter and refused to follow the Law were slaughtered. Raffard the White, among others. But historical texts are silent about this, so as not to blemish the beautiful legend.'

'And this one... Hmm... Yes, it was definitely painted by a student. Rather young one, too...'

'Certainly. It's an allegory, at that. An allegory of the triumphing femininity, I presume. Air, Water, Earth and Fire. And the four famous sorceresses who mastered them. Agnes of Glanville, Aurora Henson, Nina Fioravanti and Klara Larissa de Winter. Look at the next, better-drawn painting. It's Klara Larissa again, opening the academy for girls. In the same building we're standing in right now. And the following portraits picture the most famous graduates of Aretuza. A long history of triumphing femineity and the subsequent feminization of the profession: Yanna of Murivel, Nora Wagner, her sister Augusta, Jada Glevissig, Leticia Charbonneau, Ilona Laux-Antille, Carla Demetia Crest, Yiolenta Suarez, April Wenhaver... And the only living one: Tissaia de Vries...'

They went ahead. Lydia's silken dress whispered quietly as they walked, and its whisper held a hint of a dreadful secret.

'And this one?' Geralt stopped. 'What is this terrifying scene?'

'Martyrdom of the mage Radmir, skinned alive during Falka's rebellion. The background shows Mirthe, burned at Falka's order.'

'For which Falka had been burned in turn. At the stake.'

‘It's a well-known fact. Temerian and Redanian children to this day play burning Falka at the eve of Saovine. Let's turn back a bit, so you'll see the other side of the gallery... I see you want to ask something. I'm listening.’

‘I'm wondering about the chronology. I know, of course, about the youth elixirs, but the paintings picturing people who are dead together with those who are still alive...’

‘In other words, you're surprised to have met Hen Gedyndeith and Tissaia de Vries but not Bekker, Agnes of Glanville, Stammelford or Nina Fioravanti?’

‘Not really. I know you're not immortal...’

‘What is death?’ Vilgefortz cut in. ‘To you?’

‘The end.’

‘The end of what?’

‘Existence. It seems that we've entered the philosophical field.’

‘Nature knows not the notion of philosophy, Geralt of Rivia. What we call philosophy is merely the funny and pathetic attempts at understanding Nature made by man. The result of such attempts is also called philosophy. It's as if the beetroot pondered the meaning of its existence, calling it an eternal and mysterious Conflict of Bulb and Leaves, and considering the rain to be an Inscrutable Motive Power. We, wizards, don't waste time on guessing what Nature is. We know what She is, because we are Her. Do you understand?’

‘I'm trying but speak slower, please. Don't forget that you're speaking to a beetroot.’

‘Have you ever wondered what happened when Bekker forced water out of the rock? It's said very simply: Bekker subdued the Power. He'd bound an element to his will. He'd reigned over Nature, dominated Her... What are your views towards women, Geralt?’

‘Excuse me?’

Lydia von Bredevoort turned around with a whisper of silk, waiting for his answer. Geralt noticed in her arms a paiting wrapped in paper. He had no idea where it came from, as Lydia hasn't been carrying anything a moment ago. The amulet on his neck gave soft vibrations.

Vilgefortz was smiling.

‘I was asking,’ he repeated, ‘about your views towards the relations between a man and a woman.’

‘What part of these relations are you referring to?’

‘Do you think it's possible to bind a woman to your will? I am, of course, talking about real women, not girls. Is it possible to rule over a real woman? Conquer her? Force her to yield to you? And if so, then how? Answer me.’

The ragdoll's button eyes were still fixed at them. Yennefer turned her gaze away.

‘You answered?’

‘I did.’

‘How?’

‘You know.’

‘You understand,’ said Vilgefortz at last. ‘And it seems like you've always understood. So you will also understand that once the concept of will and subjugation, of domination and submission, of male master and female slave, is gone and forgotten – only then we can truly achieve unity. An attachment and a bond. Mutual diffusion. And once you achieve this, death will no longer matter. There, in the banquet hall, John Bekker is present, as water which has

once gushed out of the rock. Saying that Bekker has died is like calling water dead. Look at the next painting.'

He did as he was told.

'It's exquisite,' he said finally. Instantly he felt delicate vibrations from his amulet.

'Lydia,' Vilgefortz smiled, 'Is thanking you for the appreciation. And I shall congratulate you on your taste. The art work depicts the meeting of Cregennan of Lod with Lara Dorren aep Shiadhal, the legendary lovers, forced apart and destroyed by the times of contempt. He was a wizard, she was an elf, one of the elite Aen Saevherne, the Knowing. What could have become the beginning of reconciliation, ended up as a tragedy.'

'I know this story. I used to take it for a mere fairytale. What happened for real?'

'That,' the wizard stated somberly 'is a mystery to all. All, but for a chosen few. Lydia, hang your painting next to it. Geralt, you may admire Lydia's newest work of art. It's a portrait of Lara Dorren aep Shiadhal, based on an old miniature.'

'My deepest regards,' the witcher bowed to Lydia van Bredevoort; his voice didn't tremble. 'It's truly a masterpiece.'

His voice didn't change at all, despite Lara Dorren aep Shiadhal looking at him down from her portrait with Ciri's eyes..

'What happened next?'

'Lydia was in the gallery. We both went out to the terrace. And she laughed at my expense.'

'Over there, Geralt. If you don't mind. Tread only on the dark tiles, please.'

Below the sea roared, the island of Thanedd stood among the white foam of the surf. The waves crashed against the walls of Loxia, which were located just below them. Loxia sparkled with light, like Aretuza. Towering above them was the stone block Garstang which appeared to be black and dead.

'Tomorrow,' the wizard eyes followed the witcher 'member of the Chapter and of the Council will be wearing their traditional robes, you know the ones from the old engravings, black capes and pointed hats. Also we will carry staves and canes, we'll look similar to wizards and witches that scare children. It's a tradition. Accompanied by some other delegates, we head up to Garstang. There, in a room specially prepared we will debate. The rest will wait in Aretuza for us to return with our decisions.'

'The gathering in Garstang, in a small group, is also a tradition?'

'Absolutely. It is ancient and dictated by practical considerations. It happens that the deliberations of wizards there have been fairly stormy and reached a very active exchange of views. During one of these exchanges a ball of lightning damaged the hair and dress of Nina Fioravanti. Nina spent a year working to surround the walls of Garstang with magical aura blocking spells which were incredible strong. Since then, spells do not work in Garstang and the discussions run quietly. Especially when we remember to take away the knives of the disputants.'

'I understand. And this solitary tower, above Garstang at the very top. What is it? Some building of importance?'

'That is Tor Lara, the Tower of Seagulls. A ruin. Important? Probably yes.'

'Probably?'

The wizard leaned against the railing.

'According to Elvish traditions, Tor Lara is connected via some form of teleportation device with the enigmatic Tor Zireael, the Tower of the Swallow, which has not yet been found.'

‘How? How is it you haven’t succeeded in discovering the teleporter? I don’t believe it.’

‘You are correct. We discovered a portal, but it was necessary to block it. There were protests, everyone rushed to do experiments, each sorcerer wanted to become famous as the explorer of Tor Zireael, the mythical home of Elvish sages and wizards. The Portal, however is irreparably flawed and brings chaos. There were casualties, so it was blocked. Let’s go, Geralt, it’s getting cold. Careful. Step only on the dark tiles.’

‘Why only on the dark?’

‘These buildings are in ruins. Moisture, erosion, strong winds, salt air, all of it affects the walls terribly. Fixing them would cost a fortune, so we use illusions. Prestige, you know.’

‘Not quite.’

The wizard raised his hand and the terrace disappeared. They were standing in front of an abyss, on a precipice which at the bottom were bristling teeth of rock bathed in foam. They were on a narrow belt of dark tiles arranged as a trapezoid between the porch of Aretuza and the pillars that supported the roof.

Geralt maintained his balance without effort. If he were a human, not a witcher, he would not have managed to keep it. But even he was surprised. His sudden movement did not escape the attention of the wizard, nor the look on his face. The wind buffeted the narrow catwalk, and carried the sound of waves from the abyss below.

‘Not afraid of death.’ Vilgefortz said with a smile. ‘But you are afraid for her.’

The rag doll looked at him with its button eyes.

‘He mocked you.’ Yennefer murmured, hugging the witcher. ‘There was no danger, surely he had you both wrapped in a levitation field. He wouldn’t have risked it... What happened next?’

‘We went to another wing of Aretuza. He led me into a large chamber, it was probably one of the teachers offices, maybe even the head. We sat at a table on which stood an hourglass. The sand was falling. I sensed the smell of perfume, I knew Lydia had been in the room before us...’

‘And Vilgefortz?’

‘He asked questions.’

‘Why did you not become a wizard, Geralt? Did the Arts never attract you? Be honest.’

‘I will. Yes they appealed to me.’

‘So why not follow the voice of inclination?’

‘I felt that it would be more reasonable to go with the voice of reason.’

‘Meaning?’

‘Years of work in the witcher’s profession have taught me to measure the strength of intentions. You know, Vilgefortz I once knew a dwarf, who dreamed of becoming an elf. What do you think would have happened if he had followed the voice of inclination?’

‘Was that supposed to be a comparison? A parallel? If so, it is completely inaccurate. A dwarf could never be an elf. Because his mother was never an elf.’

Geralt was silent for a long time.

‘Well, yes,’ he said finally. ‘I could have guessed that. You’ve been digging around a bit in my resume. Can you tell me, for what purpose?’

‘Maybe,’ smiled the wizard slightly. ‘I dream of a painting in the Gallery of Glory? The two of us, at the table, and a brass plate inscription reading: “Vilgefortz of Roggeveen’s pact with Geralt of Rivia.”’

‘That would be an allegory,’ said the witcher. ‘With the title: “Knowledge trumps ignorance.” I would prefer a more realistic picture, bearing the title: “Vilgefortz explains to Geralt what’s going on.”’

‘Isn’t it obvious?’

‘No.’

‘Have you forgotten? The painting that I dream of, hangs in the Gallery of Glory, they will look at it in future generations, and they will know perfectly well what is going on, what the event shows in the painting. Painted on the canvas, Vilgefortz and Geralt agree and forge a pact which as a result, Geralt, not following the voice of inclination, but a true calling, finally enters the ranks of Sorcerers, putting behind his present life which is lacking in meaning and devoid of a future.’

‘And to think,’ said the witcher after a long moment of silence. ‘I had believed that nothing could surprise me anymore. Believe me Vilgefortz, I will remember this banquet and its magical comedy of events for a long time. Surely it is worth a picture. With the Title: “Geralt leaves the island of Thanedd, bursting with laughter.”’

‘I do not understand,’ the wizard bowed slightly, ‘I am lost in thy flowery speeches and densely woven fancy words.’

‘The cause of your misunderstanding is clear to me. We are too different to understand. You are a powerful wizard of the Chapter, who has attained oneness with nature. While I am a wanderer, a witcher, a mutant, who travels the world and kills monsters for money...’

‘The flamboyance,’ interrupted the wizard ‘has been replaced by banalities.’

‘We’re too different.’ Geralt did not let himself be interrupted. ‘A small fact that my mother was, incidentally, a sorceress, cannot erase this difference. But just out of curiosity, who was your mother?’

‘I have no idea.’ Vilgefortz said calmly.

The witcher fell silent immediately.

‘The Druid Circle in Kovir,’ the wizard took a moment ‘found me in the gutter in Lan Exeter. They took me in and educated me. As a druid, of course. You know what a druid is? They are tramps, that walk through the world and kneel before the sacred oaks.’

The witcher stayed silent.

‘And then,’ continued Vilgefortz ‘during some druidic rituals my talents surfaced. Talents that clearly and without a doubt allowed them to determine my origins. I was conceived, of course, by accident, by two people, of whom at least one of them was a sorcerer.’

Geralt was silent.

‘The druid who discovered my humble abilities, of course, had fortuitously met a sorcerer.’ Vilgefortz calmly went on. ‘And he generously offered me an education and development and the prospect of joining the Brotherhood of Sorcerers.’

‘And you,’ said the witcher hollowly ‘accepted the offer.’

‘No.’ Vilgefortz voice became increasingly cold and unpleasant. ‘I rejected it in a less than polite, even rude way. I unloaded all of my rage on him. I wanted him to feel guilty, him and all his magical brotherhood. Guilty, for the gutter in Lan Exeter, guilty for one or two rogue sorcerers. The sorcerer, it was clear, neither understood nor was he bothered by what I said then. He shrugged and walked away, thus marking himself like all of his brethren, insensitive, arrogant, bastards worthy of the highest contempt.’

Geralt remained silent.

‘I was sick of the druids already.’ continued Vilgefortz sincerely. ‘So I left the sacred oak trees and went out into the world. I did many things. So I am ashamed of still to this day. I

finally became a soldier for hire. My life unfolded as you can imagine, as a stereotype. A victorious soldier, a beaten soldier, a marauder, robber, rapist, murderer, and finally a fleeing fugitive to the end of the world from the noose. I ran away to the end of the world. And there, at the end of the world I met a woman. A Sorceress.'

'Be careful' the witcher whispered, his eyes narrowing. 'Be careful Vilgefortz that the search for similarities does not take you to far.'

'The similarities have already been completed.' The wizard did not drop his gaze. 'Since I did not know how to handle the feelings I harboured towards the woman. Neither did I understand her feelings as she tried to help me. I left. Because she was promiscuous, arrogant, angry, numb and cold. Because she was impossible to dominate and her dominance was humiliating. I left because I knew she cared about me just because of my intelligence, personality and this fascinating mystery blurred the fact that I was not a sorcerer and only a sorcerer's favour was more than a night. I left because... Because she was like my mother. Suddenly I realized that what I felt for her was not love but a feeling far more complicated, powerful but difficult to identify: a mixture of fear, anger, rage, remorse and the need for atonement, guilt, loss and damage, a perverse need for suffering and punishment. What I felt for this woman was hate.'

Great was silent. Vilgefortz looked away.

'I left,' he continued after a moment. 'because I could not live with the emptiness which has enveloped me. I suddenly realized that this is not the lack of the woman that was causing the void, but the lack of what I was feeling. A paradox right? I think I'll stop, you can guess the rest. I became a sorcerer. Out of hatred. And only then did I realize how stupid it was. I mistook the stars reflected on the surface of a pond as the sky at night time.'

'As you noticed the parallels between us were not quite parallel.' Geralt muttered. 'Despite appearances, we have little in common, Vilgefortz. What did you want to prove by telling me your story? That the path to magic mastery, thought twisted and difficult, is open to all? Even for, sorry for the parallels, bastards and foundlings, vagrants or witchers...'

'No' interrupted the wizard. 'I did not intend to argue that this route is available to all, because it is obvious and long since proven. It does not require either any evidence the fact that for some people there is simply no other way.'

'And so,' smiled the witcher. 'I have no way out? Do I have to sign the aforementioned agreement that I will become the subject of paintings and become a sorcerer? Just because of genetics? Wow. I know a little theory of heredity. My father, I learned with a little effort, was a vagabond, ignorant, mercenary adventurer. I have the advantage of paternal genes, not only maternal. The fact that I have a beard seems to confirm this.'

'Certainly.' The wizard grinned. 'The hourglass has dropped almost all its sand and I Vilgefortz of Roggeveen, master of magic, a member of the Chapter, Am still conversing with an ignorant mercenary the son of an ignorant, mercenary and vagabond. We talk about matters and issues, as we all know, are common topics of discussion and comments at the fires of ignorant mercenaries. Such things as genetics, for example. Where did you hear that word, my mercenary? From the school in the Ellander temple where they spell and write twenty-four runes? What made you decide to read books where you can find these and other similar words? Where you honed your eloquence and rhetoric? And what were you doing? Trying to converse with vampires? My genetic vagabond, that Tissaia de Vries smiles at. My witcher, mercenary that fascinates Philippa Eilhart, so that both of her hands tremble. At the mention of, makes Triss Merigold blush. Not to mention Yennefer of Vengerberg.'

'Perhaps it is a good thing that they do not remember. There is so little sand left in the hourglass that you could almost count the grains. Do not paint any more pictures for me, Vilgefortz. Say what is going on. Tell me in simple words. Imagine sitting by the fire, two

vagabonds, roasting a suckling pig, which they had just stolen, and unsuccessfully trying to get drunk from birch juice. It is a simple question. Answer. Vagabond to vagabond.'

'What is this simple question?'

'What pact do you propose? What arrangement have we entered into? Why do you want me in your boat, Vilgefortz? What cauldron, in which it seems to me, begins to boil? What's in the air here, apart from the chandeliers?'

'Hmm.' The wizard thought, or at least pretended to. 'The question is not simple, but I will try to answer. But not vagabond to vagabond. As a mercenary to mercenary like I was.'

'All right.'

'Then listen, friend mercenary. Prepare for a good fucking. A terrible slaughter of life and death, no quarter will be given. Some will win; the others will be eaten by the crows. I counsel you, friend, join with those who have the greater chance. Join with us. Join with the others, and I'll spit on you, because they have no chance, and you will die with them. No friend, don't show me your grin here, I know what it means. You want to say that you are neutral. That you and those you care about will just wait it out hiding in your mountain, Kaer Morhen. That is a bad idea, friend. Everything you love is with us. If you do not join, you'll lose it all. And then the emptiness, nothingness and hatred will swallow you. Then the time of contempt, which is coming will destroy you. So be sensible and stand on the right side, when the time comes to choose. And the choice will come. You can believe me.'

'Incredible,' the witcher's took on a sinister smile, 'how bothered you all are by my neutrality. To what extent it makes me the object of proposals for pacts and agreements, offers of cooperation, instructions about the need to make choices and stand on the right side. Let's end this conversation Vilgefortz. You lose this time. In this game, I am not an equal partner. I see no possibility that we are both in the same picture in the Gallery of Glory. Especially in the battles.'

The wizard was silent.

'Arrange' continued Geralt, 'your chessboard, the king, the queen, the bishop and the tower, do not worry about me because on this chessboard I have as much importance as the dust that covers it. This is not my game. You say that I have to choose? I assure you you're wrong. I will not choose. I will adapt to whatever happens. I will adapt to what others choose, I've always done this.'

'You're a fatalist.'

'I am. Although it is still a word you should not know. Again, this is not my game.'

'Really?' Vilgefortz leaned across the table. 'In this game witcher, on the board is already a black horse, for good or bad you are joined by bonds of destiny. You know who I'm talking about, right? You do not want to lose her? Know there is only one way to do it so as not to lose.'

The witcher's eyes narrowed.

'What is it you want from the child?'

'There is only one way you can find that out.'

'I warn you. I will not let you hurt...'

'There is only one way you can do that. I have proposed such a way, Geralt of Rivia. Think about my proposal. You have all night. Think when you look to the sky. To the stars. Do not mistake them for those reflected on the surface of a pond. The hourglass has run out.'

'I fear for Ciri, Yen.'

'You shouldn't.'

'But...'

‘Trust me.’ She hugged him. ‘Trust me, please. Don’t worry about Vilgefortz. He is a player. He wanted to approach you, to provoke. He partially succeeded in this. But it doesn’t matter. Ciri is under my care, and Aretuza is secure, She will be able to develop her abilities here, and not be disturbed. By anyone. As for being a sorceress, forget it. She has other talents. And is destined for other things. Believe me.’

‘I believe you.’

‘That’s significant progress. And do not worry about Vilgefortz. Tomorrow will explain many things and solve many problems.’

Tomorrow, he thought. She’s hiding something from me. And I’m afraid to ask. Codrigher was right. I’m tangled in a nasty cabal. But now I have no way out. I’ll have to wait for what tomorrow brings that apparently will explain everything. I have to trust her. I know something will happen. I will wait. And I will adapt to the situation.

He looked at the writing desk.

‘Yen?’

‘I’m here.’

‘When you studied in Aretuza... when sleeping in rooms like this... did you have a doll without which you could not sleep?’

‘No,’ Yennefer stirred violently. ‘I did not have a doll. Don’t ask me that, Geralt. Please don’t ask me.’

‘Aretuza.’ He whispered, looking around. ‘Aretuza on the island of Thanedd. Her home. For so many years... When she comes out from here, she’ll be a mature woman...’

‘Stop. Don’t think about it and don’t talk about it. Instead...’

‘What, Yen?’

‘Make love to me.’

He embraced her. Touched. Found. Yennefer, in an incredible way was hard and soft at the same time, she sighed loudly. The words they said were broken, sighs and aspirations which disappeared in a hurry, ceased to have meaning and dispersed. So silent, focused on finding themselves on the search for truth. They were looking a long time, carefully and lovingly, fearing the sacrilege of haste, the lightness and neglect. They looked hard, intense and passionate. They looked carefully, fearing the sacrilege of the absence of finesse.

They found each other, they overcame fear and a moment later, they found the truth, which exploded under their eyelids, awesome, blindingly obvious, a groan tore at his mouth which was clenched in determination. He then shuddered and time froze, everything disappeared, and only became a functioning sense of touch.

An eternity passed, reality returned, and for the second time he shuddered and began to move slowly, awkwardly, like a big loaded wagon. Geralt looked out the window. The moon was in the sky but what happened a moment ago should have thrown it to the ground.

‘Wow,’ said Yennefer after a time, wiping tears from her cheeks with a slow movement.

They lay motionless between the disordered sheets, among tremors, between the warmth and the expiring happiness, among the silence that swirled around the indistinct darkness pregnant with the smell of the night and the voices of the cicadas. Geralt knew that in such moments as these sorceress telepathic abilities were heightened and very strong, he thought so intensely about issues and beautiful things. The brightness of the rising sun. In the dawn mist hanging over a mountain lake. In crystalline waterfalls filled with jumping salmon, as bright as if made of molten silver. The warm drops of rain hitting the leaves of a rose bush in full bloom.

He thought of her. Yennefer smiled, listening to his thoughts. The smile trembled on her cheeks with the silver by the moon shadow on her eyelashes.

‘A house?’ Yennefer asked suddenly. ‘What house? Do you have a house? Do you wish to build a house? Ah... sorry. I should not...’

He was silent. He was angry with himself. Thinking about her had inadvertently allowed her to read the thoughts he harboured about it.

‘A beautiful dream.’ Yennefer lightly stroked his arm. ‘A house. A house built with your own hands and in the house you and me. You would raise horses and sheep, I would take care of the garden, food and Cardaria would weigh the wool that we would take to the market. From the orens that we would be given from the sale of the wool and various fruits of the earth we would by everything we need, say a little copper kettle and an iron rake. Every so often we would visit Ciri with her husband and their three children, sometimes Triss Merigold would come and to be with us for a few days. We could grow old with dignity. And if I get bored at night you would play the bagpipes made with your own hands. Playing the bagpipes, as everyone knows is the best remedy for the blues.’

The witcher was silent. The sorceress coughed softly.

‘Sorry,’ he said at last. He raised himself on his elbow, leaned over and kissed her. She moved to rapidly embrace him. In silence.

‘Say something.’

‘I do not want to lose you, Yen’

‘After all I have.’

‘This night is over.’

‘Everything ends.’

No, he thought. I do not want it to be so. I’m tired. Too tired to accept the prospect of principals, after which you have to start all over again. I wish...

‘Do not talk.’ With a quick movement Yennefer laid a finger on his lips. ‘Do not tell me what you want or what you crave. Because I might not be able to fulfil your wishes and that would cause me pain.’

‘And what do you want, Yen? What do you dream?’

‘Only about things that can be achieved.’

‘What about me?’

‘I already have you.’

He was silent for a long time. And waited for the moment she broke the silence.

‘Geralt?’

‘Mmm?’

‘Make love to me, please.’

At first, they filled each other, both were full of fantasy and imagination, ideas, discoveries and new desires. As usual, it soon proved that it was both too much and too little. They understood at once and again proved their love.

When Geralt came to, the moon was still in place. Cicadas chirped loudly as if they would also like to fight fear and unrest on the basis of madness and passion. From a nearby window on the left wing of Aretuza someone hungry for sleep screamed and fumed bitterly, demanding silence. From the window across someone, apparently gifted with an artistic soul, enthusiastically applauded and shouted congratulations.

‘Oh, Yen...’ Whispered the witcher in shame.

‘I had a reason...’ she kissed him and then nestled her cheek into the pillow. ‘I had a reason to scream, so I screamed. That should not be suppressed, it is unhealthy and unnatural. Hold me, if you can.’

*Teleporter of Lara, also known as, after the name of its discoverer Benavent's Portal.
Located on the island of Thanedd on the top floor of the Tower of Gulls. Standing,
periodically active. Principles of operation: not known.*

*Destination: unknown, probably distorted as a result of spontaneous decay, possibly many
branches and forks.*

*Note: The teleporter is chaotic and deadly. Experiments absolutely prohibited. Do not allow
the use of magic in the Tower of Gulls and the immediate area in particular, teleportation
magic. The Chapter reviews all exceptional applications for permission to enter Tor Lara in
order to visit the teleporter. The request must be justified by research work and specialization
in this field.*

*Bibliography: Geoffrey Monck, "The Magic of the Elder Folk", Immanuel Benavent, "Portal
of Tor Lara", Nina Fioravanti "The Theory and Practice of Teleportation", Ransant Alvaro,
"The Secret Gates."*

*Prohibit (index of forbidden artifacts)
Ars Magica, Ed. LVIII*

Chapter Four

At first there was only chaos pulsing, sparkling, a cascade of images, a vortex, a spiral full of sounds and voices. Ciri saw a tower reaching to the heavens, on whose roof lightning danced. She heard the cry of a bird of prey and she was this bird. She flew with great speed, below her was a raging sea. She saw a small doll made from rags, and suddenly she was the doll wrapped in a darkness that vibrated with the song of cicadas. She saw a large black and white cat, and suddenly she was the cat, around her was a dark house, with dark wood panelling, it smelled of candles and old books. She heard someone repeatedly say her name, summoning her. She saw a silver salmon leaping in a waterfall, heard the patter of rain hitting the leaves. And then she heard the strange, prolonged scream of Yennefer. And this cry awoke her, snatching her from the depths of timelessness and disorder.

Now, unsuccessfully trying to remember a dream, she heard the quiet sounds of a lute and flute, the jingle of a tambourine, singing and laughter. Dandelion and a group of vagrants who he had accidentally met were still having fun in the room down the hall.

Through the window, fell a ray of moonlight, brightening the darkness and giving the room in Loxia the appearance of a dream. Ciri threw the sheets aside. She was sweaty, her hair stuck to her forehead. In the evening she had trouble getting to sleep, a shortness of breath, even with the window open. She knew what the reason was. Before leaving with Geralt, Yennefer had isolated the room with a spell of protection. Although it was supposed to prevent anyone from entering, Ciri actually suspected that it was to keep her from leaving. She was a prisoner. Yennefer, though pleased with the meeting with Geralt, had not forgotten or forgiven her wild Hirundum getaway, thanks to which this meeting took place.

Meeting with Geralt alone had filled her with sadness and disappointment. The Witcher was taciturn, tense, anxious and clearly lying. Their conversations occurred at a fast pace and involved fragmented, broken and unfinished statements and questions. The Witcher's eyes and thoughts fled and disappeared into the distance. Ciri knew where.

The room down the hall became quieter and the sound of Dandelion singing and the lute strings were like a murmuring of a brook over stones. She recognised the melody, which the bard had been composing for several days. The ballad, Dandelion had boasted of several times, was entitled "Elusive" and would bring triumph to the poet at the annual tournament held for bards in the late autumn at the castle of Vartburg. Ciri listened attentively to the words.

*Above wet rooftops flying,
Yellow water lilies swim,
But I at the end understand you,
If you would let me...*

The sound of hooves, horsemen galloped in the night and the horizon glows with fires. A bird of prey screeches, spreading its wings and leaping into flight. Ciri again plunged into sleep, hearing someone repeatedly call her name. Once it was Geralt, once Yennefer, once Triss Merigold and finally a few times, a girl she did not know, thin, blonde and sad, looked at her from the corner, bound in brass miniature.

Then she saw the black and white cat, after a while she was the cat and watched with its eyes. All around her was a strange, dark house. She could see shelves full of large books, some candles illuminated the desktop, in front of it two men were bent over parchments. One of the men coughed and wiped his mouth with a handkerchief. The second, a dwarf with an enormous head, sat in a chair with wheels. He was missing both legs.

‘Incredible...’ Fenn sighed, running his eyes over the mouldy parchment. ‘It’s hard to believe... Where did you get these documents?’

‘You would not believe me if I told you.’ Codringher coughed. ‘Do you now understand who Cirilla, Princess of Cintra, really is? A Child of the Old Blood... The last offshoot from that damn tree of hatred! The last branch and on it a poisonous apple...’

‘The Old Blood... As far back as... Pavetta, Calanthe, Adalia, Elen, Fiona...’

‘And Falka.’

‘The gods, that’s impossible! First, Falka did not have any children! Secondly, Fiona was the legitimate daughter of...’

‘First, about Falka’s youth, we know nothing. Second, do not make me laugh, Fenn. You know very well that the sound of the word “legal” causes me spasms of mirth. I believe in this document, because in my opinion it is authentic and speaks the truth. Fiona, Pavetta’s great-grandmother was the daughter of Falka, this monster in human skin. Hell, I do not believe in those crazy divinations, prophecies and other crap, but when I remember Ithlinne’s predictions...’

‘Stained Blood?’

‘Stained, tainted, cursed, it can be understood differently. And according to legend, if you remember, it was Falka who was cursed, because Lara Dorren aep Shiadhal cast a curse on her mother.’

‘These are fairy tales, Codringher.’

‘You’re right, this is a fairy tale. But do you know when they are fairy tales no longer? The moment when someone starts to believe in them. And someone believed in the story of the Old Blood. Especially in the passage which says that an avenger will be born of Falka’s blood that will destroy the old world, and on its ruins build a new one.’

‘And this avenger would be Cirilla?’

‘No. Not Cirilla. Her son.’

‘And searching for Cirilla is...’

‘Emhyr var Emreis, Emperor of Nilfgaard.’ Ended Codringher in a cold tone. ‘Do you understand now? Cirilla, regardless of her will, is to be mother to the heir to the throne. The Archduke will become the Archduke of Darkness, successor and avenger of that devil Falka. The Holocaust, and the later reconstruction of the world is, I believe, to be run in a controlled and monitored manner.’

The cripple was silent a long time.

‘Do you not think,’ he said at last ‘that we should tell Geralt about this?’

‘Geralt?’ Codringher curled his lip. ‘And who is he? Could it be by chance that he naively told me that he is not working for profit? Oh, I think he is not working on his own behalf. He is acting for others. Unwittingly anyway. He pursues Rience, who is on a leash, but he doesn’t feel the collar around his own neck. Why should I inform him? To help those who want to take possession of the goose who lays the golden eggs to blackmail or gain favour with Emhyr? No, Fenn. I’m not that stupid.’

‘The witcher is on a leash? Whose?’

‘Think.’

‘Damn!’

‘A well-chosen word. The only person who has influence over him. In whom he trusts. But I do not trust her. And I never did. I am going to get into this game too.’

‘It’s a dangerous game, Codringher.’

‘There are no safe games. There are only games that are worthwhile and others that do not deserve it. Fenn, brother, do you not understand what has fallen into our hands? A goose that to us and nobody else will give us a huge egg, every last one of them gold...’

Codringher burst into a fit of coughing. When he removed the handkerchief from his lips it was speckled with blood.

‘Gold will not cure you,’ Fenn said, looking at his companion’s handkerchief. ‘And it will not give me back my legs...’

‘Who knows?’

Someone knocked at the door. Fenn shifted uneasily in his wheelchair.

‘Are you expecting someone, Codringher?’

‘Yes. For people I’m sending to Thanedd. After the golden goose.’

‘Do not open it,’ cried Ciri. ‘Do not open the door! Behind it is death! Do not open the door!’

‘I’m opening it, I’m opening it.’ Codringher shouted, as he lifted the latch, after which he turned to the cat, who was merely meowing. ‘Shut up, damned beast...’

He stopped. At the door were not those he was expecting. At the door were three people he did not know.

‘Are you Mr Codringher?’

‘The lord is gone on business.’ The lawyer changed the tone of his voice to a slight squeak. ‘I am the butler of my master, I am called Glomb, Mikael Glomb. What can I do for the noble lords?’

‘Nothing,’ said one of the individuals, a tall half-elf. ‘Since your master is not here, we’ll leave a letter and a message. Here’s the letter.’

‘I will deliver it reliably.’ Codringher, well into his role as a bumbling servant, bowed humbly and reached out to pick up a bundle of scrolls connected by a red rope. ‘And the message?’

The rope that held the scrolls unfolded like a snake to attack, lashing forward to tightly entwine his wrist. Tall gave a strong pull. Codringher lost his balance, flew forward, so as not to collapse on the half-elf, he leaned left placing his hand on the half-elf’s chest. In this position he was not able to avoid the knife, which puncture him in the stomach. He shouted and pulled back, but the magic rope was still wrapped around his wrist. The half-elf wandered back towards him and stabbed him once again. This time Codringher hung onto the blade.

‘Here is the message and greeting from Rience,’ the tall half-elf hissed, tearing the dagger strongly upwards opening the lawyer like a fish. ‘Go to hell, Codringher. Straight to hell.’

Codringher wheezed. He could feel the blade grinding and crunching his ribs and sternum. He fell to the ground, rolling into a ball. He wanted to scream, to warn Fenn, but only managed to screech and squawk which was immediately stifled by a wave of blood.

The tall half-elf stepped over the body, followed behind by the other two. They were human.

Fenn was not surprised.

Ringling like a struck chord, one of the minions fell back, struck by a steel ball in the middle of the forehead. Fenn moved away from the desktop, trying in vain to reload the arbalest with trembling hands.

Tall jumped towards him, with a strong kick, he overturned the chair. The dwarf rolled onto the papers scattered on the floor. Crawling helplessly with small arms and the stumps of his legs, resembling a spider that had had its legs torn off. The half-elf kicked the arbalest out of reach of Fenn. He quickly reviewed the documents that lay on the desktop without paying attention to the crippled man trying to crawl on the ground. His attention was caught by a small framed brass horn and miniature of a blonde girl. He picked it up and took it.

The second thug who had been examining the man hit by the ball from the arbalest approached. The half-elf raised his eyebrow questioningly. The thug shook his head.

The half-elf placed the miniature and some of the documents he took from the desk and put them in his breast pocket. He then took a bunch of quills from an inkwell and lit it from the candlestick. Rotating them caused the bundle to be well lit, after which he let it fall onto the desk, among the stacks of scrolls which instantly burst into flames.

Fenn howled.

The tall half-elf removed from the table that was already burning, a rum bottle used to remove ink, went to the dwarf and spilled its contents over him. Fenn gave a sharp cry. The second thug pulled from a shelf a sheaf of papers and threw them over the cripple. The desk stood roaring with fire all the way to the roof. Another bottle, smaller, exploded with a bang, the ashes sprinkled the shelves. Papers, bundles and folders began to blacken and twist and stoked the fire.

Fenn screamed.

The half-elf was beside him holding a burning scroll.

Codringher's black and white cat sat on a nearby wall. In his bright yellow eyes reflected the fire that turned a pleasant night into a terrible parody of day. The surrounding area was filled with screams. Fire! Fire! Water! People were running towards the house. The cat froze, staring in amazement and contempt. These idiots were going there, towards the fiery pit that he barely managed to escape.

Turning around with indifference, the cat continued licking its paws stained with Codringher's blood.

Ciri woke up covered in sweat, her hands painfully clutching the sheets. All around her was silence and the soft darkness was pierced by a dagger of moonlight.

Fire. Fire. Blood. Nightmare... I do not remember anything, I do not remember...

She inhaled deeply the crisp night air. The shortness of breath was gone. She knew why.

The protection spells did not work.

Something has happened, Ciri thought. She jumped out of bed and dressed quickly. She strapped on a dagger. She had no sword; Yennefer had removed it and left it in the care of Dandelion. The poet was probably asleep already, Loxia was quiet. Ciri was wondering if she should go and wake him up when she suddenly felt in her ears heavy beats and the rhythm of blood.

The bright beam of moonlight through the window became a road. At the end of the road, far away, there were doors. The doors opened and Yennefer appeared.

Come here.

Behind the sorceress opened another door. One after another, endlessly. In the gloom she could make out the black forms of columns. Or maybe they were statues... *I'm dreaming*, thought Ciri, *I myself do not believe this. I'm dreaming. This is not a road, it is light, a streak of light. I can not walk through the...*

Come here.

She obeyed.

Were it not for the witcher's foolish scruples, if not for his impractical rules, many of the later events would have had a completely different course. Many events would probably never even taken place. And then the history of the world would be different.

But the world's history unfolded as it unfolded, and the sole reason for this was that the witcher had scruples. When he awoke at dawn and felt the need, he did what anyone would have done. He walked onto the balcony and peed in the pot of nasturtiums. Scruples. He dressed quietly so as not to wake Yennefer, who was fast asleep, motionless and hardly without breath. He left the dwelling and went into the garden.

The banquet was still going on, but judging by the sound, in a rudimentary form. The windows of the ballroom had a light still burning which filled the atrium and illuminated the clumps of peonies. The witcher went a little further into the dense bushes and there stared at the shining sky, from the horizon appeared the first glowing purple streaks of dawn.

When he returned slowly, reflecting on important issues, his medallion started shaking vigorously. He grabbed it with his hand and felt the vibrations across his entire body. There was no doubt. Someone had cast a spell in Aretuza. Geralt pricked up his ears and heard muffled screams and a banging clatter coming from the gallery in the left wing of the palace.

Any other would have turned around without hesitation and returned to their room pretending not to hear anything. And then, the history of the world would also have developed differently. But the witcher had scruples and principles and was used to following foolish and unrealistic rules.

When he came running through the gallery and into the hallway, there the struggle continued. Some soldiers dressed in gray jackets were restraining a sorcerer who was lying quietly on the floor. Directing the soldiers was Dijkstra, head of the secret services of Vizimir king of Redania. Before Geralt could take any action, he was also restrained. Two other soldiers in gray pushed him against the wall while a third person held an iron triton to his chest.

All the soldiers on their chest had a medallion with the eagle of Redania.

'This is called "falling into the shit"' Dijkstra quietly explained, while he approached. 'And you, witcher, seem to have a natural talent for getting into it. Stand still and try not to pay attention.'

He finally saw the sorcerer being held by the arms. It was Artaud Terranova, a member of the Chapter.

The light that allowed him to see the details came from a ball that hung over the head of Keira Metz, a sorceress that Geralt had spoken with that night at the banquet. He hardly recognised her. She had changed light tulle netting for rough masculine clothes and carried a dagger at her side.

'Cuff him.' She commanded briefly. In her hand jingled shackles made of a bluish metal.

'Do not dare to put those on me!' Terranova cried. 'Don not dare, Metz! I am a member of the Chapter!'

'You were. Now you are an ordinary traitor. And you'll be treated like a traitor.'

'And you're a mangy bitch, you...'

Keira took a step forward; swaying slightly in the hips and with all her strength she slammed her fist into his face. The sorcerer's head whipped back so far that for a moment Geralt had the feeling that it was going to detach from his neck. Terranova was hanging limply from the hands that held him, with blood running from his nose and lips.

The Sorceress did not deliver another blow, but her hand was raised. The witcher saw the flash of brass knuckles on her fingers. He was not surprised. Keira was tiny; such a blow could not have been given with only her bare fist.

Geralt did not move. The soldiers held him tightly, and the tips of the triton poke his chest. Geralt was not sure that if he moved he could get free. Had he even know what to do.

The soldiers put chains on the wrists of the sorcerer, which were placed behind his back. Terranova screamed, twisted, bent and tried to vomit. Geralt knew already, what kind of shackles they were. It was an alloy of iron and dimeritium, a rare mineral, whose properties consisted of stifling magical abilities. This stifling accompanied rather unpleasant side effect for magicians.

Keira Metz raised her head, pushing aside the hair on her forehead. And then saw him.

‘What is he doing here, damn it? How did he get here?’

‘He put his nose,’ Dijkstra replied impassively. ‘Where he has a talent for putting in. What would you have me do with him?’

Keira growled and stamped several times on the floor with the heel of her boot.

‘Keep an eye on him. I do not have the time now.’

She left quickly, behind her walked the Redanians, who dragged Terranova. The glowing ball hovered behind the sorceress, but dawn was already starting to shine. At a sign from Dijkstra, the soldiers released Geralt. The spy came and looked the witcher in the eye.

‘Keep absolute peace of mind.’

‘What is happening here? What is...’

‘And absolute silence.’

Keira Metz returned after a short time, not alone. She came accompanied with a sorcerer with hair the colour of flaxen that the previous day had been introduced to Geralt as Dethmold of Ban Ard. Upon seeing the witcher, the sorcerer curse and slammed his fist into his hand.

‘Damn it! Is this the one whom took a liking to Yennefer?’

‘This,’ Keira confirmed. ‘is Geralt of Rivia. The problem is that I do not know how he is with Yennefer...’

‘I also do not know.’ Dethmold shrugged. ‘In any case, he is already involved in this. He has seen too much. Take him to Philippa, she can decide.’

‘There is no need,’ Dijkstra said sleepily. ‘I can vouch for him. I’ll take him to where he belongs.’

‘Fine then.’ Dethmold said. ‘Because we do not have time. Come, Keira, up there things get more complicated...’

‘Beware those who are angry.’ The Redanian spy muttered, looking after those departing. ‘A lack of skill, nothing else. A coup like all coups are like gazpacho. It should be eaten cold. Come on, Geralt. And remember, peacefully, with dignity, without any fuss. Do not make me regret not tying you in chains.’

‘What is going on, Dijkstra?’

‘Have you not guessed?’ The spy walked beside him, three soldier hang behind them. ‘Tell me honestly, witcher, how did it happen that you came to be here?’

‘I was afraid the nasturtium were drying up.’

‘Geralt,’ Dijkstra gave him an evil look. ‘You are up to your neck in shit. And you are just keeping your mouth above the surface, but your legs do not reach the bottom. Someone is giving you a helping hand, risking that they might also fall in and drown. Then stop these stupid jokes. It was Yennefer who told you to come here, right?’

‘No, Yennefer is still asleep in bed. Has this reassured you?’

The huge spy turned sharply, seized the witcher by the shoulders and pinned him to the wall of the corridor.

‘No, it has not reassured me, fucking idiot,’ he yelled. ‘Do you not understand, clown, that sorcerers honest and loyal to the kings do not sleep tonight? Have not even gotten into bed? Those who are sleeping in their beds are traitors bribed by Nilfgaard. Traitors who themselves have been preparing a coup, but for later. They did not know that their plans had been discovered we were warned of their intentions. And right now they are being pulled from their warm beds and being given a knuckle duster to the nose and their wrists are being put in dimeritium shackles. The traitors are finished, understand? If you do not want to go down with them, stop pretending idiot! Where you recruited by Vilgefortz last night? Or were you recruited before by Yennefer? Speak? Hurry, because the shit has already started to reach your mouth!’

‘Cold gazpacho, Dijkstra.’ Geralt reminded him. ‘Lead me to Philippa. Calmly, with dignity and no fuss.’

The spy let him go and took a step back.

‘Come on,’ he said coldly. ‘Up these stairs. But this conversation is finished. I promise you that.’

Where the four corridors joined beneath a column that supported the roof, was illuminated with a clarity that came from lanterns and magic globes. Soldiers and sorcerers gathered here. Among the latter were members of the Council: Radcliffe and Sabrina Glevissig. Sabrina, like Keira Metz, was also wearing gray men’s clothing. Geralt realised that the coup was taking place before his eyes and could recognise the different factions by their uniforms.

Kneeling on the floor was Triss Merigold, bent over a body lying in a pool of blood. Geralt recognised Lydia van Bredevoort. He recognised her by her hair and silk dress. The face he would never have recognised, because it was no longer a face. It was a hideous, gruesome death’s mask, with bared teeth gleaming through half of her cheek and the lower jaw was deformed, sunken, and badly swollen.

‘Cover her.’ Sabrina Glevissig said dully. ‘When she died the illusion dispelled... Damn it, cover her with something.’

‘What has happened, Radcliffe?’ Triss asked, removing the hand from the hilt of the dagger stuck below Lydia’s breastbone. ‘How could this happen? It was to be done without deaths!’

‘They attacked us.’ The sorcerer muttered, bowing his head. ‘When they took Vilgefortz they fell on us. There was an uproar... I myself do not know how... It is her own dagger.’

‘Cover her face!’ Sabrina turned sharply. Geralt saw her eyes gleam like charcoal.

‘How did he get here?’

Triss jumped up quickly, and threw herself on the witcher. Geralt saw her face before her hand. Then he saw a flash and went down softly into darkness. He felt hands on his neck and a violent jolt.

‘Hold him, because he’ll fall.’ Triss’s voice was unnatural, it sounded like she was feigning anger. She tugged at him again, so for the moment he found himself next to her.

‘Forgive me,’ he heard her quickly whisper. ‘I had to.’

Dijkstra’s men held him down.

He shook his head. He moved to his other senses. In the corridor there was movement, the air rippled, carried smells. And voices. Sabrina Glevissig cursing, trying to calm Triss. The soldiers, smelling like barracks dragged along the ground a dead body, the silk dress whispering. Blood. The smell of blood. And the smell of ozone. The scent of magic. Raised voices. Steps, the nervous tapping of heels.

‘Hurry! This has been going on too long! We should already be in Garstang!’

Philippa Eilhart. Nervous.

‘Sabrina, Marti Sodergren is faster. If necessary, get her out of bed. Something is wrong with Hen Gedyndeith. I think it’s a heart attack. Have Marti address it. But do not tell her anything about what is going on. Triss, you have to locate and then take Dorregaray, Carduin and Drithelm to Garstang.’

‘Why?’

‘They represent the kings. Let Ethain and Esterad be informed of our action and its consequences. It will bring... Triss, you have blood on your hands! Who?’

‘Lydia.’

‘Damn. When? How?’

‘Does it matter how?’ said a cold, calm voice. Tissaia de Vries. Her dress rustled. Tissaia was dressed in an evening gown, not a rebel uniform. Geralt listened but could not hear the clink of dimeritium chains.

‘You pretend to be affected?’ Continued Tissaia. ‘To be worried? When organising a revolt, when armed soldiers are entering in the night, you have to expect there will be casualties. Lydia is dead, Hen Gedyndeith is dying. I saw for a moment, Artaud, his face was butchered. How many more victims will there be Philippa Eilhart?’

‘I do not know.’ Philippa replied sharply. ‘But I will not go back.’

‘Of course. You do not back off for anything.’

The atmosphere trembled, heels hit against the floor at a familiar rhythm. Philippa was approaching him. He remembered the nervous rhythm of her steps when, the day before they walked together around the room of Aretuza to feast on the caviar. He remembered the smell of cinnamon and nard. Now the smell was mixed with baking soda. Geralt did not think he would participate in any coup, but if he were involved, he didn’t believe he would brush his teeth beforehand.

‘He can not see you Phil.’ A seemingly sleepy Dijkstra said. ‘He sees nothing and saw nothing. The one with the pretty hair has blinded him.’

He heard and felt the breath of Philippa, her every move, but shook his head awkwardly, feigning being perplexed. The Sorceress was not fooled.

‘Do not pretend, Geralt Triss has darkened your eyes, but do not get your head removed. How is it you have appeared here?’

‘I ran. Where is Yennefer?’

‘Blessed are those that do not know.’ Philippa’s voice held no mockery. ‘You will live longer. Say thank you to Triss. It was a weak spell, blindness, you will see again soon. And so you have not seen what may not be seen. Watch them, Dijkstra. I’ll be back.’

Once again movement. Voices. The soprano sound of Keira Metz, the low nasal tone of Radcliffe. The tapping of soldiers boots. The raised voice of Tissaia de Vries.

‘Let go of her! How could you? How could you do it?’

‘She’s a traitor!’ said nasal, Radcliffe.

‘I do not believe it’

‘Blood is not water.’ Philippa Eilhart said coldly. ‘And Emperor Emhyr has promised the elves freedom. And an independent state of their own. And that was enough to immediately betray us.’

‘Answer!’ Tissaia de Vries said with emotion. ‘Answer her, Enid!’

‘Answer, Francesca.’

The clinking of dimeritium shackles. And the lilting elvish accent of Francesca Findabair, the Daisy of the Valley, the most beautiful woman in the world.

‘Me Va a Vort, Dh’oine. These N’aen and dice’n.’

‘Is that enough for you, Tissaia?’ said Philippa’s voice, like a bark. ‘Do you believe me now? You, me, we all are and have always been to her *Dh’oine*, human, which she being *Aen*

Seidhe has nothing to say to us. And you, Fercart? What has Emhyr and Vilgefortz offered you to, to make you decide to betray us?’

‘Go to hell, perverted slut.’

Geralt gasped, but did not hear the sound of the brass knuckles colliding with a jaw. Philippa had more control than Keira. Or did not have any brass knuckles.

‘Radcliffe, take the traitors to Garstang! Dethmold, offer you arm to the great teacher de Vries. Go now. I will join you.’

Steps. The smell of cinnamon and nard.

‘Dijkstra.’

‘Here I am, Phil.’

‘Your subordinates are not needed here. Have them return to Loxia.’

‘Are you sure...?’

‘To Loxia, Dijkstra!’

‘At your service, noble lady.’ The spy’s voice was perceived mockery. ‘The footmen will have already done their share. It is now the exclusive domain of sorcerers. And so I promptly removed myself from the beautiful eyes of your Highness. I did not expect gratitude for the assistance and participation in the coup but I’m sure your Highness will keep me in grateful memory.’

‘Sorry, Sigismund. Thank you for your help.’

‘Not at all, it has been a pleasure. Hey, Voymir, gather the troops. Five will be with me. Bring down the rest, they are to wait down below and embark on the Waterfall. Of course, in silence, on tiptoe, without noise or fuss. Use the side corridors. Off to Loxia’s port and not a word! Off!’

‘You have not seen anything,’ Philippa Eilhart said in a whisper to Geralt, the witcher caught a whiff of cinnamon, nard and baking soda. ‘You have not heard anything. You have never spoken to Vilgefortz. Dijkstra will lead you to Loxia. I will try to find you there when... When everything is over. I promised you something yesterday and I will keep my word.’

‘And what about Yennefer?’

‘He is obsessed.’ Dijkstra returned, shuffling his feet. ‘Yennefer, Yennefer... I get bored. Don’t worry about him, Phil. There are more important issues. Did you find in Vilgefortz’s belongings what you expected to find?’

‘Yes. Here, this is for you.’

‘Oho!’ The rustle of paper. ‘Oho! Oho, oho! Beautiful! Duke Nitert. Excellent! Baron...’

‘Discreetly, without names. And I ask of you, when you return to Tretogor, do not start immediately with executions. Do not induce an early scandal.’

‘Do not be afraid. The big boys on this list, greedy for the gold of Nilfgaard are safe. For now. They will be my beloved marionettes to pull the strings on. And then impose on them more strings... Out of curiosity, were there any other lists? Do Kaedwen, Temeria or Aedirn have traitors? I would be glad to take a look. Even half a glance...’

‘I know you’d be happy. But it is none of your business. These lists have been given to Sabrina Glevissig and Radcliffe, they will know what to do with them. And now, goodbye. Hurry.’

‘Phil.’

‘I’m listening.’

‘Restore the witcher’s sight. Let’s not have him stumble on the stairs.’

In the ballroom of Aretuza the banquet continued, but had changed its form to something more traditional and intimate. Tables had been removed, sorcerers and witches had brought

into the room sofas, chairs, and stools from who knows where, they sat on the and engaged in various amusements. Most of the diversions might have been considered tactless. A large group sat around a huge barrel, drinking, chatting and occasionally bursting into raucous laughter. Those that had long exercised the search for appetizers with silver forks, now shamelessly gnawed mutton ribs that they held in both hands. Some played cards with passion, contempt for those around them. Some slept. In one corner, a couple was kissing passionately and with the eagerness with which they did showed they were not going to confine it to kissing.

‘Just look at them, witcher.’ Dijkstra leaned over the balustrade of the gallery, watching the sorcerers from a height. ‘How they play happily, you’d think they were youths. Meanwhile, the Council has been pried and almost all of its members are on trial for treason for allying with Nilfgaard. Look at this park. Just seek a secluded corner, and before the end of a fuck, Vilgefortz will already be hanging from a rope. Ah, the party, a kiss and a flower...’

‘Shut up, Dijkstra.’

The road to Loxia was a zigzagging stair leading down the slope of the mountain. Stairs laced with terraces decorated with poorly maintained hedges., flowerbeds and potted dry agaves. Dijkstra stopped at one of the terraces they had just passed and approached the wall, lined with the stone heads of chimeras, from which water poured out from between their teeth. The spy bent down and drank for a long time.

The witcher came closer to the railings. The sea shone golden, the sky’s colour was even more trashy that the painting in the Gallery of Glory. Down below he saw detachments of soldiers that had come from Aretuza and hurried to approach the harbor. They crossed over a bridge that cross to the shore through the cleft in the rock.

What suddenly caught his attention, was the lone colourful character. The figure was conspicuous because it was moving so quickly. And in the opposite direction that the Redanians. Up to Aretuza.

‘Come.’ Dijkstra , hurried him with a cough. ‘He who rises early, the gods help.’

‘If you are in such a hurry, go alone.’

‘Well, of course,’ sneered the spy. ‘Then you can go back to the top and save your Yennefer. And fuck like drunken gnomes. We go to Loxia, witcher. Do you have delusions or something? Do you think I pulled you out of Aretuza because I’m secretly in love with you? Of course not. You are out of there because I need you.’

‘For what?’

‘Are you pretending? Studying at Aretuza are a hundred ladies from the best families of Redanian. I can not risk a conflict with the esteemed rector, Margarita Laux-Antille. The rector did not give me Cirilla, Princess of Cintra, who was brought to Thanedd by Yennefer. However, they will release her to you. When you ask her about it.’

‘Where did you get this funny idea that I’m going to ask?’

‘From the funny assumption that you want to ensure the safety of Cirilla. Under my protection, under the protection of King Vizimir, she will be safe. In Tretogor. On Thanedd it is not safe. Refrain from malicious comments. Yes, I know that initially the kings intentions were not exactly the cleanest in the world about the girl. But it has changed. It is now clear that Cirilla alive, healthy and safe can be, in the coming war, more valuable than ten heavy cavalry detachments. Dead she is not worth a damn.’

‘Does Philippa Eilhart know what you intend?’

‘She does not know. She does not even know that I know that the girl is in Loxia. My dear Phil lifts her head up high, but King Vizimir still gives the orders in Redanian. I will fulfil

Vizimir's orders, the machinations of sorcerers give a shit. Cirilla will be out on the Waterfall and will set sail for Novigrad and then on to Tretogor. She will be safe. Do you believe me?'

The witcher leaned over one of the heads of the chimeras and drank water from the monstrous maw.

'Do you believe me?' Dijkstra repeated, coming over to him.

Geralt straightened up, wiped his mouth with his hand and punched him straight in the jaw. The spy staggered, but did not fall. The nearest Redanian soldier leaped and tried to grab the witcher, but he grabbed air instead, and immediately sat down, spitting blood and teeth. Then they all rushed at him. They created a crowded clutter of confusion and this is precisely what the witcher wanted.

One Redanian had his face smashed into a stone chimera; the gushing water was immediately stained red. The second was punched in the windpipe, he double over as if he'd been hit in the genitals. A third was beaten in the eye with an elbow, and fell back groaning. Dijkstra grabbed the witcher in a bear hug, but Geralt hit him hard in the shin with his heel. The spy howled and comically hopped around on one leg.

Another soldier tried to hit the Witcher with a swordstaff, but it just whistled through the air. Geralt grabbed him by the elbow with one hand, the other by the wrist and spun him, knocking him to the ground into two others who were trying to rise. The soldier he was holding was strong and was not releasing the sword staff. Geralt tightened his grip and broke his hand with a snap.

Dijkstra, still limping on one leg, made for a triton with the intentions of nailing the Witcher to the wall between its three points. Geralt reached down and grabbed the swordstaff with both hands and applied a principle known to scholars as leverage. The spy, saw before his eyes the joints of the brick wall, as he was launched into the air but it was too late to avoid the blow to the crotch from the head of the chimera.

Geralt used the swordstaff to take down another of the soldiers, he then thrust the sword at the ground and with a blow from his boot broke it, shortening the shaft. He tested the blade, first by hitting Dijkstra in the back who was sitting astride the chimera's head, then by silencing the cries of the soldier with the broken hand. The seams had long ago been ripped on his doublet and the witcher felt much better.

The last of the soldiers who were still standing attacked with a triton, thinking that its length gave him an advantage. Geralt hit him in the face and the soldier collapsed into a pot of agaves. Another Redanian, with extraordinary stubbornness, grabbed the witcher's thigh and bit him painfully. The witcher with a furious kick robbed the man of any possibility of biting.

Running up the stairs, gasping was Dandelion. When he saw what was happening he turned white as paper.

'Geralt!' he shouted after a moment. 'Ciri has disappeared! She's gone!'

'I was expecting this.' The witcher hit one of the Redanians that did not want to stay down. 'But be thankful you did not wait, Dandelion. I told you yesterday that if something happened you were immediately to come to Aretuza. Did you bring me my sword?'

'Both!'

'That sword is Ciri's, you idiot.' Geralt hit the soldier who was stirring in the agaves.

'I don't know anything about swords,' hissed the poet. 'By the gods, stop hitting them! Don't you see the eagle of Redania? These are King Vizimir's people! This is treason and rebellion, you could go to the dungeon...'

'To the gallows.' Said Dijkstra, drawing his dagger and approaching at a stagger. 'You are both going to the gallows...'

He could not say any more as he fell to all fours, felled by a blow to the side of the head by the shaft of the swordstaff.

‘Breaking on the wheel,’ Dandelion said grimly. ‘Proceeded by being poked with hot tongs...’

The witcher kicked the spy in the ribs. Dijkstra fell onto his side like a slaughtered elk.

‘Dismemberment.’ Said the poet.

‘Stop it, Dandelion. Give me both swords. And get out of get quickly. Escape from the island. Run away as far as you can!’

‘And you?’

‘I’m going back to the top. I have to save Ciri... And Yennefer. Dijkstra, lie quietly and leave the dagger alone!’

‘You will not get away with this,’ the spy gasped. ‘I will bring my... I will follow you...’

‘No, you will go.’

‘I will go. I have fifty men on the deck of Waterfall...’

‘Is there a surgeon among any of them?’

‘Why?’

Geralt went behind the spy, bent down, grabbed him by the foot, and twisted it sharply with great force. It cracked. Dijkstra screamed and fainted. Dandelion groaned as if it had been his own joint.

‘What you do to me after this,’ murmured the witcher. ‘I don’t give a shit.’

At Aretuza it was quiet. In the ballroom only a few remained, not having the strength to make noise. Geralt avoided the room, not wanting to be seen.

Not without some effort he found the room where he had slept with Yennefer. The halls of the palace were a labyrinth, and all look alike.

The rag doll was watching him with its little button eyes.

He sat on the bed, and clutched his head in his hands. On the floor there was no blood. But hanging on the back of a chair was a black dress. Yennefer had changed. Into male attire, the uniform of the conspirators? Or dragged away in her underwear. In dimeritium chains.

At a bay window sat the healer, Marti Sodergren. She lifted her head when she heard his footsteps. Her cheeks were wet with tears.

‘Hen Gedyndeith is dead.’ She said, her voice cracking. ‘Heart attack. I couldn’t do anything... Why did they call me so late? Sabrina struck me. I was struck in the face. Why? What has happened here?’

‘Have you seen Yennefer?’

‘No, I’ve not seen her. Leave me alone. I want to be alone.’

‘Show me the shortest way to Garstang. Please.’

Aretuza consisted of three overgrown terraces, above, the slope of the mountain was steep and inaccessible. On the slope stood Garstang. The foundation of the palace was a dark boulder, homogeneous, smooth, close to the rocks. Only the top floor gleamed with marble and stained glass windows, the sun shone golden on the gilded dome plates.

The paved road leading to Garstang and beyond, to the top, twisted around the mountain like a snake. There was, however, another way, a shortcut, stairs that connected the terraces,

and just under Garstang they disappeared into a dark tunnel. Marti Sodergren pointed out to the witcher just those stairs.

Beyond the tunnel was a bridge crossing an abyss. After the bridge the stairs climbed sharply upwards, twisting and disappearing behind a bend. The witcher quickened his pace.

The balustrade of the staircase was decorated with statues of fauns and nymphs. The statues produced the impression of being alive. They moved. The witcher's medallion began to strongly vibrate.

He rubbed his eyes. The apparent movement of the statues were that they changed appearance. The smooth stone was transformed into a porous and shapeless mass, eaten by salt and wind. They immediately returned to normal.

He knew what it meant. The illusion that masked Thanedd swayed, was falling apart. The bridge was also partly illusion. Through the fading camouflage loomed a cliff and a waterfall crashing loudly against its background.

There were no dark tiles to indicate a safe path. He crossed the bridge slowly, watching every step, cursing in his mind the wasted time. When he found himself across the abyss, he heard the footsteps of a man running.

He recognised him immediately. From above, down the staircase, came running Dorregaray, the sorcerer in service to King Ethain of Cidaris. He recalled the words of Philippa Eilhart. All sorcerers representing neutral kings had been invited as observers to Garstang. But the way Dorregaray was peeling down the stairs suggested that the invitation had been withdrawn suddenly.

'Dorregaray!'

'Geralt?' Gasped the sorcerer. 'What are you doing here? Don't just stand there, run away! Quickly, down the stairs, to Aretuza!'

'What happened?'

'Betrayal.'

'What?'

Dorregaray suddenly shuddered and coughed in a strange way, and immediately bent over and fell, directly into the witcher. Before Geralt could grab him, he saw the shaft of an arrow with gray feathers sticking from his back. He staggered with the sorcerer in his arms and it saved his life, because a second identical arrow, instead of going through his throat, slammed into the stone and the ironically smiling face of a faun, ripping of the nose and part of the cheek. The witcher let go of Dorregaray and ducked behind the balustrade of the stairs. The sorcerer fell on top of him.

There were two archers, and both had hats with squirrel tails. One was at the top of the stairs, drawing his bow; the second was drawing his sword from its sheath and ran down the stairs, skipping several steps at a time. Geralt freed himself from Dorregaray and sprang up, while he drew his sword. An arrow sang, the witcher stopped its singing by bouncing it off the tip of his sword quickly. The second elf was already closing, but seeing the arrow reflected by the sword, hesitated for a moment. But only for a moment. He threw himself at the witcher, his sword made the air moan with the swiftness of his cut. Geralt quickly sidestepped, so the blade of the elf slipped by his sword. The elf lost his balance, the witcher spun smoothly and delivered a blow to the side of his neck, just under the ear. Only once. It was enough.

The archer on the top of the stairs again drew his bow but had no time to release the string. Geralt saw a flash, the elf cried out, threw up his hands and fell down, hitting the steps. The back of his jacket was on fire.

Running down the stairs was another sorcerer. At the sight of the witcher he stopped, raising his hands. Geralt wasted no time explaining, he fell flat on the ground, and the hiss of fiery lightning flew over him, smashing the faun statue into fine dust.

‘Stop,’ he yelled. ‘It’s me, the witcher!’

‘Damn it,’ the sorcerer panted, approaching. Geralt could not remember meeting him at the banquet. ‘I had mistaken you for one of those rogue elves... What about Dorregaray? Alive?’

‘I think so...’

‘Quick, to the other side of the bridge!’

He gladly dragged Dorregaray, because in his haste he did not pay attention to the shaking and fading illusion. Nobody chased them, but despite this, the sorcerer raised his hand, shouted a spell and sent a lightning bolt to destroy the bridge.

‘That should stop them.’ He said.

The witcher wiped the blood flowing from Dorregaray’s mouth.

‘He has a punctured lung. Can you help him?’

‘I can,’ Marti Sodergren said with effort, climbing the stairs from Aretuza. ‘What’s going on, Carduin? Who shot him?’

‘The Scoia’tael.’ The sorcerer wiped his forehead with his sleeve. ‘There is fighting in Garstang. Fucking gangs, each worse than the other Philippa by night put people in chains, along with Vilgefortz and Francesca Findabair, so Francesca introduced Squirrels to the island! And Tissaia de Vries... Damn, they have messed this up!’

‘Speak clearly, Carduin!’

‘I will not waste time chattering! I’m going to Loxia, there I’m immediately teleporting to Kovir. And those there, in Garstang, can kill each other! It does not matter! We are at war! All this mess was engineered by Philippa to allow the kings to declare war on Nilfgaard! Meve of Lyria and Demavend of Aedirn provoked Nilfgaard! Do you understand that?’

‘No,’ said Geralt. ‘I do not want to understand. Where is Yennefer?’

‘Stop it!’ screamed Marti Sodergren, bent over Dorregaray. ‘Help me! Hold him! I can not pull out the arrow!’

They helped her. Dorregaray groaned and shuddered, the stairs were also shaking. Geralt initially thought it was the magic of Marti’s healing spells. But it was Garstang. Suddenly the stained glass windows exploded, flickering in the windows of the palace was fire and smoke.

‘The battle continues.’ Carduin clenched his teeth. ‘They are going hard, spell after spell...’

‘Spells? In Garstang? But there is the magic blocking aura!’

‘It is Tissaia’s doing. She suddenly decided on which side to stand. She has removed the block, dissipating the aura and neutralizing the dimeritium. Then everyone jumped at each other’s throats! Vilgefortz and Terranova on one side, and Philippa and Sabrina on the other... The columns broke and the roof collapsed... And Francesca opened the entrance to the basement and then, there were these elven devils... We shouted that we were just neutral but Vilgefortz laughed. Before we could build a shield, Drithelm received an arrow through the eye, then they covered him like a hedgehog... I did not stay to await the development of the issue. Marti, do you have much left to do? We have to get out of here!’

‘Dorregaray will not be able to walk.’ The healer wiped her bloody hands on her white ball gown. ‘Teleport us Carduin.’

‘Here? Are you crazy. Tor Lara is too close. Portal Lara produces emanations that affect all teleportation. No one can teleport from here!’

‘He can not walk! I have to stay with him...’

‘Then stay!’ Carduin stood. ‘And have fun! I like living! I’m returning to Kovir! Kovir is neutral!’

‘Wonderful.’ The witcher spat, looking at the sorcerer who disappeared into the tunnel. ‘Camaraderie and solidarity! But I can not stay with you, Marti. I have to go to Garstang. Your bother has destroyed this bridge. Is there another way?’

Marti Sodergren sniffed. Then lifted her head and nodded.

He was near the walls of Garstang when Keira Metz fell on his head.

The path indicated by the healer led through a hanging gardens of linked serpentine stairs. The stairs were thickly overgrown with ivy and honeysuckle, vegetation made it difficult to climb, but provided cover. He worked his way unnoticed to the same wall of the palace. While seeking entry, Keira fell on him, both collapsed into a blackthorn bush.

'I've broken a tooth,' The sorceress said sadly, lisping slightly. She was dishevelled, dirty, covered in plaster and soot and on her cheek was a large hematoma.

'I think I broke my leg,' she said, spitting blood. 'Is that you, witcher? I fell on you? How come?'

'I wonder, too.'

'Terranova kicked me out the window.'

'Can you get up?'

'No, I can't.'

'I want to get inside. Unnoticed. Which way?'

'Are all witchers,' Keira spat again, she moaned, trying to get up on her elbows. 'crazy? The fighting continues in Garstang! It is so hot that even the stucco on the walls is melting! Are you looking for trouble?'

'No, I'm searching for Yennefer.'

'Ha!' Keira ceased her effort and lay on her back. 'I would like it if someone loved me so much. Take my hand.'

'Maybe another time. Now I have to hurry.'

'Take my hand, I say! I will show you the way into Garstang. I need to get that bastard Terranova. Well, what are you waiting for? You could not find the entrance, and if you did, you'd be finished off by the bastard elves... I can not walk, but I'm still able to cast a few spells. If someone gets in our way, they'll regret it.'

She screamed when he lifted her.

'Sorry.'

'Never mind,' she surrounded his shoulders with her arm. 'It is this leg. You still smell like her perfume, you know? No, not that way. Turn around and go uphill. It is the second entry, on the side of Tor Lara. Maybe there are no elves... Auuu! Careful, dammit!'

'Sorry. How did the Scoia'tael get here?'

'They were in the basement. Thanedd is empty as a shell, below there is a great cavern, you can reach it by boat, if one knows the way. Someone had betrayed us.... Auuu! Careful! Don't shake me!'

'Sorry. So the Squirrels came by sea? When?'

'The gods know when. Maybe today, maybe a week ago? We were preparing for Vilgefortz and Vilgefortz for us. Vilgefortz, Francesca, Terranova and Fercart... We messed up badly. Philippa thought that they wanted to start a seizure of power in the Chapter, to exert influence over the kings... And then they were going to kill us during the conference... Geralt, I can not stand it... Leg... Put me down for a moment. Auuuu!'

'Keira it is an open fracture. Blood is running down the leg.'

'Shut up and listen. Because it is about your Yennefer. We went to Garstang, to the Chamber. It has a magical lock, but the lock does not work on dimeritium, we felt safe. Discussions began. Tissaia and the neutrals shouted at us, we yelled at them. And Vilgefortz remained silent and smiled...'

‘I repeat, Vilgefortz is a traitor! He has partnered with Emhyr of Nilfgaard, pulled into a conspiracy! He broke the law, betrayed us and the kings...’

‘Slowly Philippa. I know that the grace that surrounds you from Vizimir, means more to you than the solidarity of the Brotherhood. The same applies to you Sabrina, You play the same role in Kaedwen. Keira Metz and Triss Merigold represent the interests of Foltest of Temeria, Radcliffe is an active tool of Demavend of Aedirn...’

‘What does this have to do with it, Tissaia?’

‘The interests of kings do not necessarily coincide with ours. I know perfectly well what was going on. The kings began the extermination of the elves, and other non-humans. Maybe you, Philippa, you think it is right. Maybe you, Radcliffe, you think it appropriate to assist Demavend’s troops in a raid on Scoia’tael. But I am against it. And no wonder Enid Findabair is against you. But that still does not imply treason. Do not interrupt me! I know exactly what your kings planned, I know you want to start a war. Actions that could lead to the avoidance of war may constitute treason in the eyes of your Vizimir, but not mine. If you judge Vilgefortz and Francesca, also judge me!’

‘What war are you talking about here? My king, Esterad of Kovir, will not support and aggressive action against the Nilfgaard Empire Kovir is and will remain neutral!’

‘You are a member of the Council, Carduin, and ambassador to your king!’

‘Look who’s talking, Sabrina?’

‘Enough!’ Philippa banged her fists on the table. ‘I will satisfy your curiosity, Carduin. You ask, who is preparing for war? Nilfgaard is preparing, it is them who plan to attack and destroy us. But Emhyr var Emreis remembers Sodden Hill, and this time he decided to protect himself, by enlisting sorcerers into the game. Therefore he made contact with Vilgefortz of Roggeveen. He bought him, promising power and ambition. Yes, Tissaia. Vilgefortz, the hero of Sodden, is to become the governor and ruler of all the acquired North. It is Vilgefortz, assisted by Terranova and Fercart, who is to govern the provinces that arise in place of the kingdoms that are conquered, he will be the one shaking the nilfgaardian stick upon the slaves that inhabit this country to work for the empire, and Francesca Findabair, Gleann an Enid, is to be queen of the Elves of the Free State. This will, of course be a Nilfgaard protectorate, but the elves want simply from emperor Emhyr to be given a free hand to kill humans. And the elves want nothing with greater passion than to kill *Dh’oine*.’

‘It is a heavy accusation. Therefore, the evidence will have to be just as weighty. But before you throw this evidence on the scales, Philippa Eilhart, be aware of my position. Evidence can be fabricated, actions and their motives can be interpreted. However the present facts do not change anything. You broke the unity and solidarity of the Brotherhood, Philippa Eilhart. You chained up members of the Chapter like thieves. Do not dare now to propose a place in the new Chapter your band of coup plotters plans to create and sell to the kings. Between us there is blood and death. Hen Gedyndeith’s death. And the blood of Lydia van Bredevoort. With contempt you have spilled this blood. You were my best student, Philippa Eilhart. I’ve always been proud of you. But now I have only contempt for you.’

Keira Metz was pale as parchment.

‘For some time now,’ she whispered. ‘it has been quiet in Garstang. It is ending... they are chasing through the palace. It has five floors, seventy-six rooms and halls. This is where they chase...’

‘You were talking about Yennefer. Hurry. I’m afraid you’ll pass out.’

‘About Yennefer? Ah, yes... Everything went our way, when suddenly Yennefer appeared. And introduce to the room the medium...’

‘Who?’

‘A girl, about fourteen years old. Ashen hair, big green eyes... Before we had time to contemplate it, the girl began to prophesy. She told about the events in Dol Angra. No one had any doubts she was telling the truth. She was in a trance, those in a trance don’t lie.’

‘Last night,’ said the medium. ‘an army with the banners of Lyria and the standards of Aedirn perpetrated an attack against the rule of Nilfgaard. They attacked Glevitzingen an outpost located in Dol Angra. A herald announced on behalf of King Demavend to the surrounding villages, from today, Aedirn assumes government over all the country. Then called people to take up arms against Nilfgaard...’

‘Impossible! It is a hideous provocation!’

‘How easily those words leave your mouth, Philippa Eilhart.’ Tissaia de Vries said quietly. ‘But do not worry, your cries have not interrupted the trance. Keep talking, girl.’

‘Emperor Emhyr var Emreis gave the order to answer blow with blow. Nilfgaard’s armies have entered this morning at dawn Aedirn and Lyria.’

‘So then,’ smiled Tissaia. ‘Our kings have shown themselves to be the intelligent, enlightened and peace-loving rules that they are. And some sorcerers have proven on whose side they are. To those who might have had the foresight avoided a predatory war they have been placed in dimeritium chains and have absurd accusations levelled against them...’

‘It is all a lie!’

‘To hell with you all!’ Sabrina Glevissig suddenly shouted. ‘Philippa! What does all this mean? What does this trouble in Dol Angra mean? Didn’t we establish that it shouldn’t start so soon? Why had this fucking Demavend not stopped it? Why is this slut Meve...’

‘Shut up, Sabrina!’

‘Oh no, let her speak.’ Tissaia de Vries raised her head. ‘We speak of Henselt’s Kaedwen army concentrating on the border. We speak about the soldiers of Foltest of Temeria who surely now has his ships pouring in to the water that had been hidden in the forests of Yaruga. We speak of the special forces under the command of Vizimir of Redania next to the Pontar. Did you think, Philippa that we are deaf and blind?’

‘This is nothing but a bloody provocation! King Vizimir...’

‘King Vizimir,’ the impassive voice of the ashen haired medium interrupted, ‘was murdered last night. Killed by an assassin. Redania no longer has a king.’

‘Redania has long had no king.’ Tissaia de Vries stood. ‘In Redania his majesty has been ruled by Philippa Eilhart, a worthy successor to Raffard the White. Willing to sacrifice tens of thousands of lives to achieve absolute power.’

‘Do not listen!’ Philippa cries. ‘Do not listen to this medium! She is a tool, a mindless tool... Who do you server, Yennefer? Who commanded you to bring this monster here?’

‘I did.’ Tissaia de Vries said.

‘What happened next? What happened to the girl? With Yennefer?’

‘I don’t know.’ Keira closed her eyes. ‘Tissaia suddenly lifted the blockade. ‘With a spell. I’ve never seen anything like it... We were stunned and blocked, then she released Vilgefortz and the others... and Francesca opened the basement door and Garstang immediately started swarming with Scoia’tael. They were being lead by a monster in nilfgaardian armour and a winged helmet. They were helped by a man with a scar on his face. He knew how to cast spells. And protected himself with magic...’

‘Rience.’

‘Maybe, I don’t know. It was hot... The ceiling collapsed. Spells and arrows... a massacre... Among them Fercart was killed, among us Drithelm was killed, Radcliffe was killed, Marquard was killed, Rejean and Bianca d’Este... Triss Merigold was injured, Sabrina was wounded... When Tissaia saw the corpses she started to understand her error and tried to protect us, tried to restrain Vilgefortz and Terranova... Vilgefortz ridiculed and mocked her. Then he lost his mind and ran away. Oh, Tissaia... So many dead...’

‘What about the girl and Yennefer?’

‘I don’t know.’ The sorceress was drowning in coughing, spitting blood. She was breathing very slowly and with obvious effort. ‘After one of the row of explosions I lost consciousness for a moment. The one with the scar and his elves had overpowered me. Terranova first kicked me, then threw me out the window.’

‘It’s not just your leg, Keira. You have broken ribs.’

‘Don’t leave me.’

‘I have to. I’ll be back for you.’

‘Sure.’

At first there was only a chaos of amber, a dark pulse, a tangle of dark and light, a gibbering chorus of voices, which came from afar. Suddenly the voices gathered strength, exploding all around her in booms and noise. The light from the darkness became a fire that devoured carpets and tapestries, sheaves of sparks that seemed to pour from the walls, balustrades and columns that supported the roof.

Ciri choked from the smoke and realized that it was no longer a dream.

She tried to stand up, leaning on her hands. Her fingers touched something wet and she looked down. She was kneeling in a pool of blood. Next to her lay a dead body. The body of an elf. She recognized it instantly.

‘Get up.’

Yennefer was at her side. She had a dagger in one hand.

‘Lady Yennefer... Where are we? I don’t remember anything...’

Swiftly, the sorceress grabbed her hand.

‘I’m with you, Ciri.’

‘Where are we? Why is everything burning? Who is this... this one here?’

‘I told you once, centuries ago, that chaos stretches out its hand after you. Remember? No. You probably don’t remember. The elf reached out his hand for you. I had to killed him with a dagger, because his superiors are hoping that some of us will reveal ourselves using magic. And I will, but I’m not yet fully recovered... Are you fully conscious?’

‘Those sorcerers...’ Ciri whispered. ‘those in the large hall... What did I tell them? And why did I say it? I did not want to... But I had to say it! Why? Why, Lady Yennefer?’

‘Silence, ugly one. I made a mistake. Nobody’s perfect.’

From below came a roar followed by a shriek.

‘Come on. Quickly. We do not have much time.’

They ran down the hallways. The smoke was getting thicker, strangled, choked and blinded. The wall were shaking from the explosion.

‘Ciri.’ Yennefer stopped at an intersection of corridors and firmly squeezed the girl’s hand. ‘Listen to me now, listen carefully. I have to stay here. See those stairs? Go down them...’

‘No! Don’t leave me alone!’

‘I have to. Again, go down those stairs. All the way down. There will be doors and behind them a long corridor. Down the hall there is a stable where a horse is saddled. Just one. Get it

out and you jump on it. It is a well-trained horse, it serves the messengers of Loxia. He knows the way, simply spur him on. When in Loxia, look for Margarita and get under her protection. Do not swerve from this path, not one step...'

'Lady Yennefer! No! I do not want to be alone!'

'Ciri,' the sorceress said softly. 'Once I told you everything I do is for your own good. Please trust me. Run.'

Ciri was already on the stairs when she heard Yennefer's voice again. The sorceress stood beside a pillar, leaning her forehead against it.

'I love you, my daughter,' she said, her voice muffled. 'Run.'

They surrounded her in the middle of the stairs. Below her two elves with squirrel tails in their caps, above a man dressed in black. Ciri without hesitation jumped the railing and fled down a side corridor. They ran after her. She was faster and would have escaped without effort if it were not for the corridor ending at a window.

She looked through. Along the wall ran a stone ledge, perhaps two spans thick. Ciri went through the window her feet on the ledge. She turned from the window, her back to the wall. In the distance shone the sea.

An elf leaned out the window. He had light hair and green eyes, a velvet scarf was tied around his neck. Ciri quickly turned away, moving to another window. But the man in the dark suit appeared. He had dark terrible eyes and a red scar across his cheek.

'We have you, girl!'

She looked down. There, very far away, she could see the courtyard. Above the courtyard, about ten feet below the parapet on which she stood, there was a bridge linking two galleries. Only it was not a bridge. It was the ruins of a bridge. A narrow stone walkway with the remains of a railing.

'What are you waiting for?' cried the man with the scar. 'Get out there and get her!'

The fair-haired elf with caution made his way out onto the ledge, he pressed his back against the wall. He reached out his hand. He was close.

Ciri swallowed. The stone bridge, the remainder of the bridge was not narrower than the swing at Kaer Morhen, and she had jumped dozens of times onto the swing, she could absorb the jump and keep her balance. But the witcher's swing was only four feet off the ground, while below the stone bridge an abyss that the courtyard tiles seemed smaller than a hand.

She jumped, landed, stumbled but kept her balance by clinging to the broken railing. With safe passage she had reached the gallery. She could not contain herself, she turned around and showed the pursuers a bent elbow, a gesture which had been taught to her by the dwarf, Yarpin Zigrin. Scarface swore loudly.

'Jump!' He shouted at the blond elf standing on the ledge. 'Jump after her!'

'You've gone mad, Rience.' said the elf with a cold voice. 'Jump yourself, if you want her.'

Luck, as usual, did not accompany her for long. When she left the gallery and slipped behind the wall, among the blackthorns, they grabbed her. They grabbed her and pinned her in an incredibly strong hug, a slightly short, overweight man with a swollen nose and a cut lip.

'Come here,' he whispered. 'Come here, little lamb.'

Ciri writhed and screamed, he clamped his hands on her shoulders suddenly producing a paroxysm of crippling pain. The man laughed.

‘Do not wiggle, grey sparrow, or you’ll burn your feathers. Let me take a look. Let’s see what it is that makes you worth so much to Emhyr var Emreis, Emperor of Nilfgaard. And for Vilgefortz.’

Ciri ceased to struggle. The short man licked his cut lip.

‘Interesting.’ He hissed, leaning towards her. ‘So valuable you are to me, mind you, I wouldn’t give a sixpence. As well appearances can be deceptive. Ha! My darling! And what if Emhyr gave you as a gift to not Vilgefortz or Rience nor that gallant fellow in the feathered helmet, but to old Terranova? Would Emhyr be so kind to old Terranova? What do you say to that, prophetess? Since you are able to prophesy!’

His breath smelled unbearable. Ciri turned her head, wincing. He got it wrong.

‘Do not give me the beak sparrow! I do not shrink from birds. Or maybe I should? What, false seer? Did I guess wrong? Should I be afraid of birds?’

‘You should,’ whispered Ciri, feeling dizzy in the head and cold from a chill that was suddenly rising.

Terranova laughed while throwing back his head. The laughter became a cry of pain. A great gray owl flew down quietly and dug her claws into his eyes. The wizard let go of Ciri, and with a rapid motion knocked the owl away from himself, then fell to his knees clutching his face. From between his fingers flowed blood. Ciri screamed and fell back. Terranova withdrew his bloodstained hands from his face which was covered with mucus, he began chanting a spell with a wild piercing cry. He did not have time. Behind him materialized an indistinct shape, a witcher’s sword howled through the air and pierced his neck just below the occiput.

‘Geralt!’

‘Ciri.’

‘No time for sentimentality,’ said the owl from atop a wall, transforming into a dark haired woman. ‘Run! Squirrels are coming!’

Ciri freed herself from Geralt’s arms, and looked in amazement. The female owl sitting on top of the wall looked terrible. She was charred, scratched, smeared with ashes and blood.

‘You little monster,’ said the owl, looking down from above. ‘For your untimely prophesy I should... But I promised something to your witcher, and I always keep my word. I could not give you Rience, Geralt. In return I give you her. Farewell. Flee!’

Cahir Mawr Dyffryn aep Ceallach was angry. He had only been able to see for one second the girl he had been ordered to catch, but before he had time to take any action, those sorcerers had transformed Garstang into an inferno that prevented any action. Cahir lost his direction in the smoke and fire, blindly running down halls, stairs and galleries, cursing Vilgefortz to Rience, himself and the world.

From an elf he learned that the girl had been seen outside the palace, on her way to escaping to Aretuza. And then luck smiled on Cahir. The Scoia’tael found a horse saddled in the stable.

‘Run ahead, Ciri. They are close. I will stop them, and you run. Run with all your might! Like in the Killer!’

‘Do you want to leave me alone?’

‘I’ll go after you, But do not look back!’

‘Give me my sword, Geralt.’

He looked at her, Ciri felt self conscious. She had never seen eyes like those.

‘With a sword, you may have to kill. Can you?’

‘I don’t know. Give me the sword.’

‘Run. And don’t look back’

Horse’s hooves rang on the road. Ciri looked back. And she was paralysed with fear.

The knight in pursuit wore black armour with a helmet adorned with wings of a bird of prey. The wings rustled, waving wildly. Horseshoes created sparks on the cobblestones of the road.

Ciri was unable to move.

The black horse broke through the roadside bushes, the knight gave a loud cry. In that cry was Cintra, a night of murder, blood and fire. Ciri overcame her overwhelming fear and rushed to escape. With momentum she jumped over a fence, falling into a small courtyard with a pond and fountain. There was no way out of the yard, all about rose high smooth walls. The horse snorted almost behind her. Ciri fell back, stumbled and shuddered at finding her back against a hard, unmoveable wall. She was trapped.

A bird of prey flapped its wings and flew away. The black knight made his horse rear, jumped the fence separating him from the courtyard. The hooves echoed on the flagstones, the horse slipped and fell, sitting back on its haunches. The knight reeled in the saddle, tipped. The horse rose and the knight fell, causing a crash as his armour hit the stones. He, however, rose immediately and moved quickly towards Ciri, who was squeezed into a corner.

‘Don’t touch me!’ She shouted, drawing her sword. ‘I will never let you touch me again!’

The knight approached slowly, looming above her like a huge black tower.

The wings on his helmet shook and rustled.

‘You will not escape me now, young lion of Cintra.’ Through the visor of the helmet his eyes burned mercilessly. ‘Not this time. This time you have no escape, my wild lady.’

‘Do not touch me,’ she repeated, her voice choked with horror, her back pressed against the stone wall.

‘I have to. I’m following orders.’

When he reached out, fear suddenly disappeared; in its place was a wild rage. Tense muscles that had been paralysed with fear, sprang into action, all the moves she had learned in Kaer Morhen performed as if by themselves, smoothly and seamlessly. Ciri jumped, the knight rushed at her, but was not prepared for a pirouette, that without effort, took her out of reach of his hands. Her sword howled and bit, hitting hard on his plate armour. The knight staggered and fell to one knee, from under his pauldron a trickle of bright red blood appeared. Screaming with rage, Ciri circled him again with a pirouette, she struck again, this time directly to the top of his helmet, the knight fell on his other knee. Rage and fury blinded her completely; she could see nothing but hateful wings. A shower of black feathers, a wing fell off, the other hung down on the bloody pauldron. The knight, still vainly trying to rise from his knees, tried to stop the sword with his armoured glove, he groaned painfully, when the witcher’s blade cut the mesh and hand. Her next blow struck his helmet from his head, Ciri jumped again to gain momentum for the last murderous blow.

She did not strike.

There was no black helmet, no wings of a bird of prey, whose sound had pursued her in her nightmares. He was no longer the Black Knight of Cintra. Instead there was a pale dark-haired young man writhing in a pool of blood, a young man with blue eyes and his mouth twisted into a grimace of terror. The Black Knight of Cintra had fallen under the blows of her sword, had ceased to exist, the wings that caused her to be afraid were no more than limp feathers. The frightened boy, bent over, vomiting blood, was nothing. She did not know him, had never seen him before. She did not care. She was not afraid of him, did not hate him. She did not want to kill him.

She threw her sword on the ground.

She turned around, hearing the screams from the Scoia'tael running from Garstang. She realised that in a moment they would surround the courtyard. She realised that they would catch her on the road. She had to be faster than them. She ran to the black horse, who was stamping its hooves on the flagstones and galloped off with a cry, leaping into the saddle as she ran.

'Leave me alone...' Cahir Mawr Dyffryn aep Ceallach groaned to the elves trying to lift him, pushing himself up with his good hand. 'I'm all right! It's a small wound... after her. After the girl...'

One of the elves cried, splattering blood across Cahir's face. Another Scoia'tael staggered and fell to his knees, holding both of his hands to his belly, where it had been torn open. The others fell back, dispersing across the courtyard with swords drawn.

A white-haired monster attacked them. He jumped from the wall. From a height it was impossible to jump without breaking a leg. It was impossible to land softly, turning a pirouette that blurred to the eye and killing a split second later. But the white-haired monster did it. And he began to kill.

The Scoia'tael fought fiercely. They had the advantage. But they had no chance. Cahir gaped in horror at the sight of the massacre that was carried out. The gray-haired girl who had struck him a moment ago was fast, was incredible agile as a cat who was protecting her kittens. But the white-haired monster who jumped upon the Scoia'tael was like a Zerrikanian tiger. The gray-haired girl from Cintra, who, for unknown reason, had not killed him, had seemed to be crazy. The white-haired monster was not crazy. He was calm and cold. And calmly and coldly killed.

The Scoia'tael had no chance. Their bodies collapsed one after another on the flagstones of the courtyard. But none yielded. Even when there were only two, they did not flee, again they attacked the monster with white hair. Before Cahir's eyes, the monster cut one of their arms above the elbow, the next blow that was dealt was seemingly weak and awkward, however, it threw the elf back, threw him back into the pond of water. Water spilled over the edge of the pond in crimson waves.

The severed arm elf cursed in the fountain, staring, watching his blood gush from the stump. The white-haired monster grabbed him by the hair and with a quick slash of his sword, cut his throat.

When Cahir opened his eyes, the monster was right before him.

'Don't kill me...' he whispered, abandoning his attempts to rise on the floor slippery with blood. The hand that had been wounded by the gray-haired girl had stopped hurting and was numb.

'I know who you are, Nilfgaardian.' The monster with the white hair kicked the helmet with the broken wing. You've stubbornly pursued her for a long time. But you couldn't even hurt her.'

‘Don’t kill me.’

‘Give me a reason. Just one. Quickly.’

‘I.’ whispered Cahir ‘I was the one who took her from Cintra. The fire... I save her. I saved her life...’

When he opened his eyes the monster was gone, he was alone in the yard, alone with the bodies of the elves. The tinkling water from the fountain, poured over the edge of the pond, washing the blood from the floor.

Cahir fainted.

At the foot of the tower was a building that was one large room or rather a kind of colonnade. The roof of the colonnade, probably illusionary, was full of holes. It was supported on carved columns and pilasters in the form of scan’tily clad caryatids of stunning beasts. They same caryatids maintained an arch portal, where Ciri had disappeared. Behind the portal, Geralt distinguished stairs leading upwards. To the tower.

He cursed under his breath. He did not understand why Ciri had run towards it. Trailing behind her on the top of walls he had seen the horse fall. He had seen her nimbly rise, but instead of running forward along the path that wrapped around like a serpent to the summit, she ran down the mountain, towards the lonely tower. The elves did not see him or Ciri, as they were too busy with their bows trying to shoot humans who ran to the foot of the mountain. Reinforcements had come from Aretuza. He intended to follow Ciri up the stairs when he heard a murmur. From above. He turned quickly. It was not a bird.

Vilgefortz, shaking his wide sleeves, flew through a hole in the roof and dropped slowly to the ground.

Geralt stood before the entrance to the tower, drew his sword and sighed. He had sincerely hoped that the dramatic final battle would be fought between Vilgefortz and Philippa Eilhart. He had not the slightest desire to participate in such dramas.

Vilgefortz brushed off his doublet, settling the sleeves, glanced at the witcher and read his thoughts.

‘Fucking drama.’ he sighed.

Geralt made no comment.

‘She went into the tower?’

He did not answer. The wizard nodded.

‘So here we have the epilogue,’ he said coldly. ‘Its crowning work. Or is it destiny? You know where the stairs lead? To Tor Lara. To the Tower of Gulls. From there, there is no exit. Everything is over.’

Geralt stepped back so that the caryatids that formed the portal protected his flank.

‘Of course.’ He drawled, watching the hands of the wizard. ‘Everything is over. Half of your accomplices are dead. The corpses of elves who were brought to Thanedd are lying one after the other all the way to Garstang. The rest have fled. From Aretuza reinforcements of sorcerers and Dijkstra’s men have arrived. The Nilfgaardian that was to take Ciri, has probably already bled to death. And Ciri is there in the tower. And from there, there is not exit? I glad to hear that. It means that there is only one entrance. And I’m guarding it.’

Vilgefortz was angry.

‘You are wrong. You can still not properly assess the situation. The Chapter and the Council ceased to exist. The army of Emperor Emhyr is marching north: deprived of advice, magic and assistance. The kings are helpless as children. Under pressure from Nilfgaard, their kingdoms will topple like sand castles. I suggested it to you yesterday, and today I say: join the winners. We will spit on the losers.’

‘You’re the loser. To Emhyr you are just an instrument. He needed Ciri, so he sent here the guy with the helmet with wings. It will be interesting to see what Emhyr does when you communicate the failure of your mission.’

‘You shoot at random, witcher. Of course, you did not hit. What if I told you that Emhyr is my tool?’

‘I don’t believe it!’

‘Geralt lets be reasonable. Do you really want to waste time with this theatre, is the final battle so trivial between Good and Evil? I renew the proposal from yesterday. It is not too late. You can still choose, you can come to the appropriate side...’

‘On the side, which today I thinned slightly?’

‘Do not smile, your demonic smiles do not impress me. A few elves made into mincemeat? Artaud Terranova? Small things, insignificant details. We can pass over them on the agenda.’

‘But of course! I know your world view. Death does not count right? Especially someone else’s?’

‘Do not be banal. I feel sorry for Artaud, but in the end what are you going to do. Call it... a reckoning. Lately I have tried to kill you myself twice. Emhyr was impatient, so I ordered some murders against you. Every time I did it with real reluctance. I, you see, I still have hope that one day we will be in that painting together.’

‘Throw away that hope, Vilgefortz.’

‘Sheath your sword. Let us enter Tor Lara together. Be reassured that the child of the Elder Blood is up there somewhere, probably dying from fear. And we will leave here together. You’ll be with her. You can watch as she fulfils her destiny. And Emperor Emhyr? Emperor Emhyr will get what he wanted. Because I forgot to tell you that although Cordingher and Fenn are dead, their work and ideas still live on.’

‘You’re lying. Get away from here. Before I spit on you.’

‘Really, I have no desire to kill you. I hate killing.’

‘Really? What about Lydia van Bredevoort?’

The wizard pursed his lips.

‘Do not say that name, witcher.’

Geralt tighten his grip on the hilt of his sword and smiled mockingly.

‘Why did Lydia have to die, Vilgefortz? Why did you command her to die? She had to divert attention from you, right? You had to give yourself time to become resistant to dimeritium, to send a telepathic signal to Rience? Poor Lydia, she of the wronged face. Everyone knew that she was a person of no importance. Everyone. Even her.’

‘Shut up.’

‘You had Lydia murdered, wizard. You used her. And now you want to use Ciri? With my help? No. Do not enter Tor Lara.’

The wizard took a step back. Geralt tensed, ready to pounce and deliver a blow. But Vilgefortz did not raise his hand, he stretched it a little to one side. Suddenly, in his hand, materialized a thick staff, about six feet long.

‘I know,’ he said. ‘what bothers you in a reasonable assessment of a situation. I know it is complicated and difficult to predict the future, your right. This is your arrogance, Geralt. I’ll undo your arrogance. I’ll undo it with this wand here.’

The witcher narrowed his eyes, lifting his blade slightly.

‘I tremble with anticipation.’

Some weeks later, cured thanks to the efforts of the Dryads and the water of Brokilon forest, Geralt reflected on the mistakes made during the fight. He came to the conclusion that he had not made any. The only error he committed was before the fight. He should have fled before the fighting began.

The wizard was fast, the wand in his hand flashed like lightning. Greater was the astonishment of Geralt, when the wand rang against his sword. But there was no time to wonder. Vilgefortz attacked, the witcher had to dodge and squirm in evasion. He was afraid of parrying with his sword. The wand was made of iron and magic.

Four times he found himself in a position to counter attack and strike. Four times he struck a blow. At the head, neck, arm and the thigh. Each of the blows would have been fatal. But each was parried.

No man would be able to parry those blows. Geralt started to understand little by little. But it was too late.

He saw the blow that the wizard struck him. The impact threw him against the wall. He pushed with his back, failed to make a jump, to make a feint, the stroke had deprived him of breath. He received a second hit in the shoulder, flew back again, hitting his head against the pillar, against the chest of a caryatid. Vilgefortz turned away in a deft leap, he waved his stick and punched him in the stomach, below the ribs. Hard. Geralt doubled over and was struck on the side of the head. His knees weakened below him suddenly and he fell. And that was the end of the fight. In essence.

Clumsily he tried to shield himself with his sword. The blade pierced the wall and the pilaster, he erupted in a groan vibrant and clear. He protected his head with his right hand, the staff fell and broke his forearm. The pain blinded him completely.

‘I could ruin your brain through your ears.’ Vilgefortz said from far away. ‘But this is a lesson. You made a mistake, witcher. You have confused the reflection on a pond with the sky with stars at night. Oh, did you vomit? Good. Brain injury. Do you bleed from the nose? Great. So, I’ll see you. Someday. Maybe.’

He saw nothing and heard nothing. Sinking, sinking into something warm. He thought that Vilgefortz had gone. He was surprised, then, when his leg felt the vengeance of the iron wand, shattering his femur.

Any following blows, even if they occurred, he could not remember.

‘Hold on, Geralt, don’t give up.’ Triss Merigold repeated endlessly. ‘Hold on. Don’t die. Please don’t die...’

‘Ciri...’

‘Do not speak. We have to get you out of here. Hang on... By the gods, I have no strength...’

‘Yennefer... I have...’

‘You do not have to do anything! You cannot do anything! Hold on, don’t let go... Do not faint... Do not die, please...’

She dragged him across a floor strewn with corpses. Geralt saw his chest and stomach bathed in blood that flowed from his nose. He saw his leg, It was twisted at an odd angle and appeared much shorter than his healthy one. He did not feel pain. He felt cold, his whole body was cold. He wanted to puke.

‘Hold on, Geralt. Aid comes from Aretuza. It is coming soon...’

‘Dijkstra. If Dijkstra gets me... if... it’s all over...’

Triss cursed. Frantically.

She dragged him down some stairs. His broken leg and arm bounced on the steps. The pain was revived, it bit into his bowels, into his temples, flashed in his eyes, ears, to the top of his head. But he did not scream. He knew that a shout would relieve him, but did not shout. He just opened his mouth, which also brought relief.

He heard an explosion.

At the top of the stairs stood Tissaia de Vries. Her hair was in disarray, her face covered with dust. She raised both hands, her fingers burned. She shouted an incantation, and the fire dancing on her fingers burst forth in a fireball which roared down the stairs, the flames crackling and blinding. The witcher heard the rumble from below, the walls crumbling, the shrill screams of the burnt.

‘Tissaia, no!’ Triss yelled desperately. ‘Don’t do it!’

‘Do not enter here,’ said the great teacher without looking back. ‘This is Garstang on the island of Thanedd. Nobody invited the royal servants carrying out the orders of their short-sighted rulers!’

‘You’re killing them!’

‘Be silent, Triss Merigold! The coup against the unity of the Brotherhood was not successful, this island is governed by the Chapter! So keep the Kings away from the affairs of the Chapter! It is our conflict and we’ll solve it ourselves! We will resolve our issues and then put an end to this idiotic war! Because we, the sorcerers, we are responsible for the fate of the world!’

Other fireballs shot forth from her hands, the echo of explosions was repeatedly heard between the columns and walls.

‘Get out!’ She screamed again. ‘Do not enter here! Get out!’

The screams from the bottom subsided. Geralt understood that the besiegers withdrew from the staircase. Tissaia’s silhouette blurred before his eyes. It was not magic. He had lost consciousness.

‘Get out of here, Triss Merigold.’ The sorceress’s voice sounded like it was coming from a distance, as if from behind a wall. ‘Philippa Eilhart has already fled, flying away on owl wings. You were an accomplice in this conspiracy, I should punish you. But enough of blood, death and disgrace! Go away! Go to Aretuza, with your allies! Teleport. The portal in the Tower of Gulls no longer exists. It collapsed together with the tower. You can teleport without fear. To where ever you want. Even to your King Foltest for who you have betrayed the Brotherhood!’

‘I will not leave Geralt...’ Triss moaned. ‘He can not fall into the hands of Redania... He is seriously wounded... Bleeding internally... And I no longer have the strength! I do not have the strength to open a portal! Tissaia! Help me, please!’

Darkness. Biting cold. From a distance, from behind the stone wall, the voice of Tissaia de Vries.

‘I’ll help you.’

Evertsen, Peter, n. 1234, confidant of Emperor Emhyr Deithwen and one of the true creators behind the power of the Empire. A Constable in the army in the times of the Northern War (see) since 1290, High treasurer of the crown. At the end of the reign of Emhyr, he was elevated to the dignity of the Empire. During the reign of Emperor Morvran Voohis, he was falsely accused of embezzlement and convicted and imprisoned, f 1301 in Castle Winneburg. Posthumously, he was cleared by the Emperor Jan Calveit in the year 1328.

Effenberg & Talbot,
Encyclopaedia Maxima Mundi, Vol V

Tremble, at the Destroyer of Nations. Who will trample your land and divide it with the noose. Your cities will be destroyed and their inhabitants deprived. The bat, the owl and the scorpion will inhabit your homes, make them into the serpents nest.

Aen IthlInnespeath

Chapter Five

The commander of the rider squad stopped his horse, removed his helmet and stroked his thin, sweaty hair.

‘End of road’ he announced, looking at the bard’s inquiring look.

‘Heh? How is that?’ wondered Dandelion. ‘Why?’

‘We don’t go further. Look, down there is the stream, that is the Ribbon. Our task was to escort you only to the Ribbon. That means its time to bid farewell.’

The rest of the squad stopped behind them, but none of the riders dismounted.. All of them were looking worriedly at all directions. Dandelion stood up in his stirrups and put his hand over his eyes.

‘Where do you see a river?’

‘I told you, that it is down there. Go down, you will see it immediately.’

‘Escort me to the shore at least,’ insisted Dandelion, ‘To the nearest ford...’

‘You will find you ford alone. It hasn’t rained since may. The water is low, the ford is shallow. On the horse you will get through anywhere you like’

‘I showed your governor a letter of safe-conduct from king Venzlav’ objected the bard. ‘The governor read the kings orders and I heard with my own ears, how he told you to escort me to Brokilon. And you want to abandon me in this spinney? What if I get lost?’

‘You won’t’ growled grimly the second rider, that stood next to them, but did not talk until now. ‘You won’t have enough time to get lost. An arrow of some nymph will find you first.’

‘You are a band of frightened rabbits.’ said Dandelion snidely. ‘You fear woman. Brokilon is on the other side of the Ribbon after all. The river is the border. We haven’t crossed it yet.’

‘Their border’ explained the commander, constantly looked around ‘is where their arrows reach. From the forest an arrow can reach the shore like nothing. And it will still be fast enough to pierce chainmail. You insisted on going to Brokilon, your business, your hide. But I want to live, I won’t go further. I could just as well stick my head in a hornets nest!’

‘I explained to you’ the bard put his hat on and straightened up in his saddle ‘that I go to Brokilon with a message. I am a royal ambassador, so to speak. I’m not afraid of dryads. But I ask you to escort me to the shore of the Ribbon. In case some footpads attacked me in the spinney.’

The second rider, the grim one, forced a smile.

‘Footpads? Here? During the day? Sir, you won’t meet a living soul here. These days the nymphs shoot everyone who appears near the shore, and sometimes they raid deep into our territories. Don’t be afraid of footpads here.’

‘He is right,’ confirmed the commander ‘You won’t find an idiot among the footpads who would wait on the shore of the Ribbon. We are not idiots either. You will go alone, without a weapon, without armor, even a mile away everyone will see you are no soldier. Perhaps you will get lucky. But if a nymph sees us, armed riders, we won’t have enough time to run from their arrows.’

‘Good advice’ noted Dandelion. He patted his horse on the neck and looked at the path ahead of him. ‘I will go alone. Farewell soldiers. Thank you for your escort.’

‘Don’t be in such a hurry to leave’ said the grim raider and looked at the sky. ‘The evening draws near. Go when the fog appears above the river. So that, you know...’

‘What?’

‘You can’t aim as good in the fog. If you have luck, a nymph could miss you. But their bows, dear sir, only miss rarely.’

‘I said...’

‘You said, you said, I heard you. You are travelling with a message. But I say, message or not, they don’t care. They will release an arrow and that’s it.

‘You decided that you will scare me?’ asked the poet. ‘Who do you think I am? A city bookworm? I, dear soldiers, have seen more battlefields than all of you together. I also know something about dryads, for example, that they don’t shoot without a warning.

‘That was long ago’ said the commander bitterly. ‘Those times are gone. Long ago they shot at trees or at the ground. It meant, here is the arrow, here is the border – and not a step further. If a man then immediately returned, he could have saved himself. But that changed, now they only shoot to kill.’

‘Since when is it like that?’

‘You know it is like this.’ explained the soldier. ‘When the kings signed the peace treaty with Nilfgaard, they attacked the elven groups without mercy. They attack them from all sides, there is not a night when some of them don’t run through Brugge to search for safety in Brokilon. And when our people hunt the elves, they almost always run into the nymphs that are going to help the elves. Sometimes our soldiers can’t control themselves... do you understand?’

‘I understand’ Dandelion looked at the commander’s face and nodded. ‘While hunting the Scoia’tel you went through the Ribbon and killed dryads. And they are paying you back right now. War?’

‘Exactly. War. Now it is a war to the death, no one survives anymore. The hatred between us can’t be forgotten anymore. I advise you for the last time: if you don’t have to, don’t go there.’

Dandelion swallowed hard.

‘The problem is’ he said with a fighting voice and posture, which took a lot of effort, ‘that I have to go. And I will. Evening or not, fog or not, I have to go, when duty calls.’

The years of training showed their worth, the bard’s trained voice sounded resonant and powerful, firm and confident, like steel. The soldiers looked at him with honest admiration.

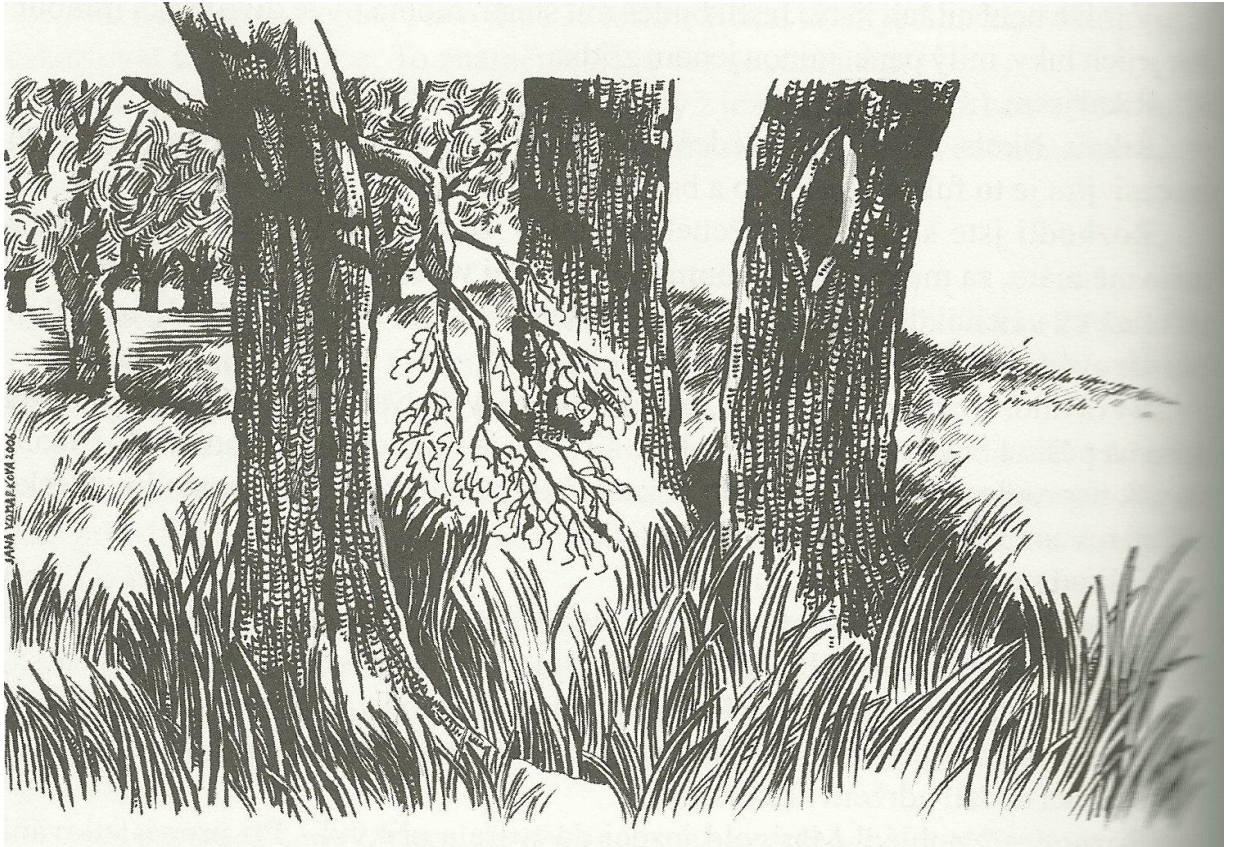
‘Before you go’ said the commander as he pulled out a wooden field flask ‘drink some spirit, sir singer. Have a swig...’

‘Dying will feel better’ added the grim second rider.

The poet drank.

‘A coward, before he dies’ he said once he coughed and got his breath back, ‘dies a hundred times, a brave man tastes death only once. The Lucky Lady likes fearless man, she despises cowards.’

The riders looked at him with the highest admiration. They could not have known that Dandelion recited the words of a rich epos. Written by someone else even.



‘Before I forget’ the poet took out a leather pouch. ‘I will reward you for your escort. Before you return to the outpost, before the stern mother duty calls you again, stop in an inn on the way and drink on my health.’

‘Thank you sir,’ the comander flushed ‘You are generous, even when we... Forgive us that we abandon you but...’

‘It is nothing. Good luck’

The bard adjusted his hat over his left ear, kicked the horse with his heel and went down to the river. On the way the whistled the melody of ‘Weddings in Bullerlyn’, a well known and quite rude drinking song.

‘In the outpost, they told us’ he heard the words of the grim one, ‘that he is a waste of food, braggart and coward. But he is a brave and valiant man.’

‘You are right’ agreed the commander. ‘He is not afraid, we must give him that. He didn’t even look back, I was looking at him. You hear that? He is even whistling. Ho, hoo. Did you hear what he said? That he is an ambassador. The king doesn’t make anyone an ambassador. You have to be a special footman to be made an ambassador...’

Dandelion spurred his horse to get away as fast as possible. He didn’t want to ruin the impression that he made with so much effort. But he knew that fear dried his throat and he couldn’t whistle much longer.

The road was shady and damp, wet clay and a carpet of leaves muffled the hooves of the brown gelding, who the poet named Pegasusus. Pegasusus walked slowly and with a drooping head. He was one of the not so numerous horses, that didn’t care about anything.

The forest ended, but on the way to the shore he had to go through a meadow. The poet stopped his horse. He looked carefully around, but did not see anything suspicious. He strained his ears, but heard only a concert of toads.

‘So horsie,’ he cleared his throat. ‘Onwards.’

Pegasusus lifted his head a little and slowly lifted his usually drooping ears.

‘You heard right. Onwards!’

The gelding idly walked forward, mud clucking under its hooves. Toads jumped to escape its feet. A few steps ahead of them, a scared duck honked and flew off. The bard’s heart stopped for a moment, then it started to beat wildly somewhere in his neck. Pegasusus paid no attention.

‘A hero went on...’ muttered Dandelion as he took out a scarf from his sleeve and wiped the cold sweat from his forehead. ‘Without fear, he walked through the dangerous swamp, and didn’t get appaled by the jumping reptiles nor by flying dragons... he went on and on... until he arrived near the immeasurable level of water...’

Pegasusus snorted and stopped. They were at the shore, standing in reeds and cattails as high as the callipers. The bard wiped his sweaty forehead again, then tied the scarf around his neck. He looked at the thick alders on the opposite shore so long and intensely, that his eyes started to weep. But he did not see anything or anyone. Over the slow current of the river, he saw swarms of small insects. The surface was filled with spreading circles, caused by fish grabbing their prey. Around the shore, a cyan-orange kingfisher looped around.

Everywhere one could see the results of beaver work, nibbled branches, gnawed tree trunks washed by water. *There are beavers here*, he thought, *an extraordinary lot*. No surprise, there is no one to scare the hard working woodgnawers. No woodcutters, bandits or hunters that lay traps here. Those, who tried were hit by an arrow and the crayfish ate them as they fell into the muddy shore. And I, fool, am going here by my own choice. This is the Ribbon, the river above which a deathly stench hangs, one that not even the smell of calamus and mint can suppress...

He sighed.

Pegasusus entered the water with his front hooves, dipped his head and drank for a long time. Then he lifted it and looked at his rider. Water dripped from his mouth and nostrils. The poet nodded his head, sighed again and loudly sniffed his nose.

‘The hero looked at the rough current,’ he said silently and tried not to chatter his teeth. ‘Then he ventured onwards, for his heart knew no fear’.

Pegasusus hung his head and ears.

‘Knew no fear I said!’

The horse shook his head, the steel rings on his bits and halter rang. Dandelion kicked him. The gelding walked into the water, with obvious indifference.

The river was shallow, but thickly overgrown. Until they reached the middle of the riverbed, Pegasusus dragged long offshoots with his feet. The animal walked slowly, and tried to shake the vegetation, that hindered his movement, off his hooves with every step.

The reeds and alders of the opposite shore were close now. So close that Dandelion could feel his stomach descending down into his pants. He realized, that in the middle of the river, confined by the vegetation, he was a very easy target, one that could not be missed. In his mind, he already saw the curved arches of bows, the stretching strings, and the sharp tips pointing at his stomach, chest, throat.

He pushed the horses sides with his legs, but Pegasusus did not move. Instead of speeding up, he stopped and lifted his tail. The horse donuts loudly splashed into the water. Dandelion yelped, shocked.

‘The hero could not go through the roaring cascade,’ he yelped with closed eyes. ‘He died a brave death, hit by countless arrows. He was forever swallowed by the shadowy pool, dead in the embrace of weeds as green as nefrit, and all of his remains disappeared... the current only carried horse shit to the sea.’

Pegasusus, who was obviously relieved, walked on without exhortation to the shore and on the shallow, without the annoying offshoots, he even mischievously jumped so the poets boots and pants were completely wet. Dandelion didn’t even notice, the vision of arrows pointing at

his chest could not be banished and fear crawled up his spine like a big, cold, slimy leech. Because barely a hundred steps behind the alders, behind the green field of alloys, towered a black, inaccessible, threatening forest wall.

Brokilon.

A few steps away from the shore, he encountered a skeleton of a horse. Stalks of cattails grew through the ribcage. There were also a few, smaller bones. They did not look like horse bones. Dandelion shuddered and looked away.

The gelding walked through the muddy shore with a lot of squelching and smacking. The mud stank. The toads were silent for a while, the Ribbon grew silent. Dandelion closed his eyes. He did not say anything, did not improvise. Inspiration disappeared somewhere far away. Only the feeling of ice cold fear remained, a feeling very strong, but thoroughly non-creative.

Pegasus walked calmly to the edge of the dryad forest, which was called by many the forest of death.

I crossed the border, the poet thought. Now everything will be decided. Until I walked out from the water, they could have been generous. Not anymore. Now I am an intruder. Like that one... My skeleton will remain here too – a warning to those who would dare follow me... If the dryads are here... If they are observing me...

He thought of all the archery competitions and tournaments that he saw, the straw targets and figurines pierced or torn to bits by arrows. What would a man hit by an arrow feel? The hit? Pain? Or... nothing?

The dryads were either not in the area, or did not decide what they should do against a lone rider, because the poet arrived at the forest, stiff with fear, but alive and healthy and in one piece. He could not get under the trees through the overgrown, with roots and branches ruffled barrier, he did not want to do enter the depths of the forest anyway. He forced himself to a risk – but not suicide.

He dismounted very slowly and bound his horse to a root sticking upwards. Usually he did not do it, for Pegasus did not usually go away from his owner, but he did not know how the horse would react to the sounds of flying arrows. Until now, it never crossed his mind to subject himself or his mount to such sounds.

From his saddle, he took his lute – an unique, beautiful instrument, with a slim fingerboard. *A gift from an elf*, he thought, as he stroked the inlaid wood. It could be that it would return to the the Elder races... If the dryads did not leave the lute with the corpse of its owner.

Close to him was a big uprooted tree trunk. The poet sat on it, leaned the lute on his leg, licked his lips and put his sweaty hands on his pants.

The sun was setting. Above the Ribbon rose haze, a whitish cover that spread as far as to the meadows near the shore. The air grew colder. Above his head he heard a flock of cranes fly, he heard their call. It disappeared into the distance, only the squawking of the toads remained.

Dandelion picked the strings. Once, then a second time, then a third. He twisted the pins, tuned the instrument and began to play. After a moment he began to sing too:

*Yviss, m'evolienn vente cáelm en tell
Elaine Ettariel Aep cor me lode deith ess'viell
Yn blathque me darienn Aen minne vain tegen a me
Yn toin av muireánn que dis eveigh e aep llea...*

The sun disappeared behind the forest. In the shadow of the old giants of Brokilon, it grew dark quickly.

*L'eassan Lamm feainne renn, ess'ell
Elaine Ettariel
Aep cor...*

He did not hear them. He felt their presence.

'N'te mire daetre. Sh'aente vort.'

'Don't shoot...' he whispered and obeying, her order he did not turn around. *'N'aen aespas a me... I come in peace...'*

'N'ess a tearth. Sh'aente.'

He obeyed, but his fingers stiffened on the strings and his voice came from his throat only with difficulty. But in the voice of the dryad there was no animosity and he, for fuck's sake, was no amateur.

*L'eassan Lamm feainne renn, ess'ell.
Elaine Ettariel
Aep cor aen tedd teviel e gwen
Yn blath que me darienn
Ess yn e evellien a me
Que shaent te cáelm a'vean minne me striscea...*

This time he dared look over his shoulder. That what crouched near the big trunk near him looked like an ivy shrub. But it was no shrub – shrubs don't have large bright eyes.

Pegasus silently snorted and Dandelion knew that somewhere in the darkness behind him, someone was stroking his horse's nostrils.

'Sh'aente vort,' asked the dryad, that was crouching behind him again. Her voice sounded like rain falling on leaves.

'I..' he began. 'I am.... I am a friend of witcher Geralt. I know that Geralt.. That Gwynbleidd is with you, here in Brokilon. I come...'

'N'te dice'en. Sh'aente va.'

'Sh'aent.' asked warmly the second dryad, one voice with the third. Perhaps with a fourth even, he was not sure.

'Yea, sh'aente taedh,' said with a silvery girly voice that, what he thought a moment ago was a birch, rising a few steps away from him. *'Ess'laine.... Taedh. Sing.. More about Ettariel.... Yes?'*

He obeyed:

Loving you is the goal of my life.
Graceful Ettariel
Allow me to keep the treasure of my memories
And the magic flower
The pledge and symbol of your love
Most with dew like silver tears...

This time he heard steps.

'Dandelion.'

'Geralt!'

'Yes, it is me. You can stop that noise now.'

‘How did you find me?’ Where did you learn that I am in Brokilon?’

‘From Triss Merigold... Dammit!’ Dandelion tripped and would have fallen if the dryad walking next to him had not caught him skilfully. She was surprisingly strong, despite her small body.

‘*Gar’ean táedh,*’ she warned him. ‘*Va cáelm.*’

‘Thank you. It is terribly dark... Geralt? Where are you?’

‘Here. Don’t fall behind.’

Dandelion sped up, tripped again and hit the witcher, who stopped in the darkness in front of him. The dryads walked past them without even a slightest sound.

‘Damn this darkness. How much longer will we walk?’

‘Not much. The camp is a bit farther. Who except Triss knows I am here? Did you tell anyone?’

‘I had to tell King Venzlav. I needed his letter of safe-passage to travel through Brugge. Nowadays it is – a waste of words... I needed permission to travel to Brokilon. But Venzlav knows you and he is in your debt. He names me, just imagine, his ambassador. Im sure he will keep it secret, I begged him. Don’t be angry Geralt.’

The witcher leaned closer to him. Dandelion did not recognize his face, in the darkness he saw only white hair and the whitish effect of not having shaved for a few days.

‘I’m not angry.’ The bard felt a hand on his shoulder and he had the feeling that the cold voice until now, has changed a bit. ‘I’m glad you came...’

‘I’m cold’ shuddered Dandelion so much that the branches on which they were resting nearly broke. ‘We could light a...’

‘Don’t even think about it.’ the witcher stopped him. ‘Did you forget where we are?’

‘They never ...’ the startled poet looked around. ‘No fire?’

‘Trees hate fire. They do too.’

‘Bloody hell. We have to endure the cold? And sit in this darkness? If I stretch my hand I can’t even see my own fingers...’

‘Then don’t stretch out your hand.’

Dandelion sighed and rubbed his stiff hands. He heard, how the witcher sitting next to him was breaking off dry branches.

Suddenly a greenish light appeared in the darkness, at first dull, but slowly getting brighter. After the first, many more started to glow, in many places: they moved like dancers or fireflies or wisps. The forest awakened with lights and shadows. Dandelion also recognized the silhouettes of the dryads. One of them came nearer and put something that looked like a glowing wreath of grass and wicker near them. The bard stretched his hand and carefully approached the green fire. It was cold.

‘What is it Geralt?’

‘Rotten wood and some type of moss, that grows only here in Brokilon. And only they know how to bind it so it glows. Thank you Fauve.’

The dryad did not answer but did not go away either. She sat down a bit farther from them. She wore a wreath on her head, her long hair fell on her shoulders. They were green, it could have been due to the light, or it might really have been green. Dandelion heard, that the hair of dryads had all kinds of colors.



'*Taedh*,' said the dryad and looked at the bard with her big eyes, glowing in her face that was split by two stripes of camouflage paint. '*Ess've vort sh'aente aen Ettariel? Sh'aente a'vean vort?*'

'No... Perhaps I will sing a bit later,' he answered warmly, carefully choosing words from the Elder speech. The dryad stretched herself and gently stroked the lute laying next to her, then she flexibly stood up. Dandelion looked at her as she leaved to join the others, whose shadows were moving in the flexous light of the moss lamps.

'I hope I did not offend her,' he said silently. 'She speaks with their own dialect, I don't know the courtesy phrases...'

‘Look to see if you have a knife in your ribs’ according to the tone of voice the witcher was not joking. ‘They answer insults with a knife. But don’t be afraid Dandelion, I think they would be willing to forgive more than some language mistakes. They really liked your performance under the forest. Now you are *Ard Táedh* to them – The Great Singer. They wait for you to finish singing ‘Flower Ettariel’. Do you know the rest? Because it is not your ballad.’

‘The translation is mine. And I enriched the elven music register a bit did you notice?’

‘No.’

‘Just as I thought. Luckily the dryads know how to value art better than you. I read somewhere that they are unusually musical. I built my savvy plan on that, for what you by the way have not praised me yet.’

‘I praise’ said the witcher after a short pause. ‘It was really savvy. And most of all you were lucky – as always. Their bows are not infallible for two hundred steps. And they usually don’t wait, until someone crosses the river and starts singing. They are very sensitive to bad smells, so if the corpse is carried away by the Ribbon, the forest will not smell bad.’

‘Whatever’ the poet cleared his throat. ‘The main thing is, it worked and I found you. Geralt how do...’

‘Do you have your razor?’

‘Huh? Of course I do.’

‘I will borrow it tomorrow morning. This beard is annoying me.’

‘Why couldn’t the dryads... Hmmm... True, they use their razors only for mushrooms. You know I will lend it to you. Hey, Geralt?’

‘Yes?’

‘I don’t have any food. Can The Great Singer ask his hostesses for dinner?’

‘They don’t eat dinner. Ever. And the guardians of the outskirts of Brokilon usually don’t even eat breakfast. You will have to wait until midday. I got used to it.’

‘But if we go to their village, to the mysterious, in the inner of the forest hidden Duén Canell...’

‘We will never go there, Dandelion.’

‘How is that? I thought that... They have given you asylum after all. They are... tolerating you after all.’

‘That is a fitting word.’

Both of them were silent for a long time.

‘War’ said the poet at last. ‘War, hatred and contempt. Everywhere. In all hearts.’

‘You are poemizing.’

‘But it is true.’

‘Just as. Well, tell me what are you carrying to me. Tell me what happened in the world, while they were healing me here.’

‘First.’ Dandelion cleared his throat. ‘You tell me what really happened in Garstang.’

‘Triss did not tell you?’

‘She did. But I want to hear your version too.’

‘Triss surely told you the more detailed and precise one. But tell me what happened while I was here in Brokilon...’

‘Geralt,’ choked Dandelion. ‘I... I really don’t know what happened to Yennefer and Ciri... no one does. Triss also...’

The witcher jerked violently, the branches cracked.

‘Am I asking about Ciri or Yennefer?’ he muttered with a changed voice. ‘Talk about the war.’

‘You don’t know anything? Did no news arrive here?’

‘Some did. But I want to hear it from you. Tell me please.’

‘Nilfgaard attacked Lyria and Aedirn,’ began the bard after a while. ‘Without any declaration of war. The reason was said to be an attack by Demavend’s army on some border fortress while the sorcerers met in Thanedd. Some say it was a provocation, that those were Nilfgaardian forces dressed as Demavend’s soldiers. How it truly was, we will never know probably. In any case, the Nilfgaardian answer was very swift and massive. A massive army crossed the border, one that had to be collected in Dol Angra for weeks, months even. Spalla and Scala, the Lyrian border fortresses were destroyed while marching. Rivia was prepared for months of siege, but surrendered after just two days. The merchants and guilds were demanding it. They were promised, that if the city opened its gates and paid ransom, it would not be ransacked...’

‘Was the promise honored?’

‘It was.’

‘Remarkable.’ The witcher’s voice changed again. ‘Honoring promises in these times? Not to mention, that in the past there were no promises, and no one expected them. The merchants and craftsmen did not open city gates in the past, but were defending the walls, everyone at their outpost or war machine.’

‘Money has no country Geralt. The merchants don’t care under whose flag they earn money. And the Nilfgaardian paladins don’t care whose taxes they collect. The dead don’t earn money, nor do they pay taxes.’

‘Continue.’

‘After the surrender of Rivia, the Nilfgaardian army continued to the north. They almost did not face any resistance. Demavend and Meve were pulling their soldiers back, because they could not create a line, and begin the decisive battle. So the Nilfgaardians got to Aldersberg. To prevent a blockade, Demavend and Meve decided to go to battle. The formation of their armies wasn’t the best... Dammit if there was more light I could draw you...’

‘Don’t draw anything. To the point. Who won?’

‘Did you hear the new sire?’ said one of the intendants, out of breath and sweating. ‘The messenger from the field arrived. We have won the battle! Victory! Ours, ours is the day! We have beaten the enemy, beaten them!’

‘Silence,’ frowned Evertsen. ‘My head hurts from your yelling. Of course, I heard: ours is the day, ours is the battle and victory too. That surprises me!’

The accountants and registrars went silent, and looked surprisingly at their superior.

‘Are you not happy, sir Chamberlain?’

‘I am. But I can be happy silently.’

All were suddenly silent and looked around embarrassed. *Amateurs*, thought Evertsen, *overconfident amateurs. That's no surprise but up there, on the hill even Menno Coehoorn and Elan Trahe are cheering, even the grey-bearded general Braibant, all are yelling and jumping, patting each other on the backs like kids. Victory! Ours is the day! And whose should it be? The kingdoms of Aedirn and Lyria could barely muster up three thousand cavalry and ten thousand footman, and about a fifth was cut off from the battle during the first days, cut off in besieged outposts and fortresses. Part of the remaining army, the enemy had to reposition to the rear and guard their flanks, endangered by attacks of our light cavalry or the ambushes of Scoia'tael commandos. The remaining five or six thousand, in that no more than twelve hundred armored knights, stood in the fields in front of Aldersberg. Coehoorn threw an army thirteen thousand strong at them, in that ten banners of heavy*

cavalry, the blooming nilfgaardian knighthood. And now they are celebrating, brawling and demanding beer. Victory! What a surprise...

With one glance he summarized the piles of papers and maps on the table, lifted his head and looked around.

‘Now listen’ he told his underlings ‘I’m giving orders.’

The accountants and registrars froze in anticipation.

‘Each one of you,’ he began ‘listened to the speech of field marshal Coehoorn to the officers and soldiers yesterday. Please remember what the marshal yesterday said to the soldiers, does not include you. You have other tasks and orders. Mine.’

Evertsen thought and rubbed his forehead.

‘War to the palaces, peace to the huts, said the officer yesterday. You know that principle, its taught at the Academy. This principle applied up until now, tomorrow you will forget it. From tomorrow morning applies a new principle, one that will become the unofficial motto of our campaign. That motto and my order is: War to everything that lives, fire to everything that can be burned. We can only leave a wasteland behind us. Tomorrow we cross the line, on which a future peace treaty will be signed. On the land that will not belong to us, only burned land can remain. The kingdoms of Rivia and Aedirn will be burned to ashes! Remember Sodden? The time of revenge has come!’

Evertsen cleared his throat.

‘But before the army destroys everything,’ he explained to the silent registrars ‘it is our task to extract as much as possible from this country and land, everything that will increase the power of our Empire. You, Audegast, you will collect and cart all agricultural crops and plants. Everything that remains on the fields that has not been destroyed by Coehoorns knights must be collected...

‘I don’t have enough men sir Chamberlain...’

‘There will be enough slaves, get the locals to work. Marder and you... I forgot your name...’

‘Helwet. Evan Helwet, sir Chamberlain.’

‘You two will collect all living stock. Chase up all herds, watch during quarantines in isolated places. Kill the sick and suspicious ones, the others have to be guided to the south on marked routes.’

‘Yes sir!’

And now the special task, thought Evertsen, looking at his people. Whom to give that? All rookies, with milk on their chins, they did not see a lot, did not experience a lot... Ech, I need more experienced older subordinates... Wars, wars, always wars... Soldiers die fast, of course intendants die just as fast if we compare their ratio. But there is never a need for soldiers, as new ones always come. Everyone wants to be a soldiers, but who wants to be a registrar or accountant? Who wants to tell their families and friends, that their heroic deeds were collecting corn, counting sinking animals and weighing wax, how they lead convoys on bumpy roads, convoys that were full of loot, how they lead bellowing hers of animals, how they only felt dust, smells, and flies...

A special task. The Gulet iron factory with smelting furnaces. The kalamín works, the foundries and forges in Eysenlaan, fifty talents of a years production. The tin factories and laundries in Aldersberg. The distilleries, malt, weaving and coloring factories in Vengerberg...

Dismantle and transport. That was the order of Emperor Emhyr – The White Flame Dancing on the Barrows of his Enemies. Two words. Dismantle and transport.

An order is an order. It has to be fulfilled.

And the most important task. The gold mines and their yield. Money. Valuables. Artwork. But I will take care of that. Personally.

More pillars of smoke, visible in the sky, appeared. And more. The army was rigorously carrying out Coehoorns orders. The Kingdom of Aedirn was changing into a Kingdom of Fire.

With lots of rattling and rising clouds of dust, the colony of siege machines were rolling on the road. Onto the still resisting Aldersberg. And onto Vengerberg, the residential city of king Demavend.

Peter Evertsen was looking and counting. Calculating. Peter Evertsen was the main treasurer of the Empire and during the war the chief chamberlain of the nilfgaardian army. He was in this position for 25 years now. Numbers and calculations, that was his entire life.

Mangonel costs fifty florins, trebuchets two hundred, a petraria at least a hundred and fifty, the simplest ballista, eighty. A trained crew takes nine and a half florins of monthly salary each. The colony marching on Vengerberg costs about three hundred pounds, including the horses, oxens, tools and minor equipment. 'A single mark of pure metal, weighing half a pound is equal to sixty florens.'

In front of the slow colony was the light cavalry. Evertsen recognized the symbols on some flags: the tactical banner of Prince Winneburg, who had transferred to the front from Cintra. *Yes, he thought, they have something to look forward to. The battle is won, the Aedirnian army in ruins. The additional reinforcements will not participate in the heavy battles with the regular army. They will only intercept fleeing groups, surround dispersed squads without leaders, murder, pilage and burn. They are looking forward to it, because its the pleasant, cheerful soldiering. One that does not tire. Not kill.*

Evertsen calculated.

The tactical banner is made of ten regular banners, that means two thousand riders. Because Winneburg's men will not fight in any bigger battle, in some insignificant fights only one sixth of them will die or be injured. On top of that, the camps, rotten provisions, dust, lice, mosquitos, infected water awaits them. And that, which can not be avoided in any war: typhoid, dysentery, malaria. The diseases usually kill one fourth of the soldiers. We can't forget the various accidents and unpredictable events, planned losses are another fifth. If we count all that, about eight hundred of them will return home and no more. Probably less.

More banners were marching on the road, behind the riders were the footman. Archers in yellow brigandines and round helmets, crossbowmen in flat kettle hats, pavisiers and pikemen were all marching north. Behind them the heavy infantry, like armored crabs, veterans from Thurn, Maecht, Gesso, Ebbing...

Ignoring the heat, the nilfgaardians regiments were marching swiftly. Drums were rumbling, flags waving, tips of pikes, partisans, gizarms and halberds shining. The soldiers marched cheerfully and courageously. That is how a winning army marches. A undefeatable army. Onwards men, into battle! Onto Vengerberg! To crush the enemy, take revenge for Sodden! To enjoy the happy war, loot and return home... Home!

Peter Evertsen was watching. And counting.

'Vengerberg fell after a week,' added Dandelion. 'You will be surprised, but there the guilds defended bastions and their sections of wall until their last breath. The attackers killed the castle crew, defenders of the city and anyone who lived there, six thousand people total. A massive escape ensued after that. The crushed troops and civilians began to escape to Temeria and Redania. Crowds of refugees stretched through the Pontar valley and Mahakaman foothills. But many were not able to escape; the nilfgaardian light cavalry were hunting them, cutting them off... Do you know why?'

‘I don’t. I don’t understand... I don’t know much about warfare, Dandelion.’

‘They wanted prisoners. Slaves. They wanted to catch as many people as possible. That is the cheapest work force in Nilfgaard. That’s why they were so focused on hunting refugees. It was a big hunt for people, Geralt. An easy hunt. Because the army was routed and no one defended the poor.’

‘No one?’

‘Almost no one.’

‘We won’t make it...’ coughed Willis, looking over his shoulder. ‘We won’t escape... Ah hell, the border is so close... so close...’

Rayla stood up in her stirrups and looked in the direction they had come. The road wound up around pines from the valley. Everywhere the eye could see, there was luggage, thrown away in a hurry, in the ditches along to road were broken carts and dead horses and cattle. Even further away from the forest, black columns of smoke were rising. And one could audibly hear roars and noise – the echoes of battle.

‘The back train,’ Willis wiped the sweat and dust of his face. ‘Do you hear Rayla? They have caught up to our back train! They will kill them!’

‘Now we are the back train,’ said the mercenary dryly ‘Its our turn.’

Willis grew pale, one of the soldiers listening let out a deep breath. Rayla yanked her reins, turned her tired horse around.

‘We would not have made it anyway,’ she stated. ‘The horses would collapse after a while. They would catch up and kill us before we got to the pass.’

‘Lets throw away what we can, and disappear into the forest,’ proposed Willis, but did not look at Rayla. ‘Individually, every man for himself. Perhaps we will... survive.’

Rayla did not answer, only gestured with a head movement toward the pass, the winding road, the last latecomers of the long crowd fleeing to the border. Willis understood. He swore stupidly and jumped to the ground. He stumbled and leaned against his sword.

‘Down from the horses!’ he shouted hoarsely at the soldiers. ‘Block the road with anything you can find! What are you looking at? Once our mothers bore us and once we have to die! We are soldiers! We are the back train! We have to stop the hunting dogs, stall...’

He stopped talking.

‘If we delay the pursuit, the people will get to the other side of the mountains, to Temeria,’ finished Rayla and also dismounted. ‘There in front of us are women and children. Why do you look so surprised? It is our work! They paid us for that, did you forget?’

Willis spat, tore off the three colored, black-golden-red cockade of the special forces of king Demavend and threw it away. Rayla smoothed and rubbed her own badge. She smiled crookedly.

‘I don’t know if it will help you Willis. I really don’t know.’

‘Rayla, you promised me...’

‘I did. And I will fulfill my promise. On your positions lads! Get the crossbows!’

They did not wait long.

After they repelled the first wave, only six of them were left. The battle was short but tough. The conscripts from Vengerberg were fighting like wolves, they matched the battle-hardened soldiers in their ferocity. No one wanted to fall into Scoia’tael hands alive. They chose death in battle. And they died hit by arrows, pierced by pikes, sliced by swords. Blaise died laying down, sliced up by the knives of two elves, that jumped on him after they pulled him from the barricade. But none of the two elves stood up again. Blaise also had a knife.

The Scoia’tael did not let them breath. They threw a second attack at them. Willis, hit by a spear for the third time, fell to the ground.

‘Rayla! He called weakly, ‘You promised!’

The mercenary repelled another elf and swiftly turned around.

‘Pleasant journey, Willis. She put her sword against his ribs and pushed. ‘See you again in hell!’

After a while, she was alone. The Scoia’tael surrounded her on all sides. The warrior, soaked in blood from head to feet. She lifted her sword and twirled, her black ponytail whirling in the air. She stood among the dead, stooping, terrible like a demon. The elves involuntarily took a step back.

‘Come!’ she roared a challenge. ‘What are you waiting for? You won’t get me alive! I am Rayla!’

‘*Gláeddyv vort, beanna,*’ said a handsome blonde elf, calmly, with a face of a cherub and big sky-blue eyes of a child, that appeared behind the backs of the hesitating Scoia’tael. His snowwhite horse snorted, tossed it’s noble head and energetically raked the blood soaked gravel of the road.

‘*Gláeddyv vort, beanna,*’ said the rider again. ‘Throw away that sword, woman.’

The warrior laughed furiously. She wiped her face with her glove and that was smeared with sweat, dust and blood into a terrible war paint.

‘My sword was too expensive for me to throw around, elf!’ she shouted her answer. ‘If you want to take it, you will have to break my fingers! I am Black Rayla! So come!’

She did not wait long.

‘No one came to help Aedirn?’ asked the witcher after a long moment of silence. ‘It had political bonds after all. Agreements of help... contracts...’

‘Redania,’ Dandelion cleared his throat, ‘fell into inner turmoil after the assassination of the king. Do you even know that Vizimir was murdered?’

‘I know that.’

‘The head of the state is, by title the queen Hedwig, but the land is in chaos. And terror. They are hunting Scoia’tael and Nilfgaardian spies. Djikstra advised the whole kingdom, the execution places were red with blood. Oh and Djikstra still can’t walk. They carry him in a litter!’

‘I expected that. Did he pursue you?’

‘No. He could have but did not. Ach, that is not important. In any case, the inner political situation did not allow Redania to send the army to help Aedirn.’

And Temeria? Why did Foltest of Temeria not help Demavend?’

‘As soon as the invasion in Dol Angra started?’ said Dandelion silently. ‘Emhyr var Emreis sent a message to Vizima...’

‘Curse them!’ growled Bronibor, looking at the closed doors. ‘What are they negotiating so long? Why did Foltest even agree to give an audience to that nilfgaardian dog? He should have cut his head off and sent it back to Emhyr. In a bag!’

‘By the gods, duke,’ gasped High Priest Willemer. ‘He is a messenger, an untouchable person. You cannot...’

‘I can’t? I will tell you what I can’t! I can’t idly stand here and look, as our enemy ravages the land of our ally! Lyria already fell and Aedirn is in danger! Demavend won’t stop Nilfgaard alone! We must immediately send an expedition to Aedirn and help Demavend by attacking the other side of the Yaruga! There are not many soldiers there now, most of them were called to the north! And we are negotiating here! We are talking instead of fighting! And we have a nilfgaardian bastard as a guest!’

‘Silence duke!’ Prince Hereward of Ellander coldly tamed the old soldier. ‘This is high politics. You have to look further than the horse’s head and the end of the tilted pike. We have to hear the messenger. Emperor Emhyr surely did not send him without a reason.’

‘That is clear, there is a reason.’ Bronibor cut him off. ‘Emhyr is crushing Aedirn right now. He knows, that if we strike now, and with us, Redania and Kaedwen we will beat him and push him even out of Dol Angra somewhere to Ebbing. He knows, that if we attack Cintra, we will strike him in his unguarded stomach, we will force him to a war on two fronts. He fears that! He tries to scare us so we don’t cross his plans. That is the true reason why his messenger has come!’

‘It is wise, to hear out any message,’ said the prince, ‘and then decide, what will be best for our country. Demavend provoked Nilfgaard and now he is paying for his hasty step. As for me, I’m not in a hurry to go die for Vengerberg. What is going on in Aedirn, is none of our business.’

‘Our business? What is that, for fuck’s sake, bullshit? The Nilfgaardians are in Lyria and Aedirn, on the right side of the Yaruga! That, and only Mahakam divides us from them, is not our business? Only a complete idiot could say that....’

‘Enough arguing’ Willemer cut them both off. ‘Not a word more, the king comes.’

The doors of the negotiating room opened. The members of the Royal Council rattled as they were pushing their chairs, then stood up. Many places were empty. The Crown Governor and most of the commanders were with their armies, waiting in the Pontar Valley, Mahakaman Foothills and on the shores of the Yaruga. The places of the sorcerers were also empty. *Sorcerers... Yes, thought priest Willemer, here in the royal court in Vizima, the places of the sorcerers will be empty for a very long time. Who knows, if not forever.*

King Foltest strode quickly through the room, stopped at the throne, but did not sit down, only bowed down slightly and leaned his clenching fists on the table. He was very pale.

‘Vengerberg is besieged,’ said the Temerian ruler quietly, ‘and will be conquered in the next few hours. Nilfgaard is marching to the north. The cut off regiments will resist, but they cannot change the outcome of the war. Aedirn is lost. Demavend fled to Redania. The fate of Queen Meve is unknown.’

The council was silent.

‘Our eastern borders, that is the delta of the Pontar Valley, will be reached by Nilfgaard in a few days.’ Foltest quietly continued. ‘The last Aedirnian fortress, Hagge will not hold for long. And Hagge, is our eastern border. And to our southern border... an awful thing has

happened. King Eryyll of Verden has paid tribute to Emperor Emhyr. He opened the fortresses on the lower Yaruga, those that should have watched our flanks. In Nastrog, Rozrog and Bodrog are currently nilfgaardian troops.'

The council was silent.

'Thanks to that, Eryyll kept his royal title, his feudal lord is Emhyr though. Formally, Vergen remains a kingdom, it is not a de facto nilfgaardian province. You understand, I hope, what that means? The situation has changed radically. The fortresses of Verden control the delta of the Yaruga and they are in the hands of the Nilfgaardians. Because of that, it is out of question for us to cross to river. We cannot even weaken the army there by sending help to Aedirn. It is not possible. The responsibility for my land and men burdens me.'

The council was silent.

'Emhyr var Emreis, Emperor of Nilfgaard,' continued the king, 'sent me a proposal... An agreement. I accepted. I will tell you its contents. And you, once you have heard me out, will understand... You will accept that... You will say...'

The council was silent.

'You will say,' finished Foltest hesitantly, 'that I bring you peace.'

'So Foltest lowered his tail and crawled away,' growled the witcher and broke another stick in his fingers. 'He made an agreement with Nilfgaard. He left Aedirn to its fate...'

'Yes' confirmed the poet. 'He only sent the army to the Pontar Valley and occupied the fortress Hagge. The Nilfgaardians did not enter the Mahakaman Valleys, did not cross the Yaruga in Sodden, did not strike on Brugge, even though they have it, after Eryyll's surrender, in their pliers. That was the cost of Temeria's neutrality.'

'Ciri was right,' whispered the witcher. 'Neutrality... Neutrality is vile.'

'What?'

'Nothing. And what of Kaedwen, Dandelion? Why didn't Henselt help Demavend and Meve? After all, they also had an agreement, they were allies. And if Henselt pisses on official seals and signs on documents like Foltest, on the royal word, he is not completely dumb? He didn't get that after the fall of Aedirn and suspension of Temeria, Kaedwen is next in line? The next who stands Nilfgaard in their way? He should have helped Demavend if only because of pure foresight. Faith and truth does not remain in the world, but has common sense disappeared too? What, you can only find disdain and hatred?'

Dandelion looked away. The green lamps were close now, they were surrounding them in a tight circle. He had not noticed it before. Now he understood, that all dryads were listening to him.

'You are silent,' said Geralt. 'That means that Ciri was right. Codrigher was right. Everyone was right. Only I, the naive, anachronistic, stupid witcher was not right.'

Centurion Digod, known under the nickname 'Halfpot', pushed the tent sheet and entered with angry snorts and growls. The corporals stood up and reluctantly took up a military posture. Before the centurion's eyes could adapt to the dimness in the tent, Ziwyk quickly threw fur on a barrel of vodka between them. It was not because, Digod was a zealous objector of drinking in the camp and on duty, but more to hide the content of the barrel from their superior. The centurion did not have his nickname for nothing – he was known to drink half a pot of alcohol on more than one occasion, without slowing down. A military pot, he could flip over and drink like a bowl of soup, and only rarely did something spill in his ears.

‘So, what is the situation sir centurion?’ asked Bode, the archer corporal, ‘what did the commanders agree on? What are the orders? Will we cross the borders?’

‘A moment’ snorted Halfpot. ‘That is hic, hell! I will tell you everything, But first give me something to drink, my throat is dry. And don’t try to tell me you don’t have anything, I can smell the booze a mile away. I even know exactly where it is. There, under that fur.’

Zywik, muttering curse words, took the barrel out of hiding. The corporals leaned forward like one, their tin mugs clattered against each other.

‘Aaaach’ the centurion rubbed his eyebrows ‘Uuuuch, filthy crap. Pour me more Zywik.’ ‘Now talk,’ said Bode impatiently. ‘What are the orders? Are we marching against the Nilfgaardians or will we stand here like pricks before a closed Harlotry?’

‘Are you missing battle?’ said Halfpot, sitting down heavily and leaning against a saddle. ‘Are you in such a hurry to get to Aedirn? You are dragged there aren’t you? Hungry wolves showing their teeth, eh?’

‘Of course.’ Answered the smaller Staler, shifting his weight from foot to foot. Both of them were crooked like a zerrikanian sabre, the legs of old cavalry men. ‘Of course sir centurion. We are on duty for the fifth night now, we sleep in our boots. That is why we want to know, what awaits us. Are we going to battle or back to the castle?’

‘We are crossing the borders,’ said Halfpot finally. ‘Tomorrow at dawn. Five banners, the Grey at the front. And now pay attention, as I am telling you what orders the great margrave Mansfeld of Ard Caraigh, that came right from the king, to tell the commanders and centurions. Remember everything, because I will not repeat anything. And they are orders that are unheard of.’

The whole tent grew silent.

‘Nilfgaard moved out of Dol Angra,’ began the centurion. They marched through Lyria, in four days they reached Aldersberg and crushed Demavend’s army. In barely six days of siege they captured Vengerberg by betrayal. Now they are marching north and pushing the remains of Aedirnian military to the Pontar Valley and to Dol Blathanna. They are nearing Kaedwen. That is why we have the orders to cross the border and march south, towards the Valley of Flowers. In three days, the Grey Banner must stand on the river Dyfne. In three days, so we will march really quickly, but not a step further than Dyfne. I repeat, not a single step! Shortly afterwards, the Nilfgaardians will appear on the other side. With them, and now pay attention, we cannot fight. Under any circumstances do you understand? Only if they will try to cross the river will we go to the shore and show our flags so that they know it’s us, the Kaedweni army.’

It seemed that there could not be no bigger silence in the tent,

‘How is that?’ said Bode after a while. ‘Not fight Nilfgaardians? We are going to war aren’t we? How is it, sir centurion?’

‘The order was: we are not going to war, but...’ Halfpot scratched his neck. ‘But we are carrying brotherly help. We are crossing the borders to protect the people of Upper Aedirn... Aw hell what am I saying? Not Aedirn but the Lower Marks. That was what the great Margrave Mansfeld said. He explained to us, that Demavend was crushed, because he ruled stupidly and lead shitty politics. And just as with him, it is the end of Aedirn. Only our king helped Demavend, lent him lots of money – and such riches can’t just be ignored. It is time to get our money back with interest. We also can’t let out brothers and countrymen from the Lower Marks come under the control of Nilfgaard. We have to free them, so that the Lower Marks, the ancient territory of Kaedwen, once under our rule, now returns to our rule. Up to the river Dyfne. Our beloved king Henselt agreed on that border with Emhyr of Nilfgaard. An agreement is an agreement, but the Grey Banner must stand on the shores of the river. Understood?’

No one answered. Halfpot frowned and waved his hand.

‘You didn’t understand shit, I see. You don’t have to worry about it, because even I didn’t understand much more than you. Most importantly our beloved king, dukes and the nobility understands. We are the army, we have to get to Dyfne in three days, occupy the shore and stay alert! And that’s it! Pour me more, Ziwyk.’

‘Sir centurion,’ stuttered Ziwyk. ‘What if... What if some Aedirnian soldiers intercept us? What if they resist? After all we are marching armed through their land. What will we do?’

‘And what of our brothers and countrymen,’ added Staler carefully, ‘those that we are to free, begin to shoot arrows or throw stones at us? What then eh?’

‘In three days we have to stand on the shores of Dyfne.’ strongly reiterated Halfpot. ‘If someone tries to stop or stall us, they are a clear enemy. And enemies have to be neutralized on the spot! But, this is an order! The huts and barns are not to be burned, the cattle not taken, do not pillage or rape the women! Get that in your damn heads and the heads of your soldiers, who breaks this order will be hanged. The duke repeated it at least ten times, is that enough, Staler? This is an order for fucks sake! And now, out to your squads, everyone hurry up, the horses and equipment must shine like the full moon! In the evening there is a rapport, the duke and commanders want to see how the army is prepared. If some squad gets drunk, then the corporal will wish he was never born! He won’t forget me until his death! Carry out!’

Ziwyk got out with the others, blinked in the sharp sunlight and looked at the chaos in the camp. Corporals hurried to their squads, centurions talked, cadets and squires were in the way of everyone. Cuirassiers from the Ban Ard trained and clouds of dust rose around them. The heat was unbearable.

Ziwyk sped up. He passed four musicians, that had come from Ard Carraigh yesterday. The artists sat in the shade of the richly decorated tent of Margrave Mansfeld and were composing heroic songs about the victorious campaign, about the king’s wisdom, the composure of the dukes and the bravery of the simple soldiers. As always, they did it in advance so they did not waste time.

‘Our brothers welcome us, welcomed us with breaaaad and saaaalt...’ sung one of them. ‘The rescuers welcomed themselves and the rescued with bread and saalt... I say, Hrafnir, tell me some rhyme for “salt!”’

The second musician gave a rhyme. Ziwyk did not hear it.

His squad camped under some willows near a pond.

‘Ready yourself!’ growled Ziwyk and stood far away enough so none of his men could smell his breath. It would have no positive influence on morale. ‘Before the sun moves my four fingers, the squad has to be ready for an inspection. Everything must shine: weapons, armor, equipment, horses! In the evening there will be a rapport, if I get disgraced by any of you, I will break your bones. That son of a bitch will never forget me! Come on!’

‘We are going to battle,’ guessed Kraska and quickly put his shirt into his pants. ‘Are we going to battle sir corporal?’

‘And what did you think? That we are going to the harvest-home dance? We are crossing the borders. Tomorrow at dawn the whole of the Grey Banner marches. The centurion did not say in which formation, but our squad will be in the front as always. So, move your arses! Hey, wait a moment! I have to tell you something and that is an order. This will not be regular war lads. The dukes made up some shitty new stuff, some rescuing or something. We are not going to the enemy but with well... brotherly help for our ancient territory, yeah. So listen what I say now: leave the people in Aedirn in peace, don’t steal...’

‘Why is that?’ Kraska’s mouth opened in disbelief. ‘Don’t steal? And what will we feed the horses corporal?’

‘Get enough food for horses but not more. Don’t beat the people, don’t burn the huts, don’t destroy the crops... Shut your mouth Kraska! We are no raiding party, but an army, to

hell with you! You will obey your orders or get hanged! As I said: don't pillage, don't burn, the women...'

Zywik paused and pondered.

'The women,' he added after a while, 'plough them silently and out of sight, so that you are not seen.'

'On the bridge over Dyfne,' finished Dandelion, 'they shook hands. Margrave Mansfeld of Ard Carraigh and Menno Coehoorn, supreme commander of the nilfgaardian army of Dol Angra. They shook hands over the bleeding and flickering kingdom of Aedirn and sealed it with the robbery and sharing of loot. The most disgusting symbol the world has ever seen.'

Geralt was silent.

'As we are at disgusting symbols, Dandelion,' he asked after a moment, 'what did the sorcerers think? I mean those from the Council and Chapter?'

'None remained with Demavend,' answered the poet. 'Foltest, on the other hand, banished all of the mages that served him from Temeria. Philippa is in Tretogor, she helps queen Hedwig with the turmoil that is still in Redania. Triss and three others whose names I can't remember are with her. A few sorcerers are in Kaedwen, many fled to Kovir and Hengfors. Many chose neutrality, because Esterad Thyssen and Medamir are as you know, still neutral.'

'I know. And Vilgefortz? And those who were with him?'

'Vilgefortz disappeared. It was expected that he would show up in the conquered Aedirn as Emhyr's governor. But no one has seen him or heard from him. Of him, or his companions. Except...'

'Speak, Dandelion.'

'Except one sorceress. She became queen...'

Filavandrel aen Fidhail silently waited for his answer. The queen, looking out of a window, was also silent. The window lead into a garden, one that was until recently the pride of the previous ruler of Dol Blathanna, a governor of the tyrant of Vengerberg. Fleeing from the Free Elves, marching as the vanguard of the imperial armies, the governor took most valuables from the ancient elven castle, even part of the furniture. But he could not steal the garden – so he destroyed it.

'No, Filavandrel,' the queen finally answered his question. 'It is too soon for that, too soon. We should not think about expanding our borders, for we don't even safely know where they are now. Henselt of Kaedwen stands on the shores of the Dyfne. The scouts report that he still hasn't stopped thinking about possible aggression. He could attack us any day.'

'So we have not accomplished anything.'

The queen slowly stretched her hand. A small Tortoiseshell butterfly, that entered through the window, settled on her laced sleeve, folding and unfolding its colorful wings.

'We have accomplished more,' reminded the queen very silently, as to not frighten the butterfly, 'than we could have hoped. After a hundred years we finally have our Valley of Flowers back...'

'I would not call it that,' smiled Filavandrel bitterly. 'After the march of the army, its more like the Valley of Ashes.'

‘We have our own land again,’ the queen answered and carefully inspected the butterfly. ‘We are a nation again, and not exiles. And ashes fertilize the land, the Valley will bloom once again in spring.’

‘That is little, Daisy, very little. We have become modest. Only recently, we boasted that we would push the humans to the seas, from where they came. And now he limited our lands and ambition only on Dol Blathanna.’

‘Emhyr Deithwen gave us Dol Blathanna as a gift. What do you expect me to do Filavandrel? Should I demand more? Do not forget, that in accepting gifts we have to have a certain degree of gratitude. Especially when it is Emhyr’s gifts, for the Emperor never gives anything for free. The land he gave us, we have to keep. The powers that we have, are just enough to defend Dol Blathanna.’

‘We will pull out the commandos from Temeria, Redania and Kaedwen,’ advised the white-haired elf. ‘Let’s call all Scoia’tael fighting the humans. You are their queen now, Enid, they will obey you. Now, that we have our own land, their fight has lost its meaning. Their duty is to come back and protect the Valley of Flowers. Let them fight as a free nation protecting their country. For now, they are dying in forests like bandits.’

The elf’s head sank.

‘Emhyr will not allow it,’ she whispered. ‘The commandos are to continue fighting.’

‘Why? What for?’ Filavandrel aen Fidhail, straightened suddenly.

‘I will tell you more. It is forbidden for us to support and help them. That was Foltest’s and Henselt’s condition. Temeria and Kaedwen will respect our authority in Dol Blathanna, but only if we officially condemn the actions of the Squirrels and terminate all connections.’

‘Those children are dying, Daisy. They are dying each day, dying in a unfair battle. After the hidden contracts with Emhyr, the people will turn on them and crush them. After all, they are our children, our future! Our blood! And you are telling me, we have to terminate all our connections. *Que’ss aen me dicette, Enid? Vorsaeke’llan? Aen vaine?*’

The butterfly fluttered its wings, rose and flew to the window, where the flow of hot air carried it away. Francesca Findabair called Enid an Gleanna, formerly a sorceress, now the queen of the Aen Seidhe, the Free Elves, looked up. In her beautiful blue eyes, tears glistened.

‘The commandos,’ she said silently, ‘must continue the war. They have to trouble the human kingdoms, make their preparations for war more difficult. That is Emhyr’s order. I cannot stand against the Emperor. Forgive me Filavandrel.’

Filavandrel aen Fidhail looked at her and bowed deeply.

‘I forgive you Enid. But I do not know, if they will too.’

‘Not one of the sorcerers changed their mind? Not even when Nilfgaard was beating and burning Aedirn, no one abandoned Vilgefortz and joined Philippa?’

‘No one’

Geralt was silent for a long time.

‘I don’t believe it,’ he said finally very silently. ‘I don’t believe that none would reject Vilgefortz, when his true motives and consequences for his betrayal came to light. I am, as is known, a naive, stupid, anachronistic witcher. Perhaps that is why I cannot believe that none of the mage’s conscience awakened.’

Tissaia de Vries put her trained decorative signature under the last sentence of the letter. After some thinking, she added an ideogram telling her true name. A name, that no one these days knew. A name, she has not used for a long, long time. From the time, she became a sorceress.

Lark.

She put down the pen. Very carefully, straight, exactly across the written sheet of parchment. For a long time she sat motionless, looking at the red ball of the setting sun. Then she stood up. She went to the window. For some time, she looked at the house roofs. Houses, in which ordinary people were going to sleep, tired from their ordinary human lives and work, full of ordinary human fears of what awaits them, what will happen tomorrow. The sorceress looked at the message on the table. A message for ordinary people. The fact, that most ordinary people could not read, was not important.

She stood in front of the mirror. She adjusted her hair. Adjusted her clothes. Blew a non-existent speck from her puffed sleeve. Adjusted her necklace of spinel over her neckline.

The candles under the mirror were not in their places. A maid must have touched them while cleaning the room. The maid – an ordinary woman. An ordinary person with eyes full of fear, of what would happen. An ordinary person, lost in the times of contempt. An ordinary person looking for hope and assurance in her, in a sorceress...



An ordinary person, whose trust she did not fulfill.

From the streets, an echo of steps came to her, of heavy military steps. Tissaia de Vries did not make a single motion, did not turn her head to the window. She did not care whose steps those were. The royal guard? The judge with the order to arrest the traitress? Assassins? Vilgefortz men? She did not care.

The steps grew quiet in the streets.

The candles under the mirror were not in the right place. The sorceress arranged them, arranged the position of the tablecloth, so that its corner fell exactly in the middle of the table edge and was parallel with the square candlestand. She pulled her golden armbands from her wrists and put them on the smooth tablecloth. She looked at everything with her critical eyes, but did not find any error. Everything was perfect, exactly, as it should be.

She opened a shelf of a dresser and took out a short scalpel with a bone handle.

Her face was hard and motionless. Dead.

The house was silent. So silent that one could hear the petal of a fading Tulip fall on the table.

The sun, red as blood, slowly set behind the roofs.

Archmistress Tissaia de Vries sat down on her chair, blew out the candles, arranged the position of the pen on the parchment for one last time, then cut the wrists on both of her hands.

The fatigue from the days travel showed. Dandelion suddenly woke up and realized, that he probably fell asleep while talking. He moved a bit and rolled from the heap of branches; Geralt was not laying next to him and their night-lying area lost balance.

‘Where did...’ he sat down and cleared his throat. ‘Where did I stop? Ah, at the mages... Geralt? Where are you?’

‘Here’ said the invisible witcher out of the darkness. ‘Continue please. You were about to speak of Yennefer.’

‘Listen,’ answered the bard, who knew perfectly well, that he would not mention even a single word about the person concerned. ‘I really don’t...’

‘Don’t lie. I know you.’

‘If you know me that well,’ said the bard angrily, ‘why the hell are you forcing me to talk. You know me like a gappy penny, you must know why I was silent, why I did not repeat overheard gossip! You must know what kind of gossip that is and why I want to spare you from it!’

‘*Que suecc’s?*’ reacted one of the sleepy dryads at his raised voice.

‘I am sorry,’ said the witcher quietly.

The Brokilonian lamps faded, only a few green lights remained.

‘Geralt,’ Dandelion interrupted the silence. ‘You always said, that you stand aside, you don’t care about anything... She could have believed it. Perhaps she believed it when she took part in Vilgefortz game...’

‘Enough,’ Geralt stopped him. ‘Not a word more. If I hear the word game, I’m in the mood to choke someone. Ech, better give me your razor, I want to shave finally.’

‘Now? Its still dark...’

‘It is never too dark for me. I’m a mutant.’

The witcher ripped the pack with toiletry needs from his hands and went to the well. Dandelion realised, that sleepiness has completely left him. The sky was getting brighter,

dawn grew near. He stood up and walked under the trees, carefully avoiding the sleeping, cuddling dryads

‘Do you belong to those, who caused it?’

He turned around sharply. The dryad leaning on the pine had hair the color of silver, he could see that even in twilight.

‘An unpleasant view,’ she said and crossed her hands on her chest. ‘The one, who lost everything. It is interesting, bard, because I once thought that one can never lose everything, that something always has to remain. Always. Even in the times of contempt, where naivety can take revenge in the cruelest way, one cannot lose everything. And he... He lost a lot of blood, the option of walking healthy, partial movement of his left hand, his witchers sword, the woman he loves, the daughter he miraculously found, confidence, faith... I told myself, that there had to be something he had not lost. But I was wrong, he has nothing, not even that razor.’

Dandelion didn’t say anything, The dryad didn’t move.

‘I asked, if you also took part in it.’ she said after a while. ‘Perhaps my question was pointless. Obviously, it is also your fault. If someone has friends, but still loses everything, they are also guilty. For what they did, or did not. Guilty for not knowing, what they had to do.’

‘What could I have done?’ he whispered silently. ‘What could I have changed?’

‘I don’t know,’ answered the dryad.

‘I didn’t tell him everything...’

‘That I know.’

‘I’m not guilty.’

‘But you are.’

‘No! I’m not!’

He jumped up, the branches of their improvised bed cracked. Geralt was sitting next to him and wiped his face. He smelled of soap.

‘You are not?’ he asked. ‘What did you imagine? That you are a frog prince? Calm down, you’re not. That you are a braggart? In that case, it may have been a precognitive dream.’

Dandelion looked around. They were alone.

‘Where... Where are they?’

‘In the outskirts of the forest. Pack up, the time has come.’

‘Geralt, a moment ago I talked to a dryad. She talked common without an accent. She told me...’

‘No dryad in this squad talks common without an accent. You imagined something, Dandelion. This is Brokilon, here you can see all kinds of stuff.’

On the outskirts of the forest, one single dryad awaited them. Dandelion recognized her immediately, it was the one with green hair that brought them the light and wanted him to sing more yesterday night. She raised her hand for them to stop. In her second hand, she held a bow and strung arrow. Geralt put his hand on the bard’s shoulder and pressed strongly.

‘Is something wrong?’ Dandelion asked quietly.

‘Of course. Be silent and don’t move.’

The thick mist over the Ribbon muffled voices and sounds, but not enough, as Dandelion heard splashes and the snuffling of horses. Riders were wading through the river.



‘Elves’ he figured. ‘Scoia’tael. They are running to Brokilon to hide right? A whole commando...’

‘No’ said Geralt, looking at the mist. The poet knew that the witcher’s senses were incredibly sharp and sensitive, although even he could not tell whether he was using sight or hearing. ‘That is no commando, only those who remain. Five or six riders, three additional horses. Stay here Dandelion, I’m going there.’

‘*Gar’ean,*’ warned the green-haired dryad and raised her bow. ‘*N’tē va, Gwynbleidd! Ki’rin!*’

‘*Thaess aep, Fauve,*’ the witcher interrupted her, unexpectedly harshly. ‘*Aespar que va’en, ell’ea?* Help yourself, shoot. If not be silent and don’t try to scare me off. Nothing will make me afraid anymore. I have to talk to Milva Barring and I will do it, whether you like it or not! Wait here, Dandelion.’

The dryad dipped her head. And her bow.

Nine horses emerged from the mist. Dandelion noticed, that truly only six of them had riders. He recognized indistinct forms of dryads, abandoning the undergrowth and going towards them. He noticed, that three riders needed help dismounting and had to be supported, so that could reach the safety of the Brokilonian trees. Other dryads ran into the mist and disappeared like ghosts. From the other shore, sounds of cries, whinnying of horses and splashing water could be heard after a while. He had the feeling he also heard the whiz of arrows, but he was not sure.

‘They were followed...’ he let out a sigh. Fauve turned to him. Her fingers still held her bow.

‘Sing a song, *taedh*’ she hissed. ‘*N’tē shaent a’minne,* not about Ettariel. Not love. No time. Now it is time to kill, so. Sing such a song, now!’

‘I, I,’ he stuttered, ‘I did not cause what is happening...’

The green-haired dryad was silent for a while and looked away.

‘I did not either,’ she said and disappeared into the undergrowth.

The witcher returned after about an hour. He led two saddled horses - Pegasus and a brown mare. On the mare were bloodstains.

‘That is an elven horse eh? One of those who came across the river?’

‘Yes’ confirmed Geralt. His face was motionless and his voice was alien. ‘That is an elven mare. I will take her. Once I have the opportunity, I will trade her for a horse, that knows how to carry a wounded man, and if the wounded falls, stays with him. They did not teach that to this mare.’

‘Are we leaving?’

‘You are leaving,’ the witcher handed Dandelion his reins. ‘Farewell, Dandelion. The dryads will accompany you two miles upstream and there you can go, and don’t fall into the hands of the Brugge mercenaries, they still could be waiting on the other shore.’

‘And you? Will you stay here?’

‘No, I won’t.’

‘You learned something? From the Squirrels? Something about Ciri?’

‘Good luck, Dandelion.’

‘Geralt! Listen...’

‘What should I listen to?’ shouted the witcher, his voice braking. ‘I can’t... I can’t just leave her to her destiny. She is alone... She must not be alone, Dandelion! You cannot understand that. No one understands, but I know... If she is alone, the same thing will happen as before... What once happened to me... You don’t understand...’

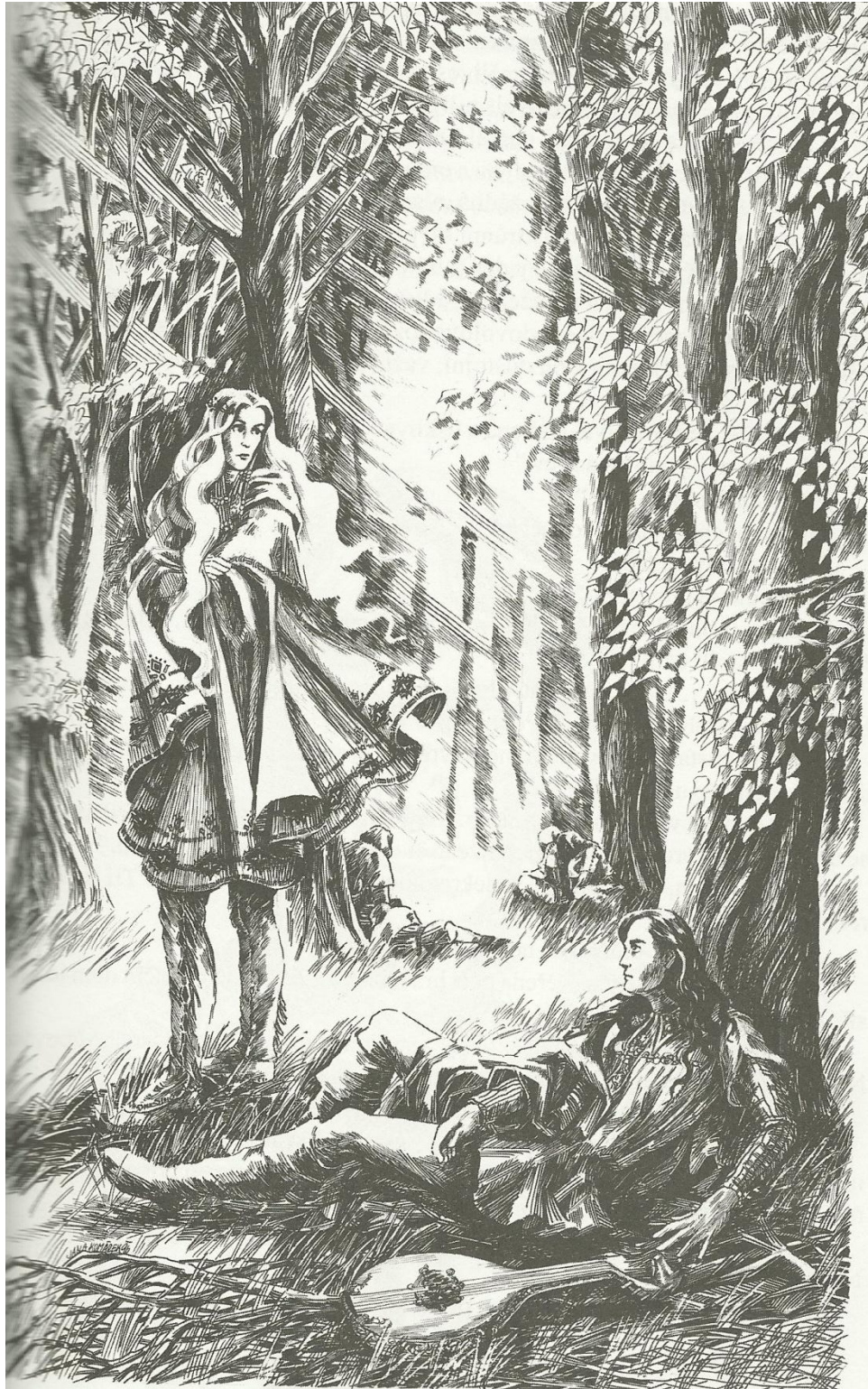
‘I understand. That’s why I’m going with you.’

‘Are you insane? Do you know where I’m heading?’

‘I know Geralt, I... I didn’t tell you everything, I... I feel guilty. I didn’t do anything, I did not know what to do... But now I know. I will go with you. I’m your friend. I did not tell you... about Ciri, about the gossip I heard. I met friends from Kovir, that heard with their own ears the messages, that came from Nilfgaard... I figure that those messages may have reached the Squirrels. That you already know everything from the elves that came through the Ribbon. But allow... that it will be me... that tells you everything...’

The witcher stood with his head and hands hanging.

‘Jump on your horse,’ he finally said with a resigned voice. ‘You will tell me on the way.’



That morning, an unusual excitement reigned over castle Loc Grim, the summer residence of the Emperor. Even more unusual because all the excitement and impatience surely did not belong to the customs of the nilfgaardian nobility and all expressions of impatience and excitement were regarded as immature. Similar behaviour was regarded as punishable by the nilfgaardian aristocracy, that even the immature youth was ashamed of it, and for them, excitement and immature feelings were natural and excusable.

That morning on Loc Grim, no youth was present, they had no place here. The great throne room was filled by serious and stern magnates, squires and knights, all dressed in ceremonial court black, like one man, refreshed only by white collars and cuffs. The men were accompanied by equally serious and stern ladies, whom customs allowed to decorate their black dresses with jewelry. All showed dignity, seriousness and strictness. But in truth, they were incredibly excited.

‘They say she is ugly. Thin and ugly.’

‘But she is supposed to be royal blood.’

‘From an illegitimate annexion.’

‘Nothing like that. She is no bastard.’

‘Will she sit on the throne then?’

‘The Emperor will decide...’

‘Aw hell, look at Ardal aep Dahy and Count de Wett... How they are looking... As if they had drunk vinegar...’

‘Silence, Graf... Are you surprised? If something from the gossip is true, then Emhyr will give the squares to an ancient lineage. He will humiliate them...’

‘Gossip will remain gossip, it will not be confirmed. The Emperor will not marry that bastard! He cannot do that...’

‘Emhyr can do anything. Careful with your words baron, be careful what you say. There have been people who said that the Emperor cannot do this or that. They end up executed.’

‘I heard he already signed the decree, where he assessed the allowance. Three hundred talents of annual rent. Consider that.’

‘And the title of Infanta. Did any of you see her?’

‘Immediately after arriving she was entrusted to Countess Liddertal. Her house is guarded now.’

‘The Countess probably got the order to teach that brat some manners. A new Infanta is said to behave like the child of cows.’

‘What is so strange about that? She is from the north, from the barbaric Cintra...’

‘The more is the gossip about Emhyr’s wedding more unlikely. No, no, that is completely impossible. The Emperor will marry de Wett’s youngest daughter, as was established. He will not marry that self-proclaimed princess!’

‘It is about time he marries someone at all. For the dynasty... It is about time Nilfgaard gets a crown prince...’

‘Then let him marry. Of course not with that barbaric tomboy!’

‘Quieter, not so loud! I assure you, dear gentlemen, that will not happen. What goal would such a marriage further?’

‘Politics, Comtesse. We are at war. Such a marriage would have political but also strategic importance... The dynasty, from which the Infanta comes from, has legal titles and recognized feudal rights for the lands around the Lower Yaruga. If she becomes the wife of the Emperor... Ha that would be a move! Look there at ambassador Esterad, how they whisper...’

‘I hope that your eccentric theory is not serious, prince? Or did you advise Emhyr to do that?’

‘It is my business, what I mean seriously and what not. As for the Emperor’s decision, you would do best if you would not question it. You and everyone else.’

‘So he already decided?’

‘I do not judge.’

‘Then you are wrong.’

‘What do you mean, lady?’

‘Emhyr departed baroness Tarnhann from the court. He ordered her to return to her husband.’

‘He drove out Dervla Tryffin Broine? Impossible! She was his favorite for three years...’

‘I repeat, he sent her away from the court.’

‘That is true. I heard that, Dervla Goldhair caused a horrible scene. Four guards had to forcibly push her into the carriage...’

‘Her husband will be happy...’

‘I doubt it.’

‘By the Great Sun! Emhyr rejected Dervla? Kicked her out because of that foundling? Because of that barbarian from the North?’

‘Quieter! Quieter, curse you...’

‘Who is behind it? What side?’

‘Quieter, please. They are watching us...’

‘That small bitch... I mean infant... is said to be ugly. Once the Emperor sees her...’

‘You mean, he has not seen her yet?’

‘He did not have time. He came from Darn Ruach an hour ago.’

‘Emhyr has never chosen an ugly one. Aine Dermott... Clara aep Gwydolyn Gor...Dervla Tryffin Broine... All beauties...’

‘Perhaps that savage will grow pretty...’

‘Once she bathes? I heard the nobility of the North does not do that often....’

‘Careful with your words. You may be talking about the future Emperor’s wife...’

‘She is still a child. She is no older than fourteen.’

‘It would obviously be a political marriage... A pure formality...’

‘If that was the truth, then Dervla Goldhair would remain in the court. The Cintran waif, politically and formally on the throne at Emhyr’s side... And in the evenings, Emhyr would give her the crown jewels to play with and he would disappear into Dervla’s room... At least until she gets old enough to give him an heir.’

‘Hmm... you may be right. So what is the name of this.... infant?’

‘Xerella or something like that.’

‘No, no. It is... Zirilla. Yes, Zirilla.’

‘A barbaric name!’

‘Quieter, damn it!’

‘Keep the seriousness. You are acting like some fools.’

‘You dare! I might consider those words an insult!’

‘If you want satisfaction, paladin, you know where you will find me!’

‘Silence. The Emperor...’

The herold did not have to do much: a single tap of the pole on the floor was enough for the heads of the nobility and knighthood to bow down like crops on a windy day. Such silence grew in the throne room, that the herold did not even have to raise his voice:

‘Emhyr var Emreis, Deithwen Addan yn Carp aep Morvudd!’

The White Flame Dancing on the Grave-Mounds of Enemies entered the room. With his usual lively walk, energetically waving his right hand, he walked the Wall of nobility. The Emperor’s black dress did not differ from others, though it lacked the laced collars and cuffs. His black hair, never artificially curled, was held by a thin gold band, on his neck, the imperial chain gleamed.

Emhyr walked on the podium and casually sat down on the throne, put his elbow on the armrest and put his hand under his chin. He did not swing his leg on the other armrest, which meant, that the ceremony was still in effect. None of the bowed heads rose even an inch.

The Emperor loudly cleared his throat. The guests let out a breath and stood upright. The herold tapped the floor a second time.

‘Cirilla Fiona Elen Riannon, Princess of Cintra, Princess of Brugge and duchess of Sodden, heiress of Inis Ard Skellig and Inis An Skellig, protector of Attre and Abb Yaruga!’

All eyes turned to the doors, where a tall, dignous Stella Congreve, comtesse of Liddertal stood. Next to the comtesse, stood the holder of all the previously listed magistral titles. Blond, pale, skinny, slightly stooped, dresses in a long lightblue dress in which she obviously felt uneasy.

‘Emhyr Deithwen straightened up in his throne, the guests immediately bowed down. Stella Congreve inconspicuously pushed the blonde girl forward and both walked through the hall of bowing nobles, the representatives of Nilfgaards best families. The girl walked stiff and uncertain. She tried to copy the comtesse.

Cirilla Fiona Elen Riannon stumbled.

Ugly and skinny, thought the comtesse on the way to the throne. Clumsy and not very smart. But I will make a lady out of her. I will make a Princess out of her, just like Emhyr ordered.

The White Flame of Nilfgaard watched her from the height of his throne. Like usual, his eyes were slightly narrowed and on his lips, a hint of a snide smile was playing.

The Princess of Cintra stumbled a second time. The Emperor leaned back and touched his cheek with a finger. He was smiling. Stella Congreve was close enough to judge that smile. She froze with fear. *Something is not right*, she realized, terrified. *Something is not right. By the Great Sun, heads will fall...*

She retained presence of mind, bowed down, and forced the girl to do the same.

Emhyr var Emreis did not stand up from his throne. But he slightly nodded his head. The guests held their breath.

‘Princess,’ said the Emperor. The girl cringed. Emhyr did not look at her, but he fixedly observed the nobility assembled in the hall.

‘Princess,’ he repeated his salutation. ‘I am happy to be able to greet you in my home and my land. I assure you, with my imperial word, that the day is near, when all your titles, that rightly belong to you, and all lands, that you are entitled to inherit, will be returned to you. The usurpers, who seized your lands, have declared war against me. They attacked the Imperium, under the excuse of guarding the rights of your lineage. Let the world know, that you came to me, not them, with a plea of help. Let the world know, that here, in my lands, you are greeted with acceptance and honor, belonging to your status, while you were a mere exile in the lands of my enemies. Let the world know, that in my lands, you are safe, while my enemies not only denied you your crown, but even sought your life.’

The Emperor’s look stopped at the ambassadors of Esterad Thyssen, king of Kovir and on the ambassador of Nedamir, ruler of the Hengfors League.

‘Let the world know, including the kings, that hesitated on which side is law and justice. I declare, in front of the world, that assistance will be provided, yours and my enemies will be defeated. In Cintra, in Sodden and Brugge, in Attra, on the islands of Skellig and in the delta of the Yaruga, peace will rule again, and you will sit down on the throne to the delight of your peasants and all justice loving people.’

The girl in the lightblue dress, bowed her head even lower.

‘Until that time comes,’ continued Emhyr, ‘you will be treated in my land with due respect and seriousness from me and my people. And, because in your kingdom, the flames of war are still burning, as proof of my respect and friendship of Nilfgaard, I grant you the title of Infanta of Rowan and Ymlac, Lady of the castle Darn Rowan, to which you will go now, to await the coming of a calmer, happier time.’

Stella Congreve controlled herself perfectly, she did not allow even a shadow of astonishment to cross her face. *He won’t leave her with him*, she thought, *he is sending her to Darn Rowan, to the end of the world, where he won’t ever come. It is obvious, that he will not*

court the girl and he won't even think of marriage. It looks like, he does not even want to see her. Why did he get rid of Dervla then? What is he hiding?

She recovered, quickly grabbed the young girl's arm. The audience ended. As they were leaving the room, the guests bowed, but the Emperor did not watch them anymore.

Once they left, Emhyr var Emreis threw his leg over the armrest of the throne.

'Caellach,' he said. 'To me.'

The Seneschal stopped at the distance, that was ceremonially allowed and bowed down.

'Closer,' ordered Emhyr. 'Come closer, Caellach. I would speak quietly. What I say now, is only for your ears.'

'Your majesty...'

'What is still planned for today?'

'The takeover of delegating documents and the granting of the formal exequatur to the ambassador of king Nedamir of Kovir,' said the Seneschal quickly. 'The naming of governors, prefects and knights. The confirmation of earldom and the relevant time allowance to...'

'We will give the exequatur to the ambassador and I will accept him in a private audience. The other things, tomorrow.'

'As you order, your Majesty.'

'Tell viscount Eiddon and Skellen, that immediately after the audience, I await them in the library. For a confidential meeting. You will also be there. And you will bring your famous mage, that farseer.. What is his name?'

'Xarthisius, Majesty. He lives in the tower near the city...'

'I'm not interested in where he lives. Bring him to my rooms. Quietly, secretly.'

'Your Majesty... is it smart to have that astrologer...'

'I gave an order Caellach.'

'Yes, your Majesty.'

Before even three hours passed, all who were summoned assembled in the imperial library. The invitation did not surprise Vattier de Rideaux, viscount of Eiddon. Vattier was the leader of military intelligence and Emhyr called him quite often – after all, Nilfgaard was at war. The invitation did not surprise Stefan Skellen, called Kalous, either. The Emperor granted him the function of coroner – the expert on special and strange missions. Because of that, Kalous was never surprised by anything.

The third guest, however was incredibly surprised and also terrified of the invitation. Even more so, because the Emperor turned to him first.

'Master Xarthisius...'

'Your Imperial Majesty...'

'I have to discover the location of a certain person. A person, that disappeared or is hiding. Perhaps that person is imprisoned. All mages, to whom I given this task, failed. You will take care of it.'

'How far is this... How far away may this person be?'

'If I knew that, I would not need you.'

'I beg for pardon, Imperial Majesty...' choked the astrologer. 'The problem is, that great distances make astromancy very difficult and virtually excludes... Ehm, ehm... And if that person is under magical protection... I can try, but...'

'To the point, master.'

'I need time... Preparations... If the conjunction of the stars will be favorable... Ehm, ehm... Your Imperial Majesty demands a uneasy task. I need time...'

Just a moment more, and Emhyr will have him impaled on a tree, thought Kalous. If that sorcerer won't stop bumbling...

‘Master Xarthisius,’ said the Emperor unexpectedly calmly, and kindly. ‘You will get everything you need. Including time. Within reasonable limits of course.’

‘I will do what is in my powers,’ assured the astrologer. ‘but I will only be able to pinpoint a approximate localization.. That means an area or radius....’

‘What?’

‘Astromancy...’ choked Xarthisius. ‘Astromancy allows in great distances only a approximate area... With a great tolerance... Very great. I don’t know if I will be able...’

‘You will be able, master,’ said the Emperor, his dark eyes flashed ominously. ‘Your abilities have my full confidence. And about the tolerance: the smaller yours, the bigger mine will be.’

Xarthisius cringed.

‘I will need the exact date of birth of that person,’ he said. ‘If possible also the hour. Something that belongs to that person would also help immensely.’

‘Hair,’ said Emhyr silently. ‘Can it be hair?’

‘Ach!’ rejoiced the astrologer. ‘Hair! That will significantly help... If only I had urine or excrements...’

He looked into Emhyr’s eyes and shut his mouth and fell on his knees.

‘I humbly beg your Imperial Majesty for forgiveness...’ he choked. ‘Please... Of course hair will be enough, Enough... Where will I find them?’

‘They will be delivered to you today, with the date and hour of birth. Master, I don’t intend to distract you more. Return to your tower and begin observing the constelations.’

‘May the Great Sun watch over Your Imperial...’

‘Good, good. You are dismissed.’

Now it is our turn, thought Kalous. *What awaits us?*

‘If any of you,’ said the Emperor slowly ‘speaks even a word of what will be said here, you will be drawn and quartered. Vattier!’

‘I am listening, Your Majesty.’

‘How did this... Infanta get here? Who took care of it?’

‘From the fortress Nastrog,’ the leader of intelligence furrowed his brow. ‘She was escorted by guards of your Majesty under the leadership...’

‘Thats not what I am asking, plague on you. How did she appear in Nastrog, in Verden? Who delivered her to the castle? Who commanded it? Who sent the report? Which commander?’

‘Pitcairn Godyvron,’ Vattier de Rideaus answered immediately. ‘He was of course, informed of the task, that Rience and Count Cahir aep Caellach had. Three days after the events on Thanedd Island, two people appeared in Nastrog. To be exact, one human and one half-elf. They supposedly had orders from Rience and Count Cahir and gave the child to commander Godyvron.’

‘Aha’ smiled the Emperor, so that Kalous felt frost on his back. ‘Vilgefortz promised me he would catch Cirilla on Thanedd. Rience assured me the same. Cahir Mawr Dyffryn aep Ceallach had detailed orders. And look, three days after the incident on that mage’s island, they deliver Cirilla to Nastrog over the Yaruga. Not Vilgefortz, not Rience nor Cahir, but a human and a half-elf. Godyvron, of course did not think about imprisoning them?’

‘No. Should I punish him for it, Your Majesty?’

‘No need.’

Kalous swallowed his saliva. Emhyr was silent, rubbed his forehead, the giant diamond in his ring shone like a star. The the Emperor lifted his head:

‘Vattier.’

‘Your Majesty?’

‘Declare an alert to all your men. I order the capture of Rience and Cahir. I presume, both are hiding in areas that are not under the control of our forces, possibly with the Scoia’tael or elves of Enid Findabair. Arrest both and they are to be immediately brought to Darn Rauch and be passed to torture and law.’

‘What should we ask them, Your Majesty?’ Vattier narrowed his eyes, pretending not to notice the sudden pallor of Seneschal Ceallach.

‘Nothing, Later, once they soften up, I will interrogate them personally. Skellen!’

‘I’m listening.’

‘As soon as that damn Xarthisius finds something out – of course if that bumbling idiot is able to do what I ordered – then immediately organise a search for a person in the location that the mage pinpoints. You will get the description. It is possible, that the astrologer will mark a location under our rule. In that case, make everyone at your disposal who lives in that area – all civilian and military personel. This is a matter of absolute priority. Do you understand?’

‘Yes. Can I...’

‘No you cannot. Sit and listen, Kalous. Xarthisius probably won’t find anything out. The person, that we are looking for, is almost certainly in a foreign land and under magical protection, I bet in the same place as our mysteriously disappeared friend Vilgefoltz of Roggeveen. Because of that, Skellen, you will prepare and train a special squad, which you will lead. You will choose the best people. They have to be prepared for anything – and they cannot be superstitious. That means they must not fear magic.’

Kalous raised his brows.

‘Your new squad,’ finished Emhyr, ‘will be tasked to invade and capture the, for now unknown, but surely perfectly hidden and guarded hideout of sorcerer Vilgefoltz, our former friend and ally.’

‘I understand,’ said Kalous calmly. ‘If I understand correctly, the person that we are looking for, if we find in them in that hideout, not even a hair can fall off the head.’

‘You understand correctly.’

‘And Vilgefoltz?’

‘His can,’ the Emperor smiled cruelly. ‘His hair must fall – together with his head. That also applies to anyother sorcerers who will be in his hideout. Without exception.’

‘I understand. Who will be tasked with finding Vilgefoltz’s hideout?’

‘You, Kalous.’

Stefan Skellen and Vattier de Rideaux exchanged short glances. Emhyr comfortably leaned back in his seat.

‘Is everything clear? Then... What is the matter Ceallach?’

‘Your Majesty...’ said the Seneschal imploringly, who had not joined the conversation until now. ‘I beg for pardon...’

‘There is no pardon for traitors. There is no mercy for those, who do not fulfill my will.’

‘Cahir... My son...’

‘Your son,’ Emhyr narrowed his eyes. ‘I don’t know yet, what your son caused. I want to believe that his guilt is only because of his stupidity and incapability and that its not conscious treason. If that is the truth, he will be beheaded, and not crushed on the wheel.’

‘Your Majesty! Cahir is no traitor... Cahir would not...’

‘Enough, Ceallach, not a word more. The guilty will be punished! They tried to deceive me and that is unforgivable. Vattier, Skellen, in an hour, you will return here for my signed instructions, orders and powers of Attorney, then immediately start carrying out your tasks. And one more thing: I don’t have to, I hope, tell you that that girl, whom you saw in the throne room today, must be regarded as Cirilla, Princess of Cintra, Infanta of Rowan. By everyone. It is a national secret!’

The present men all looked at the Emperor with astonishment. Deithwen Addan yn Carn
aep Morvudd smiled

‘You don’t understand? Instead of the real Cirilla of Cintra, they delivered me some
imposter. Those traitors, probably assumed I wouldn’t know her. But I know the true Ciri.
I would recognize her even at the end of the world and in the darkness of the underworld!’

“The puzzling thing about the unicorn is that, although extremely timid and fearful of people, if it encounters a young maiden, who has not physically been with a man, in intimacy, it will approach her, kneel, and without fear place its head in her lap. It is said in past and ancient times that there were maidens who did not have real dealings with them. For many years they went without marriage and practiced chastity, so they could serve as decoys for unicorn hunters. Soon, however it was learned that the unicorns would only approach maidens that were young. Being a wise beast, the unicorn inevitably understood that those that remained a virgin were suspicious and unnatural.”

Physiologus.

Chapter Six

She was awakened by the heat. The heat burned her skin like an executioners iron.

She could not move her head, something held her back. She tugged and howled in pain, feeling the tears and splits from the skin on her temple. She opened her eyes. The stone on which she rested her head was brown from the dry clotted blood. She touched her temple; her fingers felt a hard, cracked crust. Her scab had been attached to the stone, and now flowed with blood from where she had pulled her head away. Ciri coughed and spat out sand and long sticky saliva. She raised herself up on her elbows; she looked around, then lay back down.

On all sides she was surrounded by a rocky plain, a red-grey, cut by ravines and faults, with mounds of stones piled here and there and huge boulders in bizarre shapes. On the plain, high above, the hot sun hung huge, golden yellow in the sky which distorted the view completely with its blinding glare which vibrated the air.

‘Where am I?’

She carefully touched the swollen wound on her temple. It hurt. It hurt a lot. *I must have hit a pretty large rock*, she thought. *I must have taken a good tumble through the air*. Suddenly she noticed her clothes torn and ripped, and found new sources of pain in her kidneys, back, arms and thighs. During the fall, sand and pebbles had gotten everywhere: in her hair, ears, mouth, also in her eyes, which were stinging and weeping. Her fingers and elbows burned where they had been scrapped to the bone. Slowly and gently she straightened her legs and groaned again, because her left knee answered with a sharp pain. She massaged the knee through her leather pants, she saw no swelling. When trying to breathe she felt an ominous stinging in her side, and when trying to bend her torso she almost screamed, a strong spasm emanated from her lower back. *Just bruised*, she thought. *I don't think I have broken anything. If I had a broken bone it would hurt more. I'm only a little battered. I can stand. I can get up*.

Gradually, with slow movements, she assumed a kneeling position clumsily trying to protect her injured knee. She then got on all fours, moaning, panting and groaning. Finally after what seemed like an eternity, she stood up. Only to collapse immediately back to the stones, due to a wave of dizziness. Feeling a violent wave of nausea, she lay on her side. The rocks burned like fiery red coals.

‘I can't get up...’ she sobbed. ‘I can't... I'll burn under this sun...’

Her head was throbbing a dull, terrible, unstoppable throb. Every movement made the pain grow worse, so Ciri stopped moving. She covered her head with her arms, but the heat soon became unbearable. She realized she would have to escape it. Overcoming the pain in her body, squinting from the pain in her temples, she crawled on all fours towards a huge rock shaped by the wind to resemble a large mushroom, whose shapeless hat gave a bit of shade at its base. She curled herself into a ball, coughing and sniffing.

She lay there a long time, until the sun wandered across the sky and caught up to her again pouring its fire down from above. She shifted to the other side of the boulder, only to realize that it did not make a difference. The sun was at its zenith, the mushroom stone gave almost no shade. She pressed her hands to her temples which were bursting with pain.

She was awakened by a shuddering across her whole body. The fireball-like sun had lost its blinding glare. It was now hanging low over the jagged toothed rocks, it was orange. The heat had receded somewhat.

Ciri sat down with effort and looked around. Her headache had eased and was no longer blinding. She massaged her head and noticed that the heat had dried the wound on her temple, turning it into a hard slippery crust. Still, her whole body hurt, she felt that she did not have one healthy place on it. She cleared her throat, sand gritted between her teeth. She tried to spit the sand out, to no avail. She leaned back against the mushroom shaped boulder, still warm from the sun. *It had finally stopped scorching*, she thought. *Now when the sun goes down, it will no longer be unbearable, and soon...*

Soon night will fall.

She gave a shudder. Where the hell am I? How do I get out of here? And which way? Where do I go? Would it be better to stay here and hope they find me? After all they'll search for me. Geralt. Yennefer. They won't abandon me...

Again and again she tried to spit but could not. Then she understood.

Thirst.

She remembered. Even during her flight, thirst had tormented her. She remembered that in the saddle of the horse she mounted when fleeing to the Tower of Gulls was a wooden canteen. At the time she had no time to untie and drink from it. And now the canteen was gone. There was nothing. Nothing but scorched stones, the tightness that the wound to her head caused her skin, the pain in her body and the dryness of her throat, which was not possible to relieve by even swallowing saliva.

I cannot stay here. I must find water. If I don't find water I'm going to die.

She tried to get up, resting her hands on the mushroom shaped stone. She rose slowly. She took a step. And with a yelp collapsed and fell on her hands and knees again, her body spasmed in a dry retch. A dizziness gripped her so strong that she was forced to lie on the ground again.

I am powerless. And alone. Again. Everyone has betrayed me, abandoned me, and left me alone. Just like before...

Ciri felt her throat constrict in an invisible vice, her jaw ached and her cracked lips began to tremble. She recalled the words of Yennefer. "There is nothing more disgusting than the sight of a sorceress crying." *But no one can see me here... No one...*

Curled up under the mushroom shaped stone, Ciri sobbed, and started a dry, awful cry. Without tears.

When she tried to open her swollen eyelids, they were reluctant to open, she realized that the heat had receded more, and the sky was no longer orange but a cobalt blue dotted with thin strips of white clouds. The disc of the red sun was lower than before, but it still poured heat over the desert in waves. Or maybe the stones were radiating heat?

She sat down, noting that the pain in her skull and her beaten body had ceased to bother her. At that moment, nothing compared with the growing pit in her stomach and the terrible itching that forced her to cough her throat raw.

I mustn't surrender, she thought. *I cannot give up. Like in Kaer Morhen, I need to get up; I have to defeat, overcome, and suppress this pain and weakness. I have to get up now and go. Now at least I know in which direction to go. Where the sun is now in the west is where I need to go. I have to find water and something to eat. I have to. Otherwise I'll perish. This is a desert. I flew to a desert. That thing I entered in the Tower of Gulls, it was a magic portal, a device with which you can move over long distances...*

The portal in Tor Lara was a strange portal. When she rushed to the last floor, there was nothing, not even windows, just bare walls covered with fungus. And on one wall burned an irregular oval filled with an opalescent glow. She had hesitated, but the portal had attracted her, summoned her, even begged her. And there was no other way out, only the brilliant oval. She had closed her eyes and stepped into it.

Then there was a blinding brightness and a raging maelstrom, an explosion took her breath away crushing her ribs. She remembered the flight in the silence, the cold and emptiness, then another flash and the howling of the air. Above her blue, below a blurry greyness...

She dropped in flight, just as the sea eagle drops the fish into the air when it is too heavy for it. When she hit the stones, she'd lost consciousness. She was not sure for how long.

I have read in the temple about portals, she recalled, shaking the sand from her hair. In the books it mentioned teleporters were warped and chaotic, leading to nowhere to hurling people into unknown places. Surely the portal in the Tower of Gulls was one of these. I've been thrown to the end of the world No one knows where I am. No one is going to look for me. If I stay here I die.

She stood up. Mobilizing all her strength and relying on the rock, she took a step. Then a second. Then a third.

Those first steps made her realize that her right boot buckles were broken and the drooping buckle prevented her from walking. She sat down, this time voluntarily, without falling and did a review of her clothing and equipment.

The first thing she discovered was her sword. She had forgotten about it as the scabbard had slipped back. On her belt, next to the sword, as always, was a small purse. A gift from Yennefer. Containing "what a lady should always have with her." Ciri untied the knot holding it closed. Unfortunately the standard equipment of a lady did not reflect the situation in which she found herself now. The purse contained a tortoiseshell comb, a nail-file, and a package wrapped in linen that contained a jade pot of hand lotion. Ciri, immediately began to pour the cream onto her face and parched lips, and immediately licked her hungry lips of the ointment. Without thinking she licked clean the entire jar, enjoying the soothing touch of the fat and moisture. The chamomile, amber and camphor that were used to flavour the cream tasted disgusting, but acted as a stimulant.

She tied the broken buckle of her boot with a strip torn from her sleeve, got up and took a few steps to try it out. She tore off some more and made a bandage that protected her temple and battered sunburned forehead.

She got up, straightened her belt and shifted her sword around on her hips; instinctively she drew it from the scabbard, and ran her thumb down the blade. It was sharp. She already knew it.

I have a weapon, she thought. I'm a witcher. No, I will not die here. As for hunger, I've endured fasting for two days in the temple of Melitele. And water... I have to find water. I'll walk until I find some. This ploughing desert has to stop somewhere, if it is a big desert I would have noticed it in the maps I studied with Jarre. Jarre.. I wonder what he is doing now...

I'm decided. I'm going west, I'll see where the sun sets, it's the only safe location. At the end of the day, I never err; I always know which way to go. If need be, I'll walk all night. I'm a witcher. As soon as my strength returns, I will run the Trail. Then I will soon get to the edge of the desert. I will endure. I must endure... Ha, I'm sure Geralt has been in more than one desert like this, who knows maybe he has been in others that are even worse...

I'm going.

The scenery did not change during the first hour of her march. All around there was nothing but grey-red rocks, sharp, which made her legs slip, forcing her to be cautious. A few shrubs, dry and thorny with their twisted stems spread towards her from cracks in the ground. When she first encountered the shrubs, Ciri stopped thinking that it would be possible to find some leaves or a young branch that she could suck or chew. But the bush had nothing but thorns that pricked her fingers. It did not serve to even make a cane. The second and third bush were exactly alike, she ignored them, passing without stopping.

Night fell quickly. The sun set over the broken teeth of the horizon, the sky glowed red and purple. With the sunset came the cold. At first she welcomed it with joy, as it relieved her burned skin. However, it soon became even colder, and Ciri's teeth began to chatter. She quickened her pace, hoping that it would warm her up, but the effort again awoke the pain in her knee. She started to limp. The downside of the sun sinking completely below the horizon was the immediate darkness that followed. There was a new moon and the stars that dotted the sky did not help. Soon, Ciri could no longer see the road ahead. A few times she stumbled, painfully scraping the skin on her wrists. Twice her foot slipped into a crack in the rock and she only escaped a broken ankle thanks to her training as a witcher which helped against falls. The march in the dark was impossible.

She sat down on a flat block of basalt, feeling a paralyzing despair wash over her. She had no idea whether the direction she walked was the same as where the sun disappeared behind the horizon. She had completely lost sight of the glow, which had guided her through the first hours after sunset. All around her was only velvety, impenetrable blackness. And a piercing cold. Cold, which paralysed, biting the joints, which forced her to shrink and put her head between her arms that ached because of the awkward position. Ciri began to miss the sun, but knew that its return would come crashing onto the rocks making them glow, which she would not be able to endure. In which she would not be able to continue the march. Again her throat felt gripped with the desire to weep, and embrace the wave of despair and hopelessness. But this time despair and hopelessness turned into rage.

'I will not cry!' She shouted at the darkness. 'I am a witcher I am a...'

Sorceress.

Ciri raised her arm, pressed her hand against her temple. The Force is everywhere. In the water, in the air, on the land...

She rose quickly, reached out slowly, taking a few uncertain steps, searching feverishly for the source. She was lucky. Almost immediately she felt a familiar buzzing in her ears, felt the energy pulsing in a vein of water hidden in the depths of the earth. She drew upon the Force carefully as she knew she was weak and in this state a sudden de-oxygenation of the brain could send her spiralling into unconsciousness, making the whole attempt futile. The energy slowly started to fill her; it gave her a familiar sense of euphoria. Her lungs started to work stronger and faster. Ciri controlled her accelerated breathing; too much oxygenation could also have fatal consequences.

She succeeded.

First tiredness, she thought, then this crippling pain in my arms and thighs. Then the cold. I have to raise my body temperature...

Slowly she recalled the gestures and spells. Some of them she performed and spoke to quickly – suddenly she was gripped by cramps and convulsions, violent spasms and light headedness that bent her knees. She dropped to the basalt and calmed her shaking hands, controlled her quick, arrhythmic breathing.

She repeated the formula, forcing herself to calmness and precision, to focus and unify her entire will. And this time the results were immediate. An enveloping warmth caressed her thighs and neck. She stood up, feeling the fatigue disappear, and her sore muscles relax.

'I am a sorceress!' she shouted triumphantly, raising her hand high. 'Come, Light immortal! I summon you! *Aen'drean va, eveigh Aine!*'

A small globe of light appeared and hovered just above her hand. It was the size of a butterfly and the light it produced threw a dynamic patchwork of shadows onto the rocks. She slowly moved her hand, steadying the globe, placing it so that it hung in the air in front of her. It was not a good idea. The light blinded her. She tried to put the globe behind her back, but this also produced a bad result, her shadow covered the road, deteriorating visibility. Ciri slowly moved the globe of light to one side and hung it a little above her right arm. Although

the globe would never match that of a truly magical Aine, the girl was extremely proud of her achievement.

‘Ha!’ She said, elated. ‘It’s a shame that Yennefer could not see this!’

She continued walking, cheerfully and energetically, walking quickly and confidently, selecting the path in the flickering and uncertain light and shadows cast by the globe. As she walked, she tried to remember the other spells, but none seemed right or usefully in this situation, moreover, some were very exhausting and she was a little afraid of them and would not use them unless necessary. Unfortunately she didn’t know any that would be able to create food or water. She knew they existed but did not know them.

In the light of the magical sphere, the desert, which seemed dead until then, came to life. Trying to escape from under her feet where a bright array of beetles and hairy spiders. A small yellow and red scorpion, dragging behind it its segmented tail ran across her path, swiftly disappearing through a crack between the rocks. A green long-tailed lizard disappeared into the darkness, making the sand crackle. There followed in its wake a large rodent like creature, which leaped nimbly and very high on its hind legs. She could make out several times in the dark, bright eyes and once she heard a hissing sound coming from a rocky outcrop that froze the blood in her veins. At first she intended to catch something that she could eat, once she heard the hissing the desire to wander among the rocks was gone. She began to look more carefully where she was putting her feet and images of books she had read at Kaer Morhen swam before her eyes. A giant scorpion. The scarletia. The vicht. The lamia. Creatures that lived in deserts. She walked, looking fearfully around; her ears remained alert while her sweaty hand clutched the hilt of her sword.

A few hours later, the globe of light had grown weaker. The circle of light emanating from the globe grew smaller, darkened and blurred. Ciri concentrated with difficulty and again uttered the spell. The globe burned bright again for a few moments, but then darkened and shrunk again. The effort staggered her, black and red spots danced before her eyes. She sat down heavily, grinding gravel and loose stones.

The globe of light went out completely. Ciri no longer attempted any spells, the exhaustion, emptiness and lack of energy she felt within herself predicted the failure of the attempt.

Before her, on the horizon, a vague glow was rising. *I’ve taken a wrong turn*, she thought with horror. *I’ve been walking in circles... At first I was going west, now the sun will rise directly in from of me... That means...*

She felt an overwhelming fatigue and drowsiness that could not be dispelled by the fright or the cold that made her shiver. *I will not sleep*, she decided. *I must not... I must...*

She was awakened by a penetrating cold, the growing brightness, a stomach pain that twisted her bowels and the dry itching in her throat. She tried to get up but could not. Her sore and cramped limbs refused to obey. Groping her hands around, she felt wetness on her fingers.

‘Water...’ she croaked. ‘Water!’

Trembling all over, she rose on all fours and put her lips to the basalt plate and feverishly poked out her tongue to collect the droplets of water that were running down the smooth surface of the rock, collection in the clefts. One such cleft held about an inch of water. She drank it down with the sand and gravel, not daring to spit. She looked around.

Carefully, so not to miss a drop, she licked up droplets from a thorny shrub that had somehow managed to grow among the rocks. Her sword lay on the ground. She could not remember drawing it from its sheath. The blade was thick with a layer of dew. Carefully and thoroughly she licked the cool metal.

Mastering the pain that numbed her body, she crawled forward on all fours, in pursuit of moisture on other stones. But the gold disc of the sun, rising above the rocky horizon, flooded

the desert with blinding golden light and the rocks dried up within minutes. Ciri welcomed the rising heat, however she was aware of the fact that soon she would be mercilessly roast and she'd miss the cold night.

She turned her back to the bright sphere. It shone in the east. And she had to go west. She had to.

The heat grew and intensified rapidly and soon it became unbearable. As noon approached it became clear that like it or not, she'd have to change direction and seek some shade. She finally found a refuge, a large rock resembling a mushroom. She crawled beneath it.

And then she saw an object lying among the rocks. It was a small jade pot of hand cream, licked clean.

She found within herself enough strength to cry.

Hunger and thirst overcame her weariness and resignation. She undertook a staggering march. The sun was burning.

Far away on the horizon, through a shimmering curtain of heat, she was something that could only be a mountain range. A very distant mountain range.

As night fell, with enormous difficulty she drew upon the Force, but only managed to create a magical globe of light after several attempts and it exhausted her so she could not go on. She had lost all energy, her warming and relaxing spells had failed her, despite many attempts. The conjured light gave her courage and lifted her spirits, but the cold extinguished it. The piercing cold gripped her and made her shudder until dawn. She trembled, waiting patiently for the sunrise. She pulled her sword from its sheath, placing it carefully on a stone so the metal could collect the morning dew. She was terribly tired but hunger and thirst kept sleep at bay. She lasted until dawn. It was still dark when she began to hungrily lick the dew from the sword's blade. When day broke, she immediately threw herself on all fours to look for moisture in the hollows and crevices.

She heard a hiss.

A large colourful lizard was sitting on a nearby block of rock, revealing a toothless mouth, its impressive crest swelled and it hit the rock with its tail. In front of the lizard was a tiny fissure filled with water.

At first, Ciri backed away scared but immediately became overwhelmed by a wild and desperate rage. Groping around with her trembling hands, she grabbed a sharp piece of rock.

'That's my water!' She cried. 'Mine!'

She threw the stone. It missed. The lizard sprang onto the long nimble claws on its feet and scurried away into the maze of rocks. Ciri threw herself down flat on the stone, and drank the remains of the water from the fissure. It was then she saw it.

Behind the stone in a round nest, lay seven eggs partially protruding from the red sand. She did not hesitate for a moment. She approached the nest on her knees, grabbed one of the eggs and fixed her teeth in it. The leathery shell burst and a sticky ooze ran down her hands and flowed into her sleeve. Ciri sucked on the egg and licked her hand. She swallowed with difficulty and did not notice the taste.

She sipped the eggs and remained down on her hands and knees, sticky, dirty, covered in sand with gluten hanging from her teeth, frantically digging in the sand and uttering inhuman, weeping sounds. She froze.

"Straighten up, Princess! Do not put your elbows on the table! Be careful when you reach for the plate, or you'll dirty the lace on your sleeves! Wipe your mouth with a napkin and stop smacking your lips! By the gods, has no one taught you, child how to behave at a table? Cirilla!"

Ciri began to cry, her head resting on her knees.

She lasted until noon, and then the heat of the day forced her to rest. She slept for a long time, hidden in the shadow of an overhanging rock. The shadow was not cold, but it was better than the burning sun. Thirst and hunger drove away sleep.

The distant mountain range seemed to be on fire with the shining sunlight. *At the top of those mountains, she thought, there could be snow, there could be ice, and there could be streams. I have to get there. I have to get there quickly.*

She walked for almost the whole night. She decided to follow the stars. The whole sky was covered in stars. Ciri regretted not having paid attention in lessons and not wanting to study the atlas of the sky in the Temple library. She knew, of course, the most important constellations: The Seven Goats, the Vase, the Serpent, the Dragon and the Lady of Winter, but they were too high in the sky and it was difficult to rely on them during the march.

She managed to finally choose from a bright star, which indicated in her opinion, the right direction. She didn't know what the star was called, so she gave it a name.

She called it the Eye.

She walked. The mountain range which was her target was not one bit closer; it was still as far away as it was the previous day. But it showed the way.

As she walked, she looked around intently. She found another lizard's nest with four eggs in it. She spotted a green plant, which was no longer than her little finger, which somehow managed to grow between the boulders. She tracked down a large brown beetle. And a thin legged spider.

She ate everything.

At noon she threw up what she ate, and then fainted. When she awoke, she looked for a bit of shadow to curl up in, clutching her hands to her aching stomach.

At sunset, she began to march again. Stiffly, like an automaton. Several times she fell but got up again and walked on.

She walked. She had to go on.

Evening. Rest. Night. The Eye leads the way. March until complete exhaustion, which arrived well before sunrise. Rest. A little sleep. Hunger. Cold. There were no magical sources, failure to conjure heat and light. Only the intense desire to lick the dew in the morning from the sword blade and the stones.

When the sun rose, she fell asleep in the growing heat. She was awakened by a searing heat. She got up and kept going.

She fainted after less than an hour's walk. When she came back to her senses, the sun was at its zenith, beating down. She did not have the strength to seek shade. She had no strength to stand. But she got up.

She walked. She did not give up. For almost the entire day and part of the night.

Once again during the hottest part of the day she slept, curled up under an overhanging boulder stuck in the sand. The sleep was light and tormenting. She dreamed of water, water that she could drink. A large white waterfall, surrounded by mist and rainbows. A babbling brook. A small spring in the woods, obscured by ferns submerged in the water. Fragrant, wet marble palace fountains. Mossy wells and tubs overflowing... Drops dripping from melting icicles... Water. Cold, crisp water that makes her teeth hurt, but it tastes wonderful and unforgettable...

She awoke and jumped to her feet and began to walk in the direction from which it came. Again, stumbling and falling. She had to get back! She had walked past the water! She had left behind a steam gurgling among the rocks! How could she have been so stupid!

She came to her senses.

The heat abated, approaching evening. The sun pointed to the west. To the mountains. The sun had no right to be right behind her. Ciri expelled her delusions and stopped her crying. She turned and walked on.

She walked all night, but very slowly. She did not get far. She dozed off on the march, dreaming of water. The rising sun found her sitting on a stone block, staring at her sword blade and bare forearm.

Blood is liquid. You can drink it.

She expelled the delusions and nightmares. Licked the dewy sword blade and continued walking.

She fainted again. When she came to her senses, she was lying on hot stones, burning in the sun.

Before her, through the quivering curtain of heat, she was the jagged toothed chain of mountains.

Closer. Much closer.

However she had no strength left. She sat down.

The sword in her hand reflected the burning sun. It was sharp. She knew it.

‘Why are you tormenting yourself?’ asked the serious and calm voice of the pedantic sorceress called Tissaia de Vries. ‘Why prolong the suffering? Finally be done with it!’

‘No. I will not surrender.’

‘You do not understand. Do you know how you die of thirst? At any time you will become mad and then it will be too late. Then you will no longer know how to finish it.’

‘No. I will not surrender. I will endure.’

She put her sword back into its sheath. Rose, staggered, fell. She rose once more, staggered and began to walk.

Above her, high in the yellow sky, she saw a vulture.

When she regained consciousness, she did not remember when she fell. She could not remember how long she had been lying there. She looked up. Two other vultures had joined the other one circling around in the sky. She did not have enough strength to get up.

She realized that this was the end. She accepted this calmly. Even with relief,

Something touched her.

Something lightly and carefully touched her arm. After a long period of solitude, where only dead and motionless stones had surrounded her, the contact caused, despite her exhaustion, her to suddenly jump up, or at least try to jump up. The thing that had touched her backed away, making a loud stamping.

With an effort, Ciri sat back down, rubbing her bleary eyes with her fingers.

I've gone mad, she thought.

A few paces in front of her stood a horse. She blinked. It was not an illusion. It was a real horse. A little horse. A young horse, almost a foal.

She regained control of herself. She licked her cracked lips and cleared her throat involuntarily. The little horse scampered back, grinding gravel beneath its hooves. It moved very strangely and its coat was an unusual colour, a bay or grey. But perhaps it only seemed so because it stood against the sun.

The little horse snorted and took a few steps towards her. Now she could see it better. So much so that in addition to the unusual colour, she also saw other strange anomalies on its body: a small head, the unusual slenderness of its neck, thin hocks and a long rich tail. The horse stopped and looked at her, turning its head in profile. Ciri sighed silently.

From the sloping forehead of the horse protruded a horn at least two spans long.

Impossible. Impossible, thought Ciri, regaining consciousness and collecting her thoughts. *Unicorns do not exist on this world, they have become extinct! Even in the books at the witcher's keep – Kaer Morhen there are no unicorns! I only read about them in books about myths at the Temple... Oh, and in the book Physiologus which I read in the bank of Mr Giancardi there was an illustration of a unicorn... But the unicorn in the illustration looked more like a goat than a horse, it had a hairy goatee and its horns, I think, were about two cubits...*

She was surprised that she remembered those events; they felt like they had happened a hundred years ago. Her head suddenly started to spin and her bowels twisted in pain. She moaned and curled into a ball. The unicorn snorted and stepped towards her then stopped and raised its head high. Ciri suddenly recalled what the book had said about unicorns.

'Feel free to approach...' Ciri croaked, trying to sit down again. 'You can, because I'm...'

The unicorn snorted, moved back and galloped away, waving its sharply. But after a moment it stopped, shook its head, pawed at the ground with its hooves and whinnied loudly.

'Not true!' Ciri cried, sobbing. 'Jarre just gave me a kiss and that doesn't count! Come back!'

The effort obscured her sight and she fell lifelessly onto the stone. When at last she lifted her head, the unicorn was again standing close by. He looked at her inquiringly, bowed his head and snorted softly.

'Don't be afraid of me...' she whispered. 'You don't have to be, because... Because after all, I'm dying...'

The unicorn whinnied, shaking its head. Ciri fainted.

When she awoke she was alone. Sore, stiff, thirsty, hungry and alone as a thumb. The unicorn had been a mirage, an illusion, a dream. And it had vanished just like a dream disappears. She understood it, accepted it, and yet she was filled with sorrow and despair, as

if the creature really existed, had been with her and then abandoned her. Just like everyone abandoned her.

She wanted to get up but could not. She rested her face on the rocks. Gradually she moved her hand to her side, fondling the hilt of her sword.

Blood is liquid. I have to drink.

She heard a pounding of hooves and a whinny.

‘You came back...’ she whispered, lifting her head. ‘You really came back?’

The unicorn gave a loud whinny. She saw its hooves close beside her. The hooves were wet. Dripping with water.

Hope gave her strength and filled her with euphoria. The unicorn lead the way and Ciri walked behind it, still not sure whether this was a dream or not. However, exhaustion eventually overcame her and she got down onto her hands and knees. Then she crawled.

The unicorns lead her between the rocks to a shallow ravine, whose bottom was covered in sand. With her remaining strength, Ciri crawled. She crawled. Because the sand was wet.

The unicorn stood before a recess in the sand, snorted and scratched with its hooves, once, twice, three times. She understood. Ciri crawled closer to help it. She dug, breaking fingernails, clawing the sand aside. She sobbed while she dug, but she was unsure why. At the bottom of the recess a muddy liquid appeared, she immediately put her lips to it and swallowed the murky water along with the sand, so eagerly that the liquid disappeared. With great effort Ciri controlled herself and continued to deepen the hole with the help of her sword, then sat and waited. Grinding the sand that was between her teeth and trembling with impatience, but she waited until the recess was filled with water again. And then she drank. For a long time.

On the third occasion she allowed the water stand for a bit then drank four swallows without sand or silt. Then she remembered the unicorn.

‘Surely you’re thirsty to horse.’ She said. ‘But you won’t drink mud. No horse drinks mud.’

The unicorn snorted.

Ciri deepened the hole further, reinforcing its edges with rocks.

‘Wait, horse. Rest for a bit...’

“Little Horse” snorted and kicked and turned its head.

‘Don’t look sideways at it. Drink.’

The unicorn approached the water with caution.

‘Drink, Little Horse. It is not a dream. It’s real water.’

Ciri, at first was reluctant to move away from the spring. She had just invented a new way of drinking involving squeezing a soaked handkerchief into her mouth, allowing her to remove a large amount of the sand and silt. But the unicorn neighed and stamped its hooves insistent that they leave, showing her the path again. Ciri, after thinking it over, obeyed thinking the animal was correct, she had to keep walking, walking towards the mountains and out of the desert. She went after the unicorn, first looking around and etching in her mind the location of the spring. She did not want to miss it if she had to come back here.

They walked all day. The unicorn, which she had named Little Horse, lead the way. It was a strange horse. Biting and chewing weeds that a normal horse would not touch not even the hungriest of goats. And when he discovered a column of ants walking on a rock, he began to

eat them. Ciri at first regarded him with astonishment, then joined in the feast. She was hungry.

The ants were terribly acidic and they made her want to avoid vomit. There were a lot of ants and she could exercise some control. The unicorn ate a lot of the ants until he's stomach was content, spitting out the tough chitinous shell fragments.

They walked on. The unicorn found yellowing patches of thistles and ate them with gusto. The time Ciri did not join him. But when Little Horse found another batch of lizard eggs in the sand, she ate them all while he watched. Sometime later, Little Horse called her attention to a large black scorpion with a tail at least half an inch long. Ciri crushed it with her boot. Seeing that she was not going to eat the scorpion, the unicorn ate it himself, and soon after he pointed out another lizards nest.

It turned out to be quite a tolerable collaboration.

They kept walking.

The mountain range was getting closer.

When night fell, the unicorn stopped. He fell asleep standing up. Ciri who knew horses, initially try to force him to lie down, so she could try and sleep on him and take advantage of his heat. But it was no good. Little Horse glanced at her and walked away, maintaining a constant distance. They did not behave this way in the classical way, or as they were described in the books of scholars. Apparently he had not the slightest intention of putting his head in her lap. Ciri was full of doubt. She did not disregard the accounts in the books about unicorns and virgins, but there was also another possibility. The unicorn was clearly a unicorn foal, maybe as a young beast; he had no damn idea that she was a virgin. She dismissed the possibility that Little Horse was able to perceive and take seriously those strange dreams she had dreamed. Who could take those dreams seriously?

The unicorn disappointed her a little. They had walked for two days and two nights, and although they were looking they found no more water. Several times he stopped, shook his head and waved his horn, then trotted through a rocky ravine which he scraped in the sand with his hooves. He found ants and ant eggs and larvae. He found lizards nest. He found a colored snake, which he skilfully stamped to death. But he found no water.

Ciri realized that the unicorn plainly did not hold to a straight line of march. She had a reasonable suspicion that he did not live in the desert. He was simply lost. Just like her.

The ants, which began to be found in abundance, contained an acidic moisture, but Ciri began thinking more and more seriously about returning to the spring. If they went much further and didn't find any water, she would not have enough strength to return. The heat was still terrible, draining them while they walked.

She already had intentions to start explain this to Little Horse, when suddenly he gave a shrill whinny, waved his tail and galloped down between some jagged rocks. Ciri quickly followed, as she ate ants.

A large space between the rocks was covered with a layer of sand and in its center was a clear recess.

‘Ha!’ Ciri cheered. ‘You’re a very smart horse, Little Horse. You found another spring. There must be water down there!’

The unicorn snorted sharply and trotted around the cleft. Ciri approached. The cleft was large, at least twenty feet in diameter. It was a precise and neat circle, resembling a funnel; it was so regular that it looked as if someone had left a giant egg in the sand. Ciri suddenly realized that a regular shape such as this could not have been created by itself.

But it was too late.

Something moved in the crater and a violent storm erupted flinging sand and gravel into Ciri’s face. She jumped back, fell and saw that she was going down.

A shooting fountain of gravel that had hit her also hit the edges of the crater and the waves started to drag her downwards. She screamed and started waving her arms like a swimmer, trying unsuccessfully to find support for her feet. She immediately realized that thrashing around only worsened the situation, force the sand to collapse faster. She rolled onto her back and spread out her hands and feet. The sand at the bottom of the crater started to move and ripple, there emerging from the sand were bronze colored pincers, more than half a fathom long ending in hooks. She screamed again, this time much louder.

The storm of gravel that was showering suddenly ceased. On the opposite side of the crater the unicorn was supported by only its hind legs, he neighed like a demon, as the edge of the cleft started to sink under his hooves. He tried to break free of the sand, but was in vain. He sank in more and more rapidly, slipping towards the bottom. The horrible claws snapped sharply. The unicorn snorted desperately, flailing, striking the crumbling sand impotently with his front hooves. His hind legs were completely trapped. When he slid to the very bottom of the crater, the monster hiding in the sand snapped its horrible claws.

Hearing a wild shriek of pain, Ciri screamed wildly and threw herself down into the crater, drawing her sword from its sheath. Once she reached the bottom, she realized she had made a mistake. The monster was hiding deep in the sand, where the sword could not reach. To make matters worse, the unicorn held by the monstrous claw was being dragged into the sand trap, the pain was making him go crazy screaming and striking blindly with his front legs, which threatened to break her bones.

Her witcher training and tricks were worth nothing down here. But there was a fairly simple spell. Ciri conjured Force and launched a telekinetic blow.

A cloud of dirt flew into the air, revealing the hidden monster that had grasped the leg of the unicorn. Ciri screamed in horror. She had never seen anything so disgusting in any illustration in the books of the Witchers. She could not even image something so awful.

The monster was a dirty gray, dull and squat like a bug sated on blood, sparse bristles covered the narrow segments of its barrel-shaped body. It seemed that it had no legs at all; instead it had claws which were almost as large as she was.

Deprived of sandy cover the creature let go of the unicorn and immediately began to burrow with fast, jerky movements of its huge body. It did this with extraordinary skill and the unicorn, trying to escape the crater, helped by pushing down waves of sand. Ciri was seized by rage and a lust for revenge. She threw herself on the now barely visible abomination and thrust her sword into its back. She attacked from behind, cautiously keeping away from the snapping pincers of the monster, as it turned out it was able to reach pretty far back. She struck again, but the creature burrowed at an amazing pace. But it did not bury itself in the sand to escape. It did it in order to attack. He had no more than two more seizures before he was hidden from them again. Once hidden, it launched a wave of gravel at Ciri which buried her to mid-thigh. She struggled and tried to step back, but there was nowhere to flee to, it had turned into a crater of quicksand, every movement dragged the closer to the bottom. The sand bottom stirred and formed a wave directed at her, a wave that contained snapping claws, ending in sharp hooks.

Little Horse saved her. Charging to the crater floor, striking his hooves on an area of sand that was bulging, which betrayed the hiding place of the monster. His wild kicks revealed a gray back. The unicorn lowered his head and stuck his horn into the monster, into the joint of the torso, where the claws couldn't reach. Seeing the pincers of the monster hit the ground helplessly clawing at the sand, Ciri jumped and using the momentum drove her sword into its body. She pulled it out and struck again. And again. The unicorn pulled his horn free and put his hooves onto the barrel-shaped body.

The monster did not try to bury itself anymore. It was not moving at all. The sand surrounding it was wet with a greenish fluid.

With difficulty, Ciri climbed out of the crater. Ciri took a few steps, and then fell limply onto the sand, panting and shivering as waves of adrenaline pounded in her temples and throat. The unicorn walked around her. He stepped awkwardly; a wound in his thigh was pouring blood, flowing down his leg in sheets, leaving red stains on the sand. Ciri got up on her hands and knees and vomited violently. After a while she got up and stumbled towards the unicorn, but Little Horse would not let her touch him. He moved ran further away, after which he threw himself on the sand and rolled around. He then cleaned his horn by stabbing it several times into the sand.

Ciri also cleaned and wiped the blade of her sword, looking uneasily from time to time at the nearby crater. The unicorn stood up, whinnied and approached her at a walk.

'I'd like to examine your wound, Little Horse.' Little Horse whinnied and shook his horned head.

'If not, no. If you can walk, we'd better go. We had better not stay here.'

Soon they came across a large sandy shoal dotted with craters, which reached to the edge of the rocks around it. Ciri looked at in apprehension – some of the craters were twice as large as the one which not long ago they had been fighting for their lives in.

They dared not cross the shoal dodging crater. Ciri was convinced that the craters were traps for unsuspecting victims and that monsters were hidden beneath lying in wait with their large claws waiting for victims to fall in. By taking care and keeping away from the pits, the sandy terrain could cross the without fear that any of the monster would leave the pits and pursue them. She was sure that there was no risk, but she wished to avoid testing her theory. The unicorn was of the same opinion; he snorted, whinnied and ran around about then away from the shoals of sand. They decided on a lengthy path around the dangerous territory, remaining on the firm and rocky terrain, in which none of the beasts would be able to bury itself.

As they walked, Ciri did not take her eyes off of the craters. Sometimes she saw the deadly traps firing jets of sand into the air – the monsters deepening and renewing their burrows. Some craters were so close to each other that the gravel thrown by one monster fell into the other holes, alarming the creatures hidden at the bottom, which then began a terrible cannonade and for a few minutes the sand rained and whistled around like hail.

Ciri wandered what the sand monsters hunted in the dry and lifeless desert. The answer came a moment later. From one of the holes closest to her a dark object flew in a wide arc and fell not far from them. After a moment's hesitation, Ciri ran from the rocks onto the sand. The object that had flown from the crater was a dead rodent that resembled a rabbit. At least the fur did. It was a shrunken corpse, hard and dry as chips, light and empty as a bladder. Not a single drop of blood remained in it. Ciri shuddered. Now she knew what the monsters hunted and how they fed.

The unicorn gave a warning snort. Ciri raised her head. In their vicinity there was no crater, the sand was even and smooth. But suddenly, before her eyes, the smooth sand began to swell into a lump and started moving in their direction. She left the dry little body of the rodent and jumped back up to the rocks.

The decision to avoid the shoal had proved to be the correct one.

They walked on, avoiding even the smallest patches of sand, stepping only on solid ground.

The unicorn was walking slowly, stumbling. Blood was gushing from his injured thigh. But he would still not allow Ciri to approach and examine the wound.

The shoal narrowed considerably and began to meander. Fine and loose sand gave way to gravel and heavy boulders. Since they no longer saw craters, they decided to walk along the path indicated by the sandbank. Ciri although again tortured by hunger and thirst, began to move faster. There was hope. The rocky shoal was not a shoal. It was the bed of a river flowing towards the mountains. The river was dry, but it would lead to the source, the water was too weak and inefficient to fill the trough, but there would probably be enough to drink.

She walked faster, but had to slow her pace. The unicorn had slowed down. He trotted along with visible effort, stumbled, entangling his legs. When evening came, he lay down. He didn't stand up when she approached him. He allowed her to examine the wound.

There were two wounds on both sides of the thigh, swollen and hot. Both wounds were bleeding, along with the blood a sticky smelly pus flowed.

The monster had been poisonous.

The next day was even worse. The unicorn could hardly walk. In the afternoon he lay down on some rocks and refused to rise. When Ciri knelt before him and touched his wounded thigh, he whinnied. In that whinny was pain.

The pus flowed more strongly now, the stench was sickening. Ciri drew her sword. The unicorn with a shrill bleat, tried to rise but fell to his haunches on the stone.

'I don't know what to do...' Ciri sobbed, looking at the blade. 'I don't know... I probably have to cut the wound to remove the pus and poison... But I don't know! I could cause you more harm!'

The unicorn tried to lift his head and whinnied. Ciri sat on the rocks holding his head in her hands.

'I haven't been taught how to heal,' she said bitterly, 'they taught me to kill, saying that this was the way to save lives. It was a big lie, Little Horse. A Lie.'

Night fell quickly. The unicorn is dying, Ciri thought feverishly. She went and collected thistles and stalks that grew in abundance on the banks of the dry river bed, but Little Horse would not eat. He put his head on the rocks and did not attempt to lift it. Only blinking. From his nose foam started to appear.

'I can't help you, Little Horse' Ciri said her voice choked. 'I do not have anything...'

Except for magic.

I am a sorceress.

She rose, extending her hand. And nothing. She needed a lot of magical energy, and there was no trace. She was surprised, she had not expected this. After all, water veins are everywhere she took a few steps in one direction, then in another. She began to walk in a wide circle. She made a full rotation.

Nothing.

‘Cursed desert!’ she shouted, clenching her fist. ‘There is nothing in you! No water, no magic! They said that magic is everywhere! That was a lie too! They have all lied, everyone!’

The unicorn snorted.

The magic is everywhere. In the water, on land, air...

And in the fire.

Ciri smacked her fist to her forehead in rage. Up until now there had been nothing but bare stones which would not burn. But now she had dry thistles and stalks at hand, and with what little energy she had left within herself she could manage a little spark...

She gathered more sticks and placed them in a pile then covered them with dry thistles. She cautiously raised her hand.

‘Aenye!’

The little pile flared, and a flame flicked and sprang up, it reached towards the leaves and devoured them shooting higher. Ciri added more stalks.

‘Now what,’ she thought aloud, watching the flames come alive. ‘How do I draw energy from it?’

Yennefer forbade me to touch the energy of fire... But I have no choice! No time! I have to act now The stalks and leaves will soon burn... The fire will go out... Fire... It is beautiful, and warm...

She did not know when or how it happened. She was watching the flames and suddenly felt a throbbing in her temples. She clutched her chest, she felt like her ribs would explode. A pain echoed in her lower abdomen, crotch and nipples, pain the momentarily transformed into a terrifying pleasure. She stood up. No, not stood up. She flew.

The Force filled her like molten lead. Stars danced in the sky as if reflected off the surface of a pond. The Eye burned in the west, and exploded in brightness. She took the brightness, and with it power.

‘Hael, Aenye!’

The unicorn whinnied wildly and tried to stand, leaning on its front legs. Ciri’s arm lifted by itself, her hand moved by itself in a magical gesture, her lips shouted an incan’tation.

From her fingers came a rippling bright light. The flames of the fire raged.

The light waves that came from her hand touched the wounded thigh of the unicorn, focused and then penetrated.

‘I want you to be healed! I want it! Vess’hael, Aenye!’

The Force exploded in her, she was filled with a wild euphoria. The fire shot upwards, brightening. The unicorn lifted his head, whinnied, then suddenly sprang up quickly from the ground, took a few steps, extended his neck and touched his thigh with his nose then snorted as if in disbelief. He released a high, piercing whinny, kicked and swished his tail and then galloped away from the fire.

‘I’ve healed him!’ Ciri shouted proudly. ‘I’ve healed him! I am a sorceress! I managed to draw the Force out of the fire! And I have the Force! With it I can do anything!’

She turned. The fire roared, throwing sparks around.

‘We no longer need to look for a source! We will not have to drink mud! Now I have power! I feel the Force that is in the fire! I will make it rain on this damn desert! Water will burst from the rocks! Flowers will bloom here! Grass! Kale! I can do anything now! Everything!’

She sharply raised both hands, shouting, chanting incan’tations and invocations. She did not understand them, did not remember when or if she had ever been taught them. It did not matter. She felt the Force, felt the power burning with fire. She was the fire. She trembled from the power coursing through her.

The night sky suddenly erupted with lightning, among the rocks and thistles the wind began to howl. The unicorn whinnied and reared. The fire erupted upwards, exploding. The sticks and stalks that she had collected had been used up already, now the rocks burned. But Ciri paid no attention to this. She felt the Force. She saw only the fire. She heard only the fire.

You can do everything, whispered the flames, you have our strength, you can do anything. The world is at your feet. You are great. You are powerful.

Among the flames appeared a figure. A tall young woman with long, straight jet black hair. The woman laughed wildly, savagely as the fire whirled around her.

You are powerful! Those who have wronged you, do not know who you are! Get even! Make them pay! Make them all pay! Let them tremble with fear at your feet, hear their chattering teeth as they dare not loop up at your face! Make them beg for mercy! But show them no mercy! Make them pay! Make them pay for everything! Revenge!

Behind the dark haired lady was fire and smoke, smoke and rows of gallows, rows of poles, pitchforks and tables and piles of corpses. These were the bodies of Nilfgaardians, those who conquered and destroyed Cintra, who murdered the king and her grandmother Calanthe, those who killed people on the streets of the city. Swinging from a noose was a knight in black armor, the rope was creaking while a swirling murder of crows tried to peck at the eyes through the slits of a winged helmet. More gallows stretched away into the horizon, from them hung Scoia'tael, those who had killed Paulie Dahlberg in Kaedwen, and those who chased her on the island of Thanedd. On a pole, convulsed Vilgefortz the sorcerer, his beautiful and noble face was wrinkled and pale from the torment, the sharp and bloody end of the pole was sticking out of his clavicle... Other sorcerers from Thanedd were kneeling on the floor, their hands tied behind their backs, sharpen poles awaited them...

Pole that had bundles of brushwood piled at their base, stretched to the horizon that shone with a smoke haze. On the nearest post, tied with chains was Triss Merigold... Beyond her was tied Margarita Laux-Antille... Mother Nenneke... Jarre... Fabio Sachs...

No. No. No.

Yes, screamed the black haired woman, death to them all, let them pay, despise them! They all wanted to damage or hurt you! Or may eventually want to hurt you! Despise them, because it has finally reached the times of contempt! Hatred, vengeance and death! Death to everybody! Death, sacrifice and blood!

Blood on your hands, blood on your clothes...

They betrayed you! They cheated you! Now you have the power to get even!

Yennefer, her lips cracked and broken, blood flowing from them, her hands and feet tied in chains, heavy chains attached to wet, dirty dungeon walls. Gathered around a scaffold a crowd yelled, Dandelion the bard lays his head onto a stump, the blade of the executioner's axe flashes brightly. The whores gathered under the scaffold spread their handkerchiefs to collect the blood in them... The howl of the crowd drowns out the blow that shakes the whole platform...

They betrayed you! Lied and cheated! Everyone! You were a puppet to them, you were a puppet on a stick! They used you! Condemned you to hunger, the burning sun, the thirst, the misery, the loneliness! It is the time of contempt and revenge! You have the power! You are powerful! Let the whole world tremble before you! Let the whole world tremble before the Elder Blood!

Witchers were then brought to the gallows. Vesemir, Eskel, Coen, Lambert. And Geralt... Geralt falters, he is covered in blood...

'No!'

Around the fire, behind the wall of flames, a wild neighing, unicorns rears up, shaking their heads and beating his hooves. Their manes are as frayed as war banners, horns, long and

sharp as swords. The unicorns are much larger than Little Horse. Where did they come from? How did so many of them get here? The flames roared higher, the black-haired woman raises her arms, her hands covered in blood. Her hair flowing in the heat.

Burn, burn, Falka!

‘Go away! Go away! I do not want this! I do not want your power! Burn, Falka!’

‘I do not want it!’

You want it! You want it! The desire and lust in you burns like a fire, pleasure enslaves you! This is the power, it is the Force, this is the power! The most delightful pleasure in the world!

Lightning. Thunder. Wind. The pounding of hooves and neighing of crazed unicorns around the fire.

‘I do not want this power! I do not want it! I renounce it!’

She did not know whether the fire faded or her eyes darkened. She fell, feeling on her face the first drops of rain.

We must kill the Being, she cannot be allowed to exist. The Being is Dangerous. Confirmation.

Denial. The Being did not call the power to herself. She did it to save Ihuarraquax. The Being was compassionate. Thanks to this Being Ihuarraquax is back among us.

But the Being has the Force. If she wanted to use...

She will not use it. Never. She renounced it. Completely. The Force has gone. It's very strange...

You never understand Beings.

I do not have to understand. End this Beings existence. Before it is too late. Confirmation.

Denial. Let us go. We will leave the Being to her Destiny.

She did not know how long she lay on the stones, shaking trembling, staring at the sky changing colours. It was alternately dark and light, cold and hot and she lay helpless, dry and empty like the skin of the rodent corpse, drained and spit out by the crater.

She did not think about anything. She was alone, empty. She had nothing and she did not feel anything within herself. There was no thirst, hunger, fatigue or fear.

She was dead, even of the will to survive. There was just a great, cold, terrifying emptiness. She felt this emptiness throughout her whole being, within every cell of her body.

She felt blood on the inside of her thigh. She was indifferent to it. She was empty. She had lost everything.

The sky changed colours. She did not move. Did it make sense to move in a void?

She did not move when she heard the sounds of hooves and horseshoes around her. She did not react to the loud cheers and shouts, the excited voices, the snorting of the horses. She did not move when the strong hands grabbed her hard. She was lifted from the ground and hung limp and powerless. She did not respond to the jerking and shaking or for the sharp, abrupt questions. She did not understand them and did not want to understand.

She was empty and indifferent. She accepted with indifference the water that was splashed onto her face. When they put the can'teen to her lips she drank. Indifferent.

She was indifferent as well when they hoisted her in to the saddle. Her groin was sensitive and sore. She was trembling, so they wrapped her in a blanket. She was limp and weak and

kept slipping from the saddle, so they tied her with a belt to the rider who sat behind her. The rider stank of sweat and urine. She was indifferent.

All around her were riders. And many horses. Ciri looked at them indifferently. She was empty, she'd lost everything. Nothing mattered.

Nothing.

Not even the fact that the knight who commanded the riders wore a helmet with the wings of a bird of prey.

"When the criminal's stake had been lit and the flames reached her, she began insulting all the knights, barons, mages and councilors gathered in the square in such foul language that they were all filled with dread. Though wet logs had been stacked to prevent the hag from burning too quickly and provide her a chance to suffer in the flames, dry wood was soon added to the fire to end the execution more swiftly.

She must truly have harbored a demon inside her as she uttered not a single scream though she sizzled fair enough. Instead, she began cursing horribly.

"An avenger shall be born from my own blood," she cried. "From the defiled Elder Blood, a destroyer of nations and worlds will rise! He shall avenge my torment! Death, death and revenge upon you and your offspring!" That was all she managed to articulate before she perished. Such was the death of Falka, her punishment for the innocent blood she had spilled."

by Roderick de Novembre
History of the World Volume III

Chapter Seven

‘Look at her. Sunburned, full of wounds, dirty. She is still drinking like a sponge and hungry. I fear for her. She came from the east, I tell you. Passed through the Korath. Through the Frying Pan.’

‘Stories! Nobody survives the pan. She came west from the mountains by the passage of Suchaka. She is barely on the edge of the Korath and she had already had enough. When we found her she had already fallen and her spirit broken.’

‘It is uninhabited for many miles to the west of here. Where did she come from?’

‘She walked, perhaps rode. For who knows how long. There were horse footprints beside her own. Must have been thrown from the horse in the Suchaka, would explain why she is beaten and bruised.’

‘Why is this child so important to Nilfgaard, out of curiosity? When the governor sent for us, I thought that some noble lady was lost. And what is this? An ordinary brat, a sweeper in rags, and on top of that dumb and brainless. I don’t know if we have found the girl who was...’

‘She is. And she is no ordinary girl. An ordinary girl, we would have found dead.’

‘She’s not far off. And rain wouldn’t have saved her. Plague, the oldest of beggars cannot remember it raining on the Pan. The clouds always pass by the Korath... Even when it rains in the valley, no drop falls there!’

‘Another week in these hills and there will be nothing to eat... Hey, you cocksucker! Do you like beef jerky? How about dry bread?’

‘Ask her in Elvish. Or Nilfgaardian. Perhaps she doesn’t understand common. She is elf spawn...’

‘She is an oaf. When I put her on the horse this morning, she sat like a puppet made of wood.’

‘Get your eyes fixed.’ The powerful and balding one called Skomlik flashed his teeth. ‘You won’t get far in the Trappers. She is neither stupid nor crazy. She is only pretending. She is a rare and cunning bird.’

‘Why is she so important to Nilfgaard? The promised reward has sent patrols everywhere... Why?’

‘I don’t know. But it would not hurt to ask her... With a stick across her back, ask your... Ha! Was she looking at me? She understands everything, she’s been listening attentively. Hey, girl! I’m Skomlik, a hunter, of the so called Trappers. And this is, a stick –called stick! Do you like the skin on your back? Then start talking...’

‘Enough! Silence!’

The command was shouted, loudly which did not tolerate any opposition which came from the other fire, where sat the knight and his squire.

‘Bored Trappers?’ The knight asked menacingly. ‘Then get to work! The horses need cleaning! Get my armor and weapons clean! Get to the forest for firewood! And do not touch the girl! Understood?’

‘Certainly, Lord Sweers’ Skomlik muttered. His comrades bowed their heads.

‘Get to work! Carry out his orders!’ The Trappers began to bustle.

‘Destiny punished us with this bastard.’ Muttered one. ‘The governor had nothing else to do but put us in league with a fucking knight...’

‘I’ll say’ muttered a second under his breath, looking sideways ‘After all it was us Trappers who found the girl. Our noses were the ones that made us ride the Suchaka.’

‘Right. The credit will be ours and so will the reward... We’ll get the money, florens in a heap at our feet, for us Trapper, and we’ll thank the governor...’

‘Shut the fuck up,’ hissed Skomlik, ‘they’re going to hear you...’

Ciri was left alone by the fire. The Knight and the Squire looked at her questioningly, but did not speak.

The Knight was an old man but strong, with a stern countenance marked by scars. During the trip, he always wore the helmet with the wings of a bird, but they were not the wings Ciri had seen in her nightmares, and then again on the island of Thanedd. He was not the Black Knight of Cintra. But he was a Nilfgaardian Knight. When giving orders, he spoke smoothly, but with a distinct accent, the accent was similar to elves. With his squire, a boy not much older than Ciri, he spoke in a language similar to the Elder Speech, but less melodious, more harsh. It must have been the Nilfgaardian tongue. Ciri, who was well acquainted with the Elder Speech, understood most of the words. But she did not betray this. During the first stop on the edge of the desert they called the Frying Pan or Korath, the Nilfgaardian knight and his squire showered her with questions. She did not respond because she was stunned and confused and only half conscious. After several days of travel, when they left the rocky cliffs and enter into a green valley, Ciri came to he senses, she began at last to see the world around her and react sluggishly. But she still did not answer the questions, so the knight stopped addressing her. It seemed that he was not paying attention. He dealt with only the wild men who called themselves the Trappers. They also asked. They were very aggressive.

But the winged helmet Nilfgaardian immediately called them to order. It was clear who was the master and who the servant.

Ciri pretended to be dumb, but listened carefully. Slowly she began to understand the situation. She had fallen into the hands of Nilfgaard. Nilfgaard had been looking for her and found her, probably following the route she had taken from where the chaotic teleporter from Tor Lara had sent her. What Yennefer had failed to do, what Geralt had failed to do, the winged helmet knight from Nilfgaard and his band of Trappers had succeeded.

What happened on Thanedd to Yennefer and Geralt? Where was she? She had a terrible suspicion. The Trappers and their leader, Skomlik, talked in a simplistic and clumsy version of the common language, but with a Nilfgaardian accent. The Trappers were normal people, but served a Knight of Nilfgaard. The Trappers were happy at the thought of a reward that the governor would pay for finding Ciri. In florens.

The only countries where the currency was the florin and the people served governors that managed the imperial provinces, where in the South.

The next day, on the banks at the edge of a stream, Ciri started thinking about the possibility of escape. Her magic could help. Carefully, she tried a simple spell, a weak telekinesis. But her fears were confirmed. There wasn’t even a spark of magical energy. After playing with the fire, her magical ability had left her entirely.

She fell back into indifference. She withdrew into herself and sank into apathy. For a long time.

Until the day they rode through a moor and the Blue Knight crossed their path.

‘Oi, oi’ Skomlik muttered, looking at the horse that barred their way. ‘It is Varnhagen, from the fortress of Sarda...’

Horsemen approached. At the head, on a powerful horse, was a giant wearing iron armor which shone with blue tones. Alongside him was another man in armor, behind were two riders in simple grey clothes, undoubtedly pages.

The winged helmet Nilfgaardian approached them, holding his dancing bay one step away. His squire stroked the hilt of his sword and swung into the saddle.

‘Stay back and take care of the girl.’ He shouted at Skomlik and the Trappers. ‘Do not meddle!’

‘We are not drunks,’ Skomlik said quietly as the squire moved away. ‘We are not drunks that interfere with the quarrels of the Lords of Nilfgaard...’

‘Will there be a fight Skomlik?’

‘Inevitably. Between Sweers and Varnhagen there is hatred of family and blood vengeance. Guard the girl. If we are lucky, we will take all the reward for her.’

‘It’s a sure thing that Varnhagen is also looking for the girl. If he prevails, we will only be four...’

‘Five.’ Skomlik smiled. ‘That one behind Sarda is my family. You’ll see, this brawl will benefit us and not the knights...’

The knight in blue armor reined in his horse. The knight with the winged helmet stood opposite. Blue’s companion stayed behind. His strange helmet was adorned with two leather straps that hung from his visor and looked like two big moustaches or walrus tusks. Across his saddle he held a menacing weapon, which resembled a little spear, much like what was used by the guards of Cintra, but with a much shorter haft and a longer spearhead.

Winged and Blue exchanged a few words. Ciri could not hear what, but the tone of the two knights left no room for doubt. These were not words of friends. Blue suddenly rose in the saddle, pointed sharply at Ciri and said something loudly and angrily. Winged shouted in response equally angry and waved his hand covered in an armoured gauntlet, presumably to tell Blue to go away. And so it began.

Blue spurred his spurs into the sides of his dapple and leaned forward; raising the axe he had carried attached to his saddle. Winged edged forward his bay and drew his sword from its sheath. However before the armed men had time to engage in the fight, Two Tusks attacked, spurring his horse into a gallop with the haft of his spear. Winged squire threw himself at him, drawing his sword, but Two Tusks shifted in his saddle and jabbed his spear into the squire’s chest. The long spearhead pierced with a bang through the breastplate, the squire cried piercingly and fell from his horse onto the ground with both hands gripping the shaft that was sticking from his chest.

Winged and Blue collided with a crash and thud. The axe was more dangerous but the sword was faster. Blue was hit in the shoulder; a piece of metal flew to one side, the rider turned and pulled the reins, he reeled in the saddle, crimson streaks started to flow down the blue armour. The fighters separated at a gallop. The winged Nilfgaardian turned his horse, but Two Tusks fell upon him, grabbing his sword with both hands, readying to strike. Winged pulled on the reins, but Two Tusks leading his horse with only his knees, galloped alongside. Winged managed to hack at him in passing. Before Ciri’s eyes, the metal cracked and sheets of blood burst forth.

Blue had already returned, brandishing his axe and yelling. Both armoured opponents exchanged blows and broke apart. Two Tusks fell back onto Winged, horses colliding and swords rang. Two Tusks cut at Winged, smashing into his bracers and shield. Winged straightened and struck a powerful blow into the right side of Two Tusks’ breastplate. Two Tusks swayed in the saddle. Winged stood in his stirrups and swung again with force, and tore between the shoulder and helmet. The broad and sharp sword pierced with a loud bang

on the metal, and got stuck. Two Tusks tensed and shuddered. The horses withdrew, kicking and biting the bit. Winged leaned against the saddlebow and pulled at the sword. Two Tusks slipped from his saddle under the hooves of the horses. The horse's shoes struck and crushed the armor.

Blue turned his dapple around again and attacked, raising his axe. He guided the horse with difficulty using his wounded hand. Winged noticed and skillfully went right, straightened in his stirrups and launched a terrible blow. Blue parried with his axe which pulled the sword from the hands of Winged. The horses crashed together again. Blue was a powerful man, the heavy axe in his hands rose and fell like a stick. It fell onto the armor of Winged with a loud crash and the bay was almost knocked to her haunches. Winged staggered, but held his place in the saddle. Before the axe could fall again, he dropped his reins and his left hand, grasping a heavy angular mace hanging from a leather sling, and struck a blow to the blue helmet. The helmet rang like a bell, now it was Blue who was rocking in the saddle. The horses groaned, trying to bite each other and did not want to separate.

Blue, clearly stunned by the blow of the mace, still got a hit in with his axe to his opponent's breastplate. The fact that both were still in their saddles seemed a miracle, but it was simply caused by the high pommel they were holding. Down the sides of both horse flowed blood, especially visible on the dapple. Ciri watched in horror. In Kaer Morhen they had taught her how to fight, but she could not imagine how she could face up against one of these strongmen. Or even stop one of those powerful blows.

Blue grabbed with both hands the handle of the axe that was stuck deep into the chest of Winged, straightened and pulled, trying to knock his opponent out of the saddle. Winged hit him hard with his club, once, twice, thrice. The blood spurted from under his helmet onto the blue armor and grey collar. Winged jabbed at the bay with his spurs, the sudden jump of the horse pulled the sharp axe from his breastplate. Blue, who was leaning on his saddlebow, dropped the handle. Winged changed his mace to his right hand, threw it and struck a terrible blow to the head of Blue's horse. Holding the reins of the horse in his free hand, the Nilfgaardian hit with the mace, the blue armor sounded like a smelting iron, blood flowed from under the shattered helmet. Yet another blow and Blue fell head first under the horse's hooves. The dapple backed away, but the bay, obviously trained for it, kicked the fallen knight with a crash. Blue was still alive, as attesting to his desperate cries of pain. The bay continued to kick him with such force, that Winged, wounded could not sustain his seat and fell with a crash next to Blue.

'They've both been killed.' Groaned the Trapper who had hold of Ciri.

'Sir Knights, to hell with them.' Spat another.

The pages of Blue watched from afar. One of them turned his horse.

'Stop, Remiz!' Skomlik screamed. 'Where are you going? To Sarda? Do you hurry to the scaffold?' The pages stopped, one looked, shading his eyes with his hand.

'Is that you Skomlik?'

'Yes! Come Remiz, fear not! Knightly feuds are none of our business!'

Ciri suddenly had enough of indifference. Nimbly slipping from her captor, she started running, caught Blue's dapple and with a jump was in the saddle with high anxiety.

She would have gotten away, had the pages from Sarda not been in their saddles and not had fresh horses. They caught her easily, grabbing the reins. She jumped off and rushed towards the forest, but the horsemen caught up with her again. One grabbed her by her hair, pulled and started to drag her. Ciri screamed and clung to his hand. The riders threw her directly at the feet of Skomlik. He swung his stick, it whistled; Ciri screamed and curled up, covering her head with her hands. The stick whistled again and hit her on the hands. She rolled on the floor, but Skomlik approached, kicked her and put his boot on her back.

'You want to flee, bitch?'

The stick whistled. Ciri howled. Skomlik struck again and poked her in the back.

‘Don’t hit me!’ She cried, shrinking back from him.

‘So you do speak, bitch! Maybe you’ll miss your tongue? I’ll do...’

‘Remember, Skomlik!’ Shouted one of the Trappers. ‘Do you want to slay her, or what? She’s worth too much to throw away!’

‘Lightning,’ Remiz said, dismounting. ‘Is this who Nilfgaard has been looking for, for a week?’

‘She is.’

‘Ha! All the garrisons seek her! You do not know how important this person is to Nilfgaard! They said that a powerful wizard was loose somewhere in the area. Such was spoken of in Sarda. Where did you catch her?’

‘In the Pan.’

‘You lie!’

‘She was, she was’ said Skomlik angrily. ‘We have her and the reward is ours! Why are you standing around like mummies? Tie this bitch to the saddle! We are getting out of here, fellows!’

‘The noble Sweers’ said one of the Traps, ‘is still breathing...’

‘Not for long. Slit his throat! We go straight to Amarillo, fellows, to see the governor. We grabbed the girl and now the reward.’

‘To Amarillo?’ said Remiz scratching his forehead, looking at the recent field of battle. ‘There we will be greeted by the executioner! What will you tell the governor? The Knights were defeated but you are okay? When the whole thing is revealed, the governor will send you to hang, and we will be sent to Sarda... And there the Varnhagens will skin us in strips. You can go to Amarillo, but I’m staying in the forests...’

‘You are my family, Remiz.’ Skomlik said. ‘Even though you are a whoreson because you gave one to my sister, you’re still a relative. So I’ll save your skin. We will go to Amarillo, I say. The governor knows that between Sweers and Varnhagen there were matters of family. They met; they fought each other, the usual thing with them. And what did we do? The girl ran, and we found her later. We are Trappers. And now you to are a Trapper, Remiz. The governor will have no fucking idea what went on with Sweers. We are not going to tell...’

‘Aren’t you forgetting something, Skomlik?’ Remiz asked while eyeing the other page from Sarda.

Skomlik slowly turned and suddenly pulled out a knife and plunged it into the throat of the page. The page gurgled and collapsed to the ground.

‘I did not forget.’ Said the Trapper coldly. ‘Well, now it is you and us. There are no witnesses, and now there are less heads for the reward. To the horses, fellows to Amarillo! It is still a long way between us and the reward. There is no time to waste!’

When they emerged from the dark and humid forest, they saw a village at the foot of the mountain, a few thatched roofs within a circle formed by a low stockade which separated them from a small meandering river.

The wind brought the smell of smoke. Ciri moved her numb hands, which were tied with ropes to the pommel of the saddle. She was completely numb, her buttocks ached unbearably, and a full bladder teased her. She had been in the saddle since sunrise. At night she could not rest because she was forced to sleep with her hands tied to the wrists of two separate Trappers lying on either side of her. With each of her movements, the Trappers reacted with profanities and threats to her life.

‘A farmhouse,’ said one.

‘I see,’ replied Skomlik.

Coming out from the forest the hooves of the horses were surrounded by tall, sunburnt grass. They soon found themselves on a bumpy road leading down to the village, towards a bridge and a wooden gate in the palisade.

Skomlik stopped his horse and stood in the stirrups.

‘What is this village? We have never stopped here. Remiz, do you know this area?’

‘Before’ Remiz said ‘this town was called White River. But a revolt began; some of those here joined the rebels, then Varnhagen of Sarda razed the village and put people to death or took them as servants. Now only Nilfgaardian farmers inhabit here, all peasants. And they now call the village Glyswen. The farmers are believed to be bad people. I say we do not halt here. Let us go further.’

‘We must give the horses a break,’ said one of the Trappers. ‘And fodder. And it sounds to me like musicians are playing inside. If they give us trouble, these peasants, I’ll wave the order from the governor before their noses, the governor is a Nilfgaardian as they are. It will quickly bring them to their knees.’

‘Oh, yes,’ growled Skomlik ‘I’ve not seen any Nilfgaardian who kneel. Remiz, is there an inn in Glyswen?’

‘There is, Varnhagen did not burn it.’

Skomlik turned in his saddle and looked at Ciri.

‘We’ll have to disguise her. Lest anyone recognise her... Give me a cloak. And put the hood up over her head... Go! Are you ready, brat?’

‘I have to go behind the bushes...’

‘I’ll give you bushes, bitch! Crouch on the road! And do not forget: in the village or in the open, do not think you are clever! One peep and I’ll cut your throat. If I don’t get the reward for you, not one will.’

The rode up at a walk, the horse’s hooves echoed on the bridge. At once from behind the stockade figures emerged armed with spears.

‘They guard the gate,’ whispered Remiz. ‘I’m curious to know why...’

‘Me too,’ Skomlik replied, rising up in his stirrups. ‘They guard the gate and the by the mill the barrier has fallen and once could drive a cart through there...’

They approached and then reined in their horses.

‘Greetings, gentlemen!’ Skomlik shouted jovially, if somewhat unnatural. ‘Good morning!’

‘Who are you?’ asked the taller of the farmers.

‘We, my friend, are the military,’ lied Skomlik leaning over his saddle. ‘in the service of our master, the governor of Amarillo.’

The farmer ran his hand along the shaft of his spear, looked askance at Skomlik. Doubtlessly not knowing he was addressing a Trapper.

‘His lordship the governor of Amarillo sent us here.’ Skomlik continued his lie. ‘To see how fared his countrymen, the good people of Glyswen.’

‘We are doing fine.’ The farmer said. Ciri noted that he spoke common like Winged, with the same accent and style of speaking, although he tried to imitate Skomlik’s jargon. ‘We are used to coping alone.’

‘The governor will be content, when we recount this to him. Is the inn open? We have dry throats...’

‘It’s open.’ The farmer said darkly. ‘At the moment, it is open.’

‘For how long?’

‘For now. Soon the inn will be stripped of its rafters and planks to put onto the granary. We get no benefit from the inn. We are too busy working, to go to the inn. Only strangers come to the inn, and people who we are not happy with. Those are the ones who stay there.’

‘Who?’ Remiz paled slightly. ‘People from the fortress of Sarda? Could they be the noble lords of Varnhagen?’

‘The farmer frowned and his lips moved as if from a desire to spit.

‘No, unfortunately. It is the militia of the Baron. The Nissir.’

‘Who are the Nissir?’ Skomlik frowned. “And where are they? And under whose command?’

‘There is one older than them all, tall, dark, moustachioed like a catfish.’

‘Heh!’ Skomlik turned to his comrades. ‘Excellent. This one sounds familiar, no? It sounds like our old friend Vercta “Trust me”, remember him? And what is this man and the Nissir doing in your town?’

‘The Nissir,’ the farmer said darkly, ‘are bound for Tyffi. We are honoured by the visit. They carry a prisoner. He belongs to the gang of Rats.’

‘Sure!’ Remiz snorted. ‘And what would you have the militia of the Emperor do?’

The farmer frowned; his hands shook on the haft of the spear. His companions murmured softly.

‘Ride to the inn, gentlemen.’ The muscles in the farmer’s jaw shook vigorously. ‘And talk to the Nissir, your companions. You are in the service of the governor. Ask, then why are they taking the bandit to Tyffi, rather than nailing him to a pole with the oxen, here in town, just as the governor charges. And remind your Nissir friends that the power here is not the Baron of Tyffi. We already have the oxen yoke and the sharpened stakes. If the Nissir refuse, we will do what is necessary. Tell them.’

‘I’ll tell them.’ Skomlik winked to his comrades. ‘Farewell, gentlemen.’

They set off at a walk between the huts. The village appeared deserted, there was not a soul. Under one of the fences a gaunt pig rolled in the mud. A large black cat dash across the path of the riders.

‘Pah, fuckin cat!’ Remiz leaned to one side of his saddle and spat, then cross his fingers in a sign of protection against the evil eye. ‘Bloody thing crossed in front of us!’

‘I hope it chokes on the mouse in its gullet.’

‘What?’ Skomlik looked around.

‘A cat. Black as pitch. It crossed the road.’

‘The hell with it.’ Skomlik looked around again. ‘Look around, it seems deserted. But I have seen glances that people were home. And I saw at another door a man with a spear.’

‘Caring for the females,’ laughed the one who wished mouse problems upon the cat. ‘The Nissir are in town! Did you hear what the farmer said? He doesn’t like the Nissir.’

‘And no wonder. “Trust me” and his company do not forgive. Eh, the Nissir are not looking or anything. The Barons appoint them “Guardians of Order”, so they are charged to keep it and to keep the roads. Shout in a peasant’s ear: “Nissir!” and he’ll be scared with shit running down his legs. However from time to time. Just as a calf goes to slaughter, they’ll find a back bone and then it’s more than farmers that are nailed in the winter, you’ll see. You saw those at the gate, they had fierce mouths? These are settlers from Nilfgaard. No joking with them... Ha, here is the inn...’

They spurred their horses.

The inn has a thatched roof, slightly sunken and heavily covered in moss. It was some distance from the huts and utilitarian buildings; it however marked the central point of the entire land surrounded by the broken palisade, where the two paths crossed through the village. In the shadow of the only large tree around, lay a corral, for livestock and horses. Of the latter there were five or six horses unsaddled. In front of the doors, on the stairs, sat two men dressed in leather doublets and pointed leather hats. Both of them hugged to their chests a few jars of clay and they had a bowl full of gnawed bones.

‘Who are you?’ Shouted one of the men at the sight of Skomlik and his company, as they dismounted. ‘What do you seek? You’d better be on your way! The inn has been occupied on behalf of the law!’

‘Do not shout, Nissir, do not shout.’ Skomlik said, pulling Ciri down from the saddle. ‘The gates were open and we entered. Your commander, Vercta is our friend.’

‘I don’t know you!’

‘Because you are a fledgling! “Trust me”, and I even served together in the old days, before he came here to Nilfgaard.’

‘Well, if so...’ Said the man hesitantly, dropping his hand to the hilt of his sword. ‘Go in. I don’t give a shit...’

Skomlik pushed Ciri, another trapper grabbed her collar. They went inside.

Inside it was dark and stuffy and smelled of smoke and burning things. The inn appeared almost empty; only one table was occupied standing directly in the streak of light that came through the window of fish membranes. Sitting at it were several men. In the background, near the fireplace, the innkeeper was busy, rattling pots.

‘Honour to the lords of Nissir!’ Skomlik boomed.

‘We do not honour any ox.’ Snapped one of the company sitting by the window, spitting on the floor. Another stopped him with a gesture.

‘Quiet,’ he said. ‘These are our fellows, do you not recognise them? Skomlik and his Trappers. Welcome, welcome!’

Skomlik beamed and walked towards the table, but stopped when his eyes fixed on the pole that supported the beam. Next to the pole sitting on a stool was a thin, blond boy of less than twenty years, strangely bent and twisted. Ciri realized that the unnatural position stemmed from the fact that the boy’s hands were twisted back and tied, and his neck was attached to the pole by a leather belt.

‘May I be showered with pustules!’ One of the trappers that had seized Ciri’s neck, snorted loudly. ‘Look, Skomlik! It’s Kayleigh!’

‘Kayleigh? It can’t be!’

One of the Nissir sitting at the table, a fat man with hair cut into a picturesque forelock, bust out in a loud guttural laugh.

‘It can be.’ He said, licking a spoon. ‘It’s Kayleigh, in his filthy person. It paid off to get up at dawn. He shall fetch me at least thirty florins in good imperial coin.’

‘Kayleigh, well, well.’ Skomlik frowned. ‘That means the Nilfgaardian yokel spoke the truth...’

‘Thirty florins, damn.’ Remiz sighed. ‘That is something... Lutz, Baron of Tyffi pays it?’

‘Yes’ confirmed another Nissir with brown hair and a moustache. ‘Lutz of Tyffi, our lord and benefactor, is a powerful baron. The Rats robbed his governor on the highway, he is burning with rage and has put up a reward. And we, Skomlik, will take this reward, trust me. Ha, just look at the men here, like puffed up owls. It was not to their taste that we captured the Rat, we also have been ordered to track down the leader of the gang!’

‘Trapper Skomlik,’ the fat man with the pointed forelock, indicated Ciri with his spoon ‘you also caught something. A little girl. Do you see, Vercta?’

‘I see,’ a man with black whiskers flashed his teeth. ‘Skomlik are you so pressed by poverty, that you are stealing children for ransom? Who is this slut?’

‘Never you mind!’

‘Wow that was fierce.’ Laughed, the man with the forelock. ‘We just want to make sure she is not your daughter.’

‘He’s daughter?’ Vercta, the man with the black moustache laughed. ‘I say, to have a daughter means he’d have to have balls.’

The Nissir roared with laughter.

‘Ah, look mutton heads!’ Skomlik yelled. ‘To you Vercta, I’ll say no more, but before Sunday, you’ll be amazed who will be most famous, you and your Rat or me and what I do. And we’ll see who is more generous: your Baron or the imperial governor of Amarillo!’

‘You can kiss my ass.’ Vercta said contemptuously returning to his soup. ‘Along with your governor, the Emperor and all of Nilfgaard, trust me. I do not care. Even I know that Nilfgaard seeks a girl. I know there are rewards for her. But I don’t care shit for it. I’ve served the governors and Nilfgaardians and I spit on them. I now serve Baron Lutz and answer only to him and nobody is hurt.’

‘Your Baron,’ Skomlik croaked ‘serves Nilfgaard, he licks the boots of the Nilfgaardians. So do not speak so casually!’

‘Do not shout,’ said the Nissir in a conciliatory tone. ‘I should not have spoken against you, trust me. That you have the girl the Nilfgaardians are looking for is a good thing. I’d see with pleasure that you take the reward and not those fucking Nilfgaardians. And you serve the governor? Nobody chooses the masters, they would choose, right? Come on, sit down with us and let us drink to this meeting.’

‘Well, why not.’ Skomlik agreed. ‘Just give me a length of rope. I’ll tie the girl to the pole with your Rat, okay?’

The Nissir roared with laughter.

‘Skomlik, the terror of the border!’ Laughed the man with the large forelock. ‘The armed wing of Nilfgaard! Come on Skomlik, tie her up nice and strong. But use an iron chain, because this famous prisoner is ready to break the rope and break your noses before fleeing. She looks so dangerous that even my hair is standing on end.’

Skomlik and even his companions burst out laughing. The Trapper flushed, dropped the rope and approached the table.

‘I meant for security, not to take...’

‘Do not worry about these asses.’ Vercta interrupted, breaking the bread in his hands. ‘You want to talk, sit down and wait in queue. And this girl, you can hang her by her legs from the ceiling. I don’t care a pig’s shit. It is terribly funny, Skomlik. For you and your governor she is perhaps an important prisoner, but to me she is an emaciated and scared kid. Do you want to tie her up? She’s, trust me, barely able to stand upright, so how is she going to flee. What are you afraid of?’

‘I’ll tell you what I’m afraid of.’ Skomlik bit his lip. ‘This is a Nilfgaardian village. Here we have not been welcomed with bread and salt, and for your Rat, they say they have a sharpened stick. And that is their right; the governor has decreed that justice is to be done to bandits at the site of their capture. And if the prisoner is not given to them, they are ready to sharpen sticks for you all.’

‘Oh dear,’ said the man with the forelock. ‘Crows frighten them. They better not put us in the midst of this or we will make their blood flow.’

‘We will not give over the Rat.’ Said Vercta. ‘We go to Tyffi. Baron Lutz can fix the issue with the governor. Ah, let them chatter in vain. Sit down.’

The trapper, lett go of his sword belt, at the table the happy Nissir started yelling for the innkeeper. Skomlik grabbed a stool and kicked it towards the pole, grabbed Ciri by the shoulders and pushed her so she fell, hitting her arm on the bound boy’s knees.

‘Stay here.’ He growled. ‘And don’t move, you wiggle like a bitch.’

‘You louse.’ Cried the boy, looking at him with narrowed eyes. ‘You dog...’

Ciri did not know most of the words that flew out of the boys crooked and crumpled mouth, but by the changes occurring on Skomlik’s face she concluded that the words must have been incredibly filthy and offensive. The trapper paled with rage, his hands shook, he hit the bound boy in the face, grabbed him by his long hair and shook him, hitting the boy’s forehead into the pole.

‘Hey!’ Cried Vercta, while rising from the table. ‘What’s happening here?’

‘I’m removing the fangs from this filthy rat!’ Skomlik growled. ‘I’ll put both of my feet up his ass!’

‘Come here and stop tearing at his throat.’ The Nissir sat down, taking a gulp of beer from his mug then wiped his moustache, ‘Your prisoner can sit, we won’t stay long. And you, Kayleigh, don’t play the daredevil. Sit quietly and think about the scaffold which Baron Lutz has order be erected in town. The list of things the Baron is going to do to you is already written and trust me, it is three cubits long. Half the town has already bet to see how long you will hold. So save your strength Rat. I put a small sum of money on it myself and I hope that you do not disappoint me and hold out until at least castration.’

Kayleigh turned his head and spat, as much as the belt around his neck would allow. Skomlik pulled up his belt and measured Ciri with a malevolent look, then joined the company at the table, cursing, because the pitcher that the innkeeper had bought only had a few remnants of foam.

‘How did you take Kayleigh?’ He asked, indicating his desire to extend his order to the innkeeper. ‘And on top of that, alive! Because his position in the Rats, I’ll give you credit.’

‘In truth,’ Vercta said, looking critically at what he had just removed from his nose, ‘we were lucky, that’s all. He split off from the gang to go through New Forge to see a wench and spend the night. The mayor, who knew we were not far, sent out a call. We were able to arrive before dawn and got him in the haystack, before he had time to chirp.’

‘And his wench entertained us all.’ Laughed the big man with the forelock. ‘Apparently her night with Kayleigh hadn’t satisfied her. When we were done with her she couldn’t move her arms or legs.’

‘Well then I say this to you bastards.’ Skomlik said loudly and mockingly. ‘You could have had more money. Instead of wasting time with the girl, you could have been applying heat to the Rat to find where the gang spent the night. You could have had Giseller and Reef... Just for Giseller, the Varnhagen of Sarda where offering twenty florins a year ago. And that fucker, what’s her name ... Mistle, I think... For her the governor would have given more money after what she did to his nephew in Druigh when the Rats raided a convoy.’

‘You, Skomlik,’ scowled Vercta ‘are either stupid by nature, or this hard life has screwed with your head. We are a party of six. Was I going to attack the whole gang myself? And the reward will not escape us. Baron Lutz is going to roast Kayleigh’s heels in the dungeon, not waste time, trust me. Kayleigh is going to sing, giving us all the hiding places and shelters, and then we’ll go with a strong band, surround them and take them out like a crab from a shell.’

‘It’s clear. They are going to wait. When they learn that you captured Kayleigh they will go into other shelters and hideouts. No, Vercta, you have to look at the truth. You swapped the reward for a romp with a maid. You are so... you have only shit in your heads.’

‘You are the fool!’ Vercta stood. ‘If you are in such a hurry, go after the Rats yourself along with your heroes! But take heed, because hunting the Rats is not the same as catching a prepubescent girl!’

The Nissir and Trappers began to scream and throw curses at each other. The innkeeper promptly served more beer, grabbing an empty jar from the big man with the forelock, which was aimed at Skomlik. The scuffle soon settled down, the beer refreshed and soothed throats and temperaments.

‘Bring food!’ They cried to the fat innkeeper. ‘Scrambled eggs with sausage, beans, bread and cheese!’

‘And beer!’

‘Why cry over spilt milk, Skomlik? Today we have money! We caught Kayleigh with his horse, purse, trinkets, sword, saddle and sheepskin, and everything we sold to the dwarves!’

‘And we also sold the red slippers from his wench. And her necklace!’

‘Ho, ho, what better reason to drink! Radem!’

‘Why are you so happy? We have reason to drink, not you. You, with your important prisoner, you can have the snot from her nose and the fleas that bite her! Your prisoner and your spoils, ha, ha!’

‘Son of a bitch!’

‘Ha, ha, sit down, and close that mouth!’

‘Let us drink to peace! We invite you!’

‘Where are those scrambled eggs, innkeeper, the plague devour you! Make haste!’

‘And bring beer!’

Ciri, curled up on the stool, raised her head, finding Kayleigh’s angry green eyes looking at her from under a matted mane of blond hair. A chill pierced her. Kayleigh’s face, although not ugly, was evil, very evil. Ciri suddenly realised that this boy who was not much older than her was capable of anything.

‘I think the gods have sent you to me,’ whispered the Rat, his green eyes penetrating her. ‘To think, I did not believe in them and they have sent you. Do not look, little idiot. You gotta help me... Give me your ear, plague...’

Ciri shrank even more, lowering her head.

‘Listen’ Kayleigh hissed, flashing his teeth which almost looked like a real rats. ‘In a few moments when the innkeeper wanders by, cry out... Listen to me, dammit...’

‘No,’ she said. ‘He’ll beat me...’

Kayleigh’s lips twitched and Ciri immediately understood that being hit by Skomlik was by no means the worst that could happen. Although Skomlik was big and Kayleigh was skinny and bound, she felt instinctively who she should be more afraid of.

‘If you help me,’ whispered the Rat. ‘I’ll help you. I am not alone. I have friends who will not leave you here... You understand? But when my friends arrive, when everything starts, I cannot be attached to this pole because I’ll be chopped to pieces by these bastards... Listen to me, dammit. I’ll tell you what to do...’

Ciri bowed her head even lower. Her lips trembled.

The Nissir and the Trappers gobbled the scrambled eggs like wild boar. The innkeeper returned from stirring a pot and brought to the table mugs of beer and a loaf of white bread.

‘I’m hungry!’ cried Ciri obediently, paling slightly. The innkeeper stopped, looked at her, then turned to the participants of the banquet.

‘Can I give her some, gentlemen?’

‘No!’ Shouted Skomlik, flushing red and spitting scrambled eggs. ‘Stay away from her, go near her and I’ll break your legs! I forbid it! And you sit quiet, stop this mischief, or you’ll...’

‘Hey, hey, Skomlik, what did she do?’ Vercta interjected, swallowing with effort bread topped with onions. ‘Look at him guys, he eats with someone else’s money, but spares the girl. Innkeeper, give the girl a bowl. I pay and I say who eats and who doesn’t. And who doesn’t like this can just leave on their hairy ass.’

Skomlik flushed even more, but said nothing.

‘Something I just remembered’ added Vercta. ‘The Rat must be fed, so that he doesn’t become anaemic on the road, because then the Baron will have our skins, trust me. Girl feed him. Hey innkeeper! Get some food for them! And you, Skomlik, what bothers you? What is it you dislike?’

‘Keep an eye on her,’ The Trapper nodded towards Ciri ‘because she is a strange bird. If she was an ordinary girl, Nilfgaard would not be after her, the governor promised money...’

‘If she is common or uncommon,’ laughed the big man with the forelock ‘I can show you, just look between her legs! What say you fellows? Do we take her out to the barn for a while?’

‘Do not dare touch her!’ Skomlik growled. ‘I will not allow this!’

‘There he goes! As if we asked permission from him!’

‘This dispute is over my head, I’m to deliver her alive and well! The governor of Amarillo...’

‘Shit on your governor. Did you drink at our expense and now you deny us one fuck? Eh, Skomlik, do not be stingy! Your head will not fall, fear not, nor will your profit be lessened! You will deliver her whole, a girl is not a bladder, she will not explode from a shagging.’

The Nissir burst into mocking laughter. Skomlik’s companions echoed it. Ciri trembled, turned pale and looked up. Kayleigh smiled sarcastically.

‘Do you understand now?’ His lip whispered, slightly smiling. ‘When they get drunk they will take you. Mistreat you. We are in the same boat. Do what I commanded. If I succeed, you also...’

‘The food is ready!’ Shouted the innkeeper, He did not have a Nilfgaardian accent. ‘Come here, lady!’

‘A knife.’ Ciri whispered, taking the bowl from the innkeeper.

‘What?’

‘A knife. Quickly.’

‘That is enough, no more!’ Shouted the innkeeper unnaturally, squinting in the direction of the feasting and adding porridge into a bowl, ‘Please leave.’

‘A knife.’

‘No. I feel for you, daughter but I cannot. I cannot, understand. Go...’

‘From this inn,’ she recited the words of Kayleigh in a trembling voice, ‘no one will come out alive. A knife. Hurry. And when it starts, run away.’

‘Hold the bowl, toad!’ Shouted the innkeeper, turning so that he hid Ciri. He was pale and his teeth chattered. ‘Closer to the pan!’

She felt the cold touch of a kitchen knife that he slipped from his belt, covering the handle with her tunic.

‘Well done.’ Kayleigh hissed. ‘Sit down so you can shield me. Put the bowl in my lap. In your left hand take the spoon, in the right the knife. Now cut the rope. Not there, asshole, under the knot on the pole. Careful, they are looking.’

Ciri felt dryness in her throat. She bowed her head almost to the bowl.

‘Feed me and eat some too.’ His green eyes stared at her from under half closed lids, hypnotically. ‘Slowly, slowly. Be brave little one. If I get out, so do you...’

True, thought Ciri, while cutting the rope. The knife smelled of iron and onions, the edge was recessed from repeated sharpening. *He is right, how do I know where these scoundrels are taking me? How do I know what this Nilfgaardian governor wants from me? Maybe what is waiting for me in Amarillo is the wheel, drills, pliers or red hot irons ... I will not be carried away like a lamb to slaughter. Better to take a chance...*

With a roar the window flew inwards, together with the frame, from outside a stump that were used for chopping wood landed on the table, causing havoc among the bowls and mugs. Following in the footsteps of the stump, onto the table jumped a blond girl with short cut hair, wearing a red tunic and high shiny boots that reached above the knees. She knelt on the table, waving her sword. One of the Nissir, the slower one, did not have time to get up and back away, he fell back onto his stool, spraying blood from his slashed throat. She dropped lightly from the table, making room for a guy who jumped in through the window who was dressed in an embroidered sheepskin jacket.

‘The Raaaattss!’ Shouted Vercta, struggling with his sword which had gotten tangled in his belt.

The fat man with the forelock drew his weapon, jumped towards the girl kneeling on the floor, swung, but the girl while on her knees, deftly parried the blow then dropped to the

ground, the boy in the sheepskin jacket, who had jumped down behind him, hit the Nissir with ease in the temple. The fat man hit the ground, like a mattress made of straw.

The doors of the inn were opened by a kick and two more rats entered the room. The first was tall and swarthy and wore a studded jacket with a scarlet scarf tied at the front. This one, with two quick slashes of his sword, sent two trappers to separate corners, then cut at Vercta. The second, a broad-shouldered blond sent a wide cut in the direction of Remiz, Skomlik's brother. The rest took flight towards the kitchen door. But the Rats were entering there as well. At the rear jumped suddenly a dark girl dressed in a colourful outfit. A quick thrust of her sword pierced one of the Trappers, then chased the another, and soon after skewered the innkeeper before he could yell who he was.

The room was filled with the noise and clashes of swords. Ciri hid behind the pole.

'Mistle!' Kayleigh shouted, having broken free from the ropes that bound him, was now wrestling with the strap around his neck that was still binding him to the pole. 'Giselher! Reef! To me!'

The Rats, however, were still busy fighting, though Skomlik heard Kayleigh's cry. The trapper turned around with the intention of nailing the Rat to the post. Ciri reacted quickly and instinctively; just like during the fight with the Wyvern in Gors Velen, like in Thanedd, all the movements she had learned in Kaer Morhen took over suddenly, almost without her participation. She jumped out from behind the pole, spun in pirouette; fell heavily on Skomlik, hitting him in the hip. She was too small and puny to dislodge the huge trapper, but managed to disrupt the rhythm of his movement. And turn his attention to her.

'You whore!'

Skomlik swung his sword and the air howled. Ciri's body again made the same economical dodge, the trapper almost fell over, following the path of his accelerating blade. Cursing vilely, he hacked again, putting the full force of his body behind the blow. Ciri jumped agilely aside, landing safely on her left foot and then spun in the opposite direction in a pirouette. Skomlik hacked again, but was unable to reach her.

Vercta abruptly fell between them, covered in blood.

The trapper stepped back and looked around. He was surrounded only by corpses. And the Rats were approaching from all sides with swords ready.

'Stand fast.' The swarthy one with the red scarf said coldly, finally releasing Kayleigh. 'It seems he wants to slice this girl at all costs. I don't know why. I do not know by what miracle you have not already done it. But let's give him a chance, since he wants it so much.'

'Give her a chance too,' Said Giselher, the one with the broad-shoulders., 'let this be a fair fight. Give her iron, Iskra.'

Ciri felt in her hand the grip of a sword. It was a little too heavy.

Skomlik grunted furiously, threw himself upon her, brandishing his blade in front of him. He was too slow. Ciri avoided the feints and cuts through fast turns, without even trying to stop the blows raining down. The sword only served as a counterweight to facilitate her easy evasions.

'Incredible!' Laughed the girl with the short cut hair. 'She's an acrobat!'

'She is fast.' Said the one in the colourful outfit, who had given her the sword. 'Quick as an elf. Hey you! Perhaps you would prefer one of us? You are having no luck with her!'

Skomlik glanced back, then all of a sudden lunged at Ciri stretching like a heron with its beak. Ciri avoided the onslaught with a short feint, she turned. For a second she saw a swollen and throbbing vein on Skomlik's neck. She knew that in the position she was in he was unable to avoid her blow. She knew where and how to strike.

She did not strike.

‘Enough of this.’ She felt a hand on her shoulder. The girl in the colourful outfit pushed her, while two other Rats, the boy in the sheepskin jacket and short hair, herded Skomlik into a corner of the room, keeping him in check with their swords.

‘Enough of this fun.’ Repeated colourful outfit, Ciri turned to face her. ‘This is taking a little too long. And it is your fault, girl. You can kill him, or not. I get the feeling you will not live long.’

Ciri trembled, looking at the big dark, almond shaped eyes, seeing bare teeth through a smile so small as to make it look ghostly. These were not human eyes or teeth. The girl in the bright outfit was an elf.

‘Time to blow.’ Giseller said sharply, the one with the scarlet scarf, evidently the leader. ‘It really is taking too long! Mistle, finish off the bastard.’

Short cut hair approached, carrying a sword.

‘Mercy!’ Skomlik screamed, falling to his knees. ‘Forgive my life! I have small children... Little ones...’

The girl struck a strong blow, turning at the hips. Blood splatter onto the whitewall as a large irregular spot of crimson.

‘I can not stand small children.’ Said short hair, while with a swift movement flicked the blood from the sword.

‘Do not just stand there, Mistle.’ Scarlet scarf urged her. ‘To the horses! We have to blow! This is a Nilfgaard settlement, we have no friends here!’

The Rats quickly ran out of the inn. Ciri did not know what to do, but had no time to reflect, Mistle, the short haired one, pushed her towards the door.

Before the inn, among the remains of the gnawed bones and jars, were the corpses of the Nissir guarding the entrance. From the village came running farmers with spears, but in light of the Rats emerging, they immediately disappeared among the huts.

‘Do you know how to ride?’ Mistle shouted at Ciri.

‘Yes...’

‘The come, grab one and gallop! There is a reward for our heads in this Nilfgaardian village! They’re all reaching for bows and spears! Ride behind Giseller! By the middle of the street! And stay away from the huts!’

Ciri flew over the low railing, grabbing the reins of one of the trappers horses, jumped into the saddle then slammed the rump of the horse with the flat of her sword, which she had not let go off. She went into a fast gallop ahead of Kayleigh and the colourful elf, who was called Iskra. The Rats rushed in the direction of the mill. She saw out of the darkness of a house, jump a man with a crossbow, pointed at Giseller’s back.

‘Stop him!’ She heard from the rear. ‘Stop him, girl!’

Ciri leaned in the saddle, jerking the reins and forcing her galloping horse to change direction, raising her sword. The man with the crossbow turning at the last second, she saw his face furrow in fear. Her hand hesitated only a moment, which was enough for her gallop to bring her alongside him. She heard the sound of the string releasing, the horse screamed, dropped to its haunches and reared. Ciri jumped, pulling her feet from the stirrups, landing lightly and dropping into a squat. Iskra, who was approaching, launched from the saddle a heavy blow, cutting down the crossbowman. The crossbowman fell to his knees, leaned forward and fell onto his face into a puddle, splashing mud. The wounded horse snorted and flung to the side, finally running between the huts, kicking hard.

‘You idiot!’ Yelled the elf, as she rode past Ciri. ‘You bloody idiot’

‘Jump on!’ Kayleigh shouted, approaching her. Ciri ran, grabbed the hand he offered to her. The momentum pulled at her shoulder joint until it cracked, but she managed to jump on the horse, clinging to the back of the blond haired Rat. They went at a gallop past Iskra. The elf turned, chasing down another crossbowman, who threw down his weapon and ran towards

the barn doors. Iskra reached him effortlessly. Ciri turned away. She heard the crossbowman scream cut short, like a wild beast.

Mistle caught up with them pulling along a saddled horse. She shouted something, Ciri could not understand the words, but she realised on the fly. She released Kayleigh's back and jumped back to the ground, ran to the saddled horse which was getting dangerously close to the huts. Mistle threw her the reins, looked up and shouted a warning. Ciri turned just in time to perform a half pirouette which helped her avoid the treacherous onslaught of a spear wielded by a stocky farmer who had emerged from a pigsty.

What happened next haunted her dreams for a long time. She remembered everything, every movement. The half pirouette that saved her from the tip of the spear, had set her in the ideal position. The spearman, however, was leaning forward too heavily, was unable to either jump away or shield himself as he held the spear with both hands. Ciri struck a blow, turning in an opposite half pirouette. For a moment she saw his lips open to scream in his face that was covered by a few days growth of beard. She saw on his long bald forehead the line where his cap or hat protected against a tan. And then everything she saw, was obscured by the fountain of blood.

Still holding the horse by the reins, the horse broke into a ghoulish squeal, and turning knocked her to her knees. Ciri did not let go of the reins. The wounded man screamed in a death rattle, was thrown convulsively into the straw and manure where blood flowed from him like a pig. Ciri felt bile rising to her throat.

Next to her nailed to her horse was Iskra. The elf seized the reins and tugged, forcing Ciri, who was still clutching the reins, back to her feet.

'Into the saddle!' She screamed 'And run!'

Ciri contained her nausea and jumped into the saddle. On the sword, which she still held in her hand was blood. She barely mastered the desire to throw the weapon as far away from herself as possible.

Mistle appeared from among the huts, chasing two people. One managed to escape by jumping a fence; the second was struck, fell to his knees and clutched his head in both hands.

Both Ciri, and the elf started off at a gallop, but after a moment stopped. Returning from the mill was Giseller with the other Rats. Behind them shouting encouragingly to each other was an armed group of farmers.

'Follow us!' cried Giseller passing them at a gallop. 'Follow us, Mistle! To the river!'

Mistle, leaning to one side, tugged the reins, turned her horse and was soon galloping behind him, jumping a low fence. Ciri put her face into the mane of her horse and followed. Iskra galloped along beside her. The momentum of the race had messed her beautiful black hair, revealing a small, pointed ear adorned with a filigree earring.

The man that Mistle had wounded was still kneeling in the middle of the road, swaying and clutched his bleeding head with both hands. Iskra turned around, rode up to him and struck with her sword from above with all her might. The wounded man screamed. Ciri saw severed fingers leap to the side like long cut chips, then fall to the ground like fat white worms.

With great effort, she managed not to vomit.

Before the hole in the palisade, waiting, were Mistle and Kayleigh, the rest of the Rats were already far ahead. All four went into a sharp, extended gallop, next to the river, the spraying water reached well above their horses' heads. Bent over, cheeks snuggled into the manes of their horses they crossed onto the sandy rocks, then ran on through a meadow covered with lupines. Iskra, having the best horse, was ahead of them.

They entered a forest, in the humid darkness between the trunks of the beeches. They caught up to Giseller and the others, but stopped for only a moment. They crossed the forest and entered a moor, then entered a gallop again. Ciri and Kayleigh soon began to lag behind the others, the trapper mounts were unable to keep the pace with the other Rats mounts. Ciri

had another problem: it was a big horse and her feet barely reached the stirrups and during the gallop she was unable to adjust them. She knew how to ride without stirrups no worse than with stirrups, but knew at this pace she could not sustain a gallop for long.

Fortunately, after a few minutes Giselher slowed and stopped, allowing her and Kayleigh to join the group. Ciri came at a trot. She still could not adjust the strap on the stirrups. Without slowing she shifted her right leg over and sat down side saddle on the horse.

Mistle, seeing the position the girl was riding in burst into laughter.

‘See, Giselher? Not only is she an acrobat, but also a mountebank! Hey, Kayleigh, where did you get this devil?’

Iskra, stopped her beautiful chestnut mare, still dry and eager to continue came nearer, pushing into the grey mare Ciri rode. Her horse snorted and stepped back, tossing its head. Ciri pulled on the reins and leant in the saddle.

‘Do you know why you are still alive, moron?’ the elf growled, pushing aside the hair from her forehead. ‘That farmer that respected your life so mercifully dropped the hammer early and hit the horse instead of you. Otherwise you would now have a bolt sticking out of your back! Why are you wearing that sword?’

‘Leave her alone, Iskra’ Mistle said, stroking sweat from the neck of her mount. ‘Giselher, we need to slow down, the pace is killing the horses! No one is chasing us’

‘I want to cross the Velda as soon as possible.’ Said Giselher. ‘We can rest across the river. Kayleigh, how is your horse?’

‘It’ll endure. It is a thoroughbred, not meant for racing, but it’s a strong beast!’

‘Well, let’s run.’

‘One moment,’ said Iskra. ‘What about this brat?’

Giselher looked back, adjusted his scarlet scarf and fixed his gaze on Ciri. His face, his expression, reminded her a little of Kayleigh – the same angry grimace of the lips, the same squinting eyes and the protruding lower jaw. But he was older than the blond haired Rat – bluish shadows on his cheeks testified that her shaved regularly already.

‘True,’ he said sharply. ‘What about you, lass?’

Ciri lowered her head.

‘She helped.’ Said Kayleigh. ‘If it were not for her, that nasty trapper would have nailed me to the post...’

‘The villagers,’ added Mistle ‘saw her running away with us. She slashed one, I doubt her survived. Those Nilfgaardians are farmers. If the girls falls into their hands, they’ll kill her. We can not leave her.’

Iskra snorted angrily, but Giselher raised his hand.

‘Let us cross the Velda,’ he decided. ‘Then we’ll see. Come, sit on the horse as you should, girl. If you fall, we will not see. Understand?’

Ciri nodded readily.

‘Tell me, girl, who are you? Where are you from? What is your name? Why do you travel under escort?’

Ciri bowed her head. During the gallop she had plenty of time to try and invent a story. She had invented a few. But the leader of the Rats did not look like someone who believed just anything.

‘Come on,’ urged Giselher. ‘You have ridden with us a few hours. You have listened to us, but I have not had a chance to know the sound of your voice. Are you mute?’

The fire shot up in a cloud of sparks and flames, flooding the ruined shepherd's hut with a wave of golden light. As if obeying a command of Giseller's, the fire lit up of the questioned party making it easier to discover if it held lies or falsehood.

But I can not tell them the truth. Ciri thought desperately. *They are thieves. Bandits. If they found out what the Nilfgaardians want me, that the Traps caught me for a reward, they may want the reward themselves. Besides, the truth is too incredible I do not even believe it.*

'We saved you from the village,' the leader of the bandits slowly continued. 'We brought you here to one of our hideouts. Gave you food. You are sitting here by our fire. So tell me who you are!'

'Leave her alone.' Mistle said suddenly. 'When I look at you, Giseller, I'm suddenly reminded of the Nissir, or the Trappers or one of those bastard Nilfgaardians. I feel like I am in an interrogation, tied to a rack in the dungeon.'

'Mistle is right,' said the blond wearing the sheepskin jacket. Ciri twitched upon hearing his accent. 'It is clear that the girl does not want to say who she is and she is entitled to that. When I joined you, I also did not talk much. I did not want to mention I was one of those bastard Nilfgaardians...'

'No shit, Reef.' Giseller waved his hand. 'With you it was different. And you Mistle, you exaggerate. There is no interrogation. I want to hear who she is and from where she is from. Once I've heard it I'll show her the way home and that's it. How can I do that if I do not know...'

'You do not know anything.' Mistle looked back. 'Even if she has a home, which I doubt. The trappers grabbed her on the road because she was alone. That's typical of these cowards. If she is forced to go, she would not survive alone in the mountains. Wolves would tear her apart or she'd die of hunger.'

'So, what do we do with her?' the broad shouldered one said with a young sounding voice, while stirring the wood in the fire with a stick. 'Do we leave her near a village?'

'Great idea, Asse.' Mistle sneered, 'Do you know the farmers? With the lack of hands to do the work now. Maybe they can get the girl to graze cattle, breaking her leg so she can not escape. In the evening she will be treated like a nobody, and therefore common property. And you know how she'll pay for the roof over her head. And in the spring will have fevers after recently giving birth to someone's bastard in a pigsty.'

'If we leave her the horse and the sword,' Giseller drawled slowly, still looking at Ciri. 'I would not want to be in the shoes of the farmer who wanted to break her leg. Or make a bastard. You saw the dance that she danced in the inn with the trapper whose throat Mistle cut. He was slashing air and she danced as if nothing was happening... Ha, I do not care about her name or her family, but would be happy to know where she learned these tricks...'

'Tricks will not save her,' Iskra said suddenly, who had been busy sharpening her sword. 'She can only dance. To survive she must learn to kill, and that she does not know.'

'I think she knows.' Kayleigh smiled. 'When in that village she ripped open the neck of that farmer, the blood flew out half a fathom...'

'And at the sight of it she nearly fainted.' Snorted the elf.

'Because she is still a kid.' Mistle interjected. 'I can imagine who she is and where she learned these tricks. I've seen people like her before. She's a dancer or acrobat with a traveling troupe.'

'And since when,' Iskra snorted again 'do we care about dancers and acrobats? Damn, midnight is approaching, sleep is overcoming me. Let's stop with the empty chatter. We have to sleep and rest, tomorrow at dusk we will be in Forge. You have not forgotten that it was the mayor who gave the Nissir, Kayleigh. The whole village will see how the night takes on a red face. And the girl? She can have the horse and sword, both were honestly earned. Give

her some food and some money. For helping to save Kayleigh. Let her go where she wants, let her care for herself...

'All right,' Ciri said, pursing her lips and rising. There was silence broken only by the crackling fire. The Rats looked at her curiously, waiting.

'All right.' She repeated, amazed at the sound of her voice which sounded so alien. 'I do not need you, I have not asked for anything... And I do not want to be with you! I'll leave...'

'So you're not mute.' Giseller said sombrely. 'You can speak, even cheeky.'

'Look at her eyes.' Iskra snapped. 'Look how she is holding her head. Bird of prey. Hawk!'

'You want to leave.' Said Kayleigh 'But where, do you know?'

'What do you care?' Ciri screamed, her eyes flashing a brilliant green. 'Do I ask you, where you go? I don't care! I do not need you at all! I can... I can handle it! Alone!'

'Alone?' Mistel repeated, smiling strangely. Ciri was silent, bowing her head. The Rats were also silent.

'It's night.' Giseller finally said. 'Do not ride at night. Do not ride alone, girl. He who is alone, dies alone. There, near the horses, are blankets and furs. Take some. Nights are cold in the mountains. Why are you looking at me with those green lanterns? Prepare a bed and sleep. You have to rest.'

After a moment of reflection, Ciri obeyed. When she returned, carrying a blanket and furs the Rats were no longer sitting around the fire. They stood in a semicircle, and the brightness of the fire flared in their eyes.

'We are the Border Rats.' Giseller said proudly. 'Smelling the spoils of loot miles away. And there is nothing we are not able to crack. We are the Rats. Come here, girl.'

She obeyed.

'You have nothing.' Giseller said, handing her a silver studded belt. 'Accept this.'

'You have nothing and no one.' Said Mistle, throwing over her shoulders with a smile, a green satin doublet and a plain weave blouse.

'You have nothing.' Said Kayleigh and his gift to her was a small dagger in a sheath studded with precious stones. 'You are alone.'

'You have no one.' Asse repeated after giving Ciri a decorative baldric.

'You have no family.' Said Reef in his Nilfgaardian accent, handing her a pair of soft skin gloves. 'You have no one nearby...'

'Everywhere you are a stranger.' Finished Iskra with seeming carelessness, and quickly and unceremoniously placed a beret with turkey feathers on her head. 'An Outsider everywhere and always different. How shall we call you, little hawk?'

Ciri looked into her eyes.

'Gvalch'ca.'

The elf laughed.

'Once you start to speak, you speak in multiple languages, little hawk! Very good. You will carry the name from the Elder People, a name that you yourself have chosen. You will be called Falka.'

Falka.

She could not sleep. Horses shuffled and neighed in the dark, the wind whispered through the tops of the pines. The sky was covered with stars. With great clarity shone the Eye, her faithful guide for many days while in the wilderness of the desert. The Eye pointed west. But Ciri was not sure if that was right. She was not sure of anything.

She could not sleep even though for the first time in many days she felt safe. She was no longer alone. She had placed the bed of blankets and furs in a corner, away from the Rats, who slept on the clay floor of the ruined hut, by the warm fire. She was away from them but still felt a closeness and presence. She was not alone.

She heard quiet footsteps.

‘Do not be afraid.’ Said Kayleigh. ‘I will not tell,’ whispered the blond hair Rat, while he crouched beside her ‘I will not tell them anything about the reward promised for you by the governor of Amarillo. There in the tavern you saved my life. I will reward you. With a beautiful thing. Right now.’

He lay beside her, slowly and carefully. Ciri tried to get up but Kayleigh forced her to lie down with a movement that was not violent, but strong and firm. He put a finger gently on her lips. It was not necessary. Ciri was paralysed with fear and her throat was painfully tight and dry and a cry could not have escaped, even though she wanted it. But it did not. The silence and darkness were better. Safer. More intimate. Hiding her fear and shame. She moaned.

‘Be quiet, little one.’ Kayleigh whispered, slowly untying her shirt. Slowly and smoothly he slid the fabric down off of her shoulders and pulled the shirt above her waist. ‘Do not be afraid. You’ll see how pleasant this is.’

Ciri shivered at the touch of his fingers, dry, hard and rough. She lay motionless, stretched taunt and full of fear and an overwhelming disgust, that sent heat waves to her temples and cheeks. Kayleigh slipped her left arm under his head and drew her closer to himself, trying to remove her hands that convulsively pulled the bottom of her shirt down in vain. She began to tremble.

In the darkness around her she suddenly felt a movement; she felt a jolt and the sound of a kick.

‘Have you gone mad, Mistle?’ Barked Kayleigh, sitting up a little.

‘Leave her alone, you swine.’

‘Piss off. Go to sleep.’

‘I said leave her alone.’

‘Does this seem unwelcome? Did she yell or stir? I just wanted to comfort her in her sleep. Don’t interrupt.’

‘Get out of here or I’ll make you.’

Ciri heard the screech of a sword leaving its scabbard.

‘I’m not kidding,’ Mistle repeated, looming in the darkness above them. ‘Go over to the others. Now!’

Kayleigh sat up, cursing. Her got up without saying a word and went quickly.

Ciri felt tears running down her cheeks, faster and faster, moving like worms crawling into her hair beside her ears. Mistle lay down beside her and covered her skin diligently. But did not close the shirt, leaving it open as it was. Ciri started shaking again.

‘Quiet, Falka. Everything is fine.’

Mistle was warm and smelled of cattle and smoke. Her hand, unlike Kayleigh’s hand was more delicate, more tender. More enjoyable. But the contact was making Ciri tense again, her body stiffened with fear and disgust, she squeezed her jaw shut. Mistle stuck to her, holding her protectively and whispering soothing words, but also her soft hand was crawling tireless like a snail, warm, calm, confident, determined, aware of its route and purpose. Ciri felt the grip of fear and disgust open up and release their prey, she felt the pressure release and fell down, down, deeper, into a warm and humid swamp of resigned submission.

She moaned dully, desperately. Mistle breath scorched her neck, velvet moist lips kissed her shoulder, collarbone and then very slowly moved lower.

Ciri, moaned again.

‘Hush, little hawk.’ Mistle whispered, gently pushing her arm under her head. ‘You will not be alone. Not anymore.’

Ciri awoke at dawn. She slipped from under the fur and slowly and carefully, as to not wake Mistle, who slept with parted lip and her eyes hidden by her forearm. Her forearm had goosebumps. Ciri carefully covered the girl. After a moment’s hesitation she leaned forward and gently kissed her cropped spiky hair. Mistle purred in her sleep. Ciri wiped a tear from her cheek.

She was no longer alone.

The rest of the Rats were also asleep, one was snoring loudly, while another let loose a fart. Iskra was lying with her hand across Giselher’s chest, lush hair scattered in disarray. The horses snorted and kicked, a woodpecker was at the trunk of a pine hammering it with short blows.

Ciri ran to the river. She washed for a long time, shivering with cold. She washed with sharp movements of her hands, trying to remove what could not be removed. Tears rolled down her cheeks.

Falka.

The water foamed and hissed onto the rocks, sailing into the distance, in fog.

Everything flowed into the distance. Into the fog.

Everything.

They were outcasts. They were a strange jumble created by war, misery and contempt. War, misery and contempt joined them and spat them out, like a swollen river spits out and deposits on beaches black polished stones and pieces of wood.

Kayleigh had woken up in smoke, fire and blood in a plundered castle lying between the corpses of his adoptive parents and siblings. Crawling among the corpses in the courtyard was Reef. Reef was a soldier of the punitive expedition, which Emperor Emhyr var Emreis sent to quell the insurgency in Ebbing. He was one of those who had conquered and plundered the castle after a two day siege. Having conquered the castle, his comrades abandoned Reef, although Reef was still alive. But the care of the wounded had never been customary in Nilfgaard special forces.

At first Kayleigh wanted to finish off Reef. But Kayleigh did not want to be alone. And Reef and Kayleigh were only sixteen.

Together they licked their wounds. Together they killed and robbed a tack collector; together they gave away the beer to an inn, and then riding through the village on stolen horses, throwing away the rest of the stolen money, dying of laughter the whole time.

Together they fled the pursuit and Nilfgaardian Nissir patrols.

Giselher deserted the army. Perhaps it was the army of the lord of Geso who had allied with the rebels from Ebbing. Probably. Giselher was not sure where he had been dragged from and enlisted. He had been drunk. Once he sobered up and got his first drill sergeant, he escaped. At first, he wandered alone, but when the Nilfgaard destroyed the confederation of rebels, the forest was full of deserters and fugitives. The fugitives soon joined into bands. Giselher joined one of them.

The band plundered and burned villages, attacking caravans and transports that were running in wild flight from the Nilfgaardian cavalry squadrons. During one of these flights, the band ran to escape into the woods but ran into Elves and found death and destruction. The

death was in the form of invisible hissing gray feathered arrows from all sides. Once shot pierced through his shoulder and pinned him to a tree. The one who pulled the arrow the next morning and took care of the wound was Aenyeweddien.

Giselher never learned why the elves sent Aenyeweddien into exile, for what crime she had been condemned to death. Because for a free elf, death was being alone in the narrow stretch of no man's land separating the humans from the free Elder People. A lonely elf will die, if they can not find a companion.

Aenyeweddien had found a companion. Her name, in free translation was "Child of Fire", was to complicated and poetic for Giselher. He called her Spark.

Mistle came from a wealthy and noble family of Thurn manor, north of Maecht. He father was a vassal of prince Rudiger, he joined the rebel army, let himself get killed and disappeared without a trace. When the population of Thurn fled the city before the news of the impending punitive expedition the notorious Peacekeepers of Gemmer, Mistle's family also fled, but lost Mistle in the panic that gripped the crowd. A decorated and delicate lady, who from early childhood had been carried around in a sedan chair, was unable to keep up with the fugitives. After three days of wandering alone she fell into the clutches of slave hunters who followed the Nilfgaardians. A girl under seventeen years was worth a lot. If she was intact. The hunters did not touch Mistle, after checking earlier that she was intact. After that check, Mistle sobbed all night.

In the valley of Velda, the caravan of hunters was attacked and destroyed by a band of Nilfgaardian deserters. They killed all the hunters and male slaves. They spared only the girls. The girls did not know why they had been spared. The ignorance did not last long.

Mistle was the only one who survived. She was pulled from the ditch, where she was thrown, naked, covered in bruises, filth, mud and blood. She was saved by Asse, the son of a village blacksmith, who had followed the Nilfgaardians for three days, mad with desire for revenge for what the marauders had done with his father, mother and sisters, which he had witness while hiding among some reeds.

They all met one day during the celebrations of Lamas, the Harvest Festival, in one of the villages of Geso. War and poverty had not then devastated the country's high veld. Farmers celebrated as tradition dictated the beginning of the crescent moon, with dancing and noisy entertainment.

They did not have to search for too long for each other in the crowd. They differed a lot from them. They had many things in common. They shared a taste for noisy, colourful, imaginative costumes, stolen trinkets, beautiful horses and swords which they did not remove even to dance. They were distinguished by their arrogance and haughtiness, their self-confidence and mocking chatter and their violence.

And their hatred.

They were children of the times of contempt. And for others they only held contempt. What counted to them was strength. Efficiency in arms, which they quickly acquired on the highways. Fast horses and sharp swords.

They became comrades. Companions. Friends. Because those who are alone, shall die of famine, sword, arrow, the stakes of the peasants, on the scaffold or by fire. Whoever is alone dies: stabbed, beaten, kicked, defiled, like a toy passed from hand to hand.

They met at the Harvest Festival. The sombre, dark, skinny Giselher. Kayleigh, thin, long hair, with evil eyes and mouth arranged in a hideous face. Reef, who still spoke with a Nilfgaardian accent. Mistle, tall, long legged, with straw coloured hair cut so short that it was stiff as a brush. Spark, large colourful eyes, slender, and light in the dance but fast and deadly in battle, with thin lips and small elvish teeth. Asse, broad shouldered, with a white moustache and a twisted beard.

Giselher became the leader. They adopted the name the Rats. Someone had called them that once and they loved it.

They robbed and killed, and their cruelty became proverbial.

At first, the governor of Nilfgaard underestimated them. They were sure that, like the other bands, they would soon fall victim to the angry peasants or would destroy and kill each other, when their greed for the stored booty triumphed over the bandit solidarity. The governor was right in regards to the other gangs, but they were wrong about the Rats. Because the Rats, children of contempt, despised the spoils. They attacked, robbed and killed for fun and seized shipments of military horses, cattle, grain, straw, salt, tar and cloth which they distributed in villages. With handfuls of gold and silver to pay tailors and craftsmen for things they loved above all else: weapons, clothes and ornaments. Those they paid well, who sheltered and hid them, even when flogged but the Nissir would not betray the hiding places and routes of the Rats.

The governors offered a large reward, and at first there were those that rejoiced at the prospect of Nilfgaardian gold. But at night, the homes of the informers became engulfed in flames and as the fire died down from the smoke rode ghostly riders with swords. The Rats attacked as rats. In silence, betrayal and cruelty. Rats loved to kill.

The governors turned to other methods that had worked with other bands; sometimes they tried to introduce a traitor among the Rats. They were unsuccessful. The Rats did not accept anyone. They were a compact and fraternal six made by the time of contempt and they did not want strangers. They despised them.

Until the day when a girl appeared, ashen haired, tight-lipped and agile as an acrobat, who knew nothing about the Rats.

Except she was like each of them. She was alone and full of sadness, sadness for what had been stolen from her in this time of contempt.

And in times of contempt, one who is alone must die.

Giselher, Kayleigh, Reef, Iskra, Mistle, Asse and Falka.

The governor of Amarillo was astonished beyond measure when he was told that there were now seven Rats.

‘Seven?’ The surprised governor of Amarillo said, looking at the soldier in disbelief. ‘There were seven, not six? Are you sure?’

‘I wish I was as healthy as I was sure.’ The sole surviving soldier of the massacre said faintly.

His desire was quite natural – the head and half of the soldier’s face was covered by a dirty bandage and covered in blood. The governor, who had been in more than one battle, knew that the soldier had been hit at the back from above – the end of the blade, went from left to right, precise, requiring skill and speed, directed at the right ear and cheek, in places not protected by a helmet or iron collar.

‘Give me your account.’

‘We were walking along the Velda in the direction of Thurn.’ Started the soldier. ‘The order was to save on of the convoys being transported by Lord Evertsen which was heading south. We were attacked by the fallen bridge when we were crossing the river. One cart was stuck, then we had to use horses from the second to pull it out. The rest of the convoy went ahead; I was left with five men and with the bailiff. And we were jumped. The bailiff, before he was killed, had time to shout that these were the Rats and then they had him around the throat... They overthrew us all. When I saw this...’

‘When you saw him,’ the governor scowled ‘You put your heels to your horses. But you were too late to save his skin.’

‘She caught up with me’ The soldier bowed his head ‘the seventh; I hadn’t seen her at first. A girl. Almost a kid. I guess she was left at the back of the Rats, because she was young and inexperienced...’

A visitor to the governor emerged from the darkness in which had been sitting.

‘Was it a girl?’ He asked. ‘What was she like?’

‘Like all of them. Painted up like an elf, colourfully like a parrot, dressed in bright velvets and brocades, with a hat with a feather.’

‘Blonde?’

‘I think so, sir. When I saw her, the horse she was riding was going fast, thinking that one of her companions was about to be made into mincemeat and she would make them pay blood for blood... I came in from the right and cut at her.. How she did it I don’t know. But I missed her. It was if the blow had gone through a ghost or spirit... I do not know how the devil... As though I was stopped, she got in behind me. Straight in the nose... Sir, I was at Sodden in Aldersburg. And now from that girl I have a souvenir on my face for life..’

‘Be glad that you are alive,’ snorted the governor, looking at his guest. ‘And be glad that you were wounded when you recovered consciousness. Now you will become a hero. If you had avoided the fight, if you had no mementos on your face when reporting the loss of cargo and horses, you soon would have found yourself on the gallows. Well, march on. To the hospital.’

The soldier left. The governor turned towards the visitor.

‘You see, sir coroner, that service here is not easy, I have no peace, I have my hands full of work. You there, in the capital, you think the provinces are all horsefly, beer, wenches and bribe taking officials. You never think to send more people or dogs, only commands – give, take, find. Putting everyone on alert, running from morning to night... and here our heads are bursting with our own problems. Five or six bands like the Rats prowling about. True the Rats are the worst, but not a day passes...’

‘Enough, enough.’ Stefan Skellen pursed his lips. ‘I know why you serve you laminations, governor. But it is in vain. You are not to abandon your orders. Rats or no Rats, bands or no bands, you have to keep up the search. By every means within reach, until I say enough. This is an order from the Emperor.’

‘We have been looking for three weeks.’ The governor scowled. ‘Not knowing, in the very least, who or what we are looking for, a spook, ghost, or a needle in a haystack. And what are the results? A few of my men have disappeared without a trace, likely killed by rebels or a vagrant. I’ll say it again, coroner, if we have not found your girl, we will not find her. Even if she was here, which I doubt. Unless...’

The governor stopped, pondered, looking askance at the coroner.

‘That girl... The seventh that rides with the Rats.’ Kalous dismissively waved his hand, trying to make his gesture come out convincingly.

‘No, Governor. Do not look for easy solutions. The girl described or any other girl adorned with brocade is surely, not the girl we want. It’s definitely not her. Continue the search. That is an order.’

The governor murmured, looking out the window.

‘And with that band,’ he added with a seemingly indifferent voice, Emperor Emhyr’s coroner, Stefan Skellen called Kalous, ‘with these Rats or whatever they are called... Regain order, governor. In the provinces the order must prevail. Get to work. Capture and hang them, without formalities or ceremonies. All of them.’

‘Easy to say.’ Muttered the governor. ‘But I will do what is in my power. Assure the Emperor. But I think this seventh girl from the Rats is worth keeping alive, however, just to be sure...’

‘No’ Interrupted Kalous, taking care that his voice did not betray anything. ‘No, exceptions, hang them all. All seven. I do not want to hear any more about them. I do not want to hear another word.’

End of Second Volume.