

SEASON OF STORMS

*From ghoulies and ghosties
And long legetty beasties
And things that go bump in the night,
Good Lord deliver us!*

Propitiatory prayer known as
"The Cornish Litany",
dated to the 14-15 century

*They say that progress illuminates the darkness. But there will
always be darkness. And in that darkness there will
always be Evil, in that darkness there will always be fangs
and claws, murder and blood. There will always be things that go
bump in the night. And we, witchers, are the ones
who bump back at them.*

Vesemir of Kaer Morhen

**ANDRZEJ
SAPKOWSKI**

**SEASON
OF STORMS
THE WITCHER**

*Whoever fights monsters should see to it that in the process he does not become a monster.
And if you gaze long enough into an abyss, the abyss will gaze back into you.*

Friedrich Nietzsche, *Jenseits von Gut und Böse*

I believe gazing into the abyss to be a complete waste of time. There's plenty of things in the world more worthy of being gazed into.

Dandelion, *Half a Century of Poetry*

Chapter One

He lived only to kill.

He lay on the sun-warmed sand. He sensed the tremors conducted by the capillary antennae and setae pressed to the ground.

Though the tremors were still distant, Idr felt them clearly and precisely, he was able to determine not only the direction and speed of the prey, but also its weight. For most predators who hunted in a similar way, the weight of the prey was paramount – prowling, attack and chase meant the loss of energy, which needed to be compensated by the energy value of the food. Most predators similar to Idr would forego attacking if the prey was too small. But not Idr. Idr did not exist to eat and breed. He was not created for that.

He lived to kill.

Carefully moving his appendages, he crawled out of the hole, slithered through the rotten log, crossed the fallen tree in three leaps, and flitted through the glade like a ghost, he fell into the undergrowth, blended into the thicket. He moved, swift and silent, running and leaping as though an enormous grasshopper.

He delved into the thicket, pressed the segmented plates of his abdomen against the ground. The tremors were becoming more and more tangible. The impulses from Idr's whiskerpads and setae arranged themselves into a picture. A plan. Idr knew how to reach his prey now, where cross its path, how to make it run, how to attack it from behind with a long leap, at which height to strike and cut with razor-sharp mandibles. The oscillations and impulses already heralded the joy he would feel, when the prey would struggle beneath his weight, the euphoria he would sustain tasting hot blood. The pleasure he

would experience when the shriek of pain pierces the air. He trembled slightly, opening and closing his palps and pincers.

The vibrations of the ground were very clear; they also became varied. There was more prey, probably three, possibly four. Two of them shook the ground in the usual manner, the third one's vibrations indicated a low weight and mass. The fourth one –if there really was one – caused irregular, weak and tentative jitters. Idr stopped, extended his antennae above the grass, and examined the movement of the air.

The tremors of the earth finally signalled the moment Idr was waiting for. The prey separated. One of them, the smallest, stayed back. And the fourth one, the faint one, disappeared. It was a false signal, an erroneous echo. Idr ignored it. The small prey strayed even further away from the rest. The ground trembled stronger. And closer. Idr tautened his hind appendages, bounded and leapt.

The little girl let out a shrieked in terror. Instead of running, she froze. And continued shrieking.

The witcher rushed towards her, grabbing his sword as he leapt. And suddenly he realised that something was wrong. That he had been duped.

The man pulling the brush cart screamed and Geralt saw him flying a fathom up, his blood gushing in wide streaks. He fell, only to be thrust into the air again, this time in two bloody pieces. He wasn't screaming any more. It was the woman who was shrieking now, paralysed with fear, just like her daughter.

Though he didn't believe he would make it, the witcher managed to save her. He leapt and pushed with power, throwing the bloodstained woman off the road, into the wood, into the ferns. He immediately understood that this was also a trick. A ruse. A grey, flat, multi-legged and incredibly fast shape

was already moving away from the cart and the first victim. It was pushing towards the second one. Towards the still shrieking little girl. Geralt rushed in pursuit.

Had she continued to stay still, he wouldn't have made it. Thankfully, the girl demonstrated enough clarity of mind to run. The grey monster would have caught up to her quickly and effortlessly – it would have caught up, killed her and returned to kill the woman as well. And it would have been like that, had there not been a witcher there.

He caught up to the monster, leapt, pinning one of its hind appendages with his heel. Had he not rebounded immediately, he would have lost a leg – the grey monster twisted with unbelievable agility, and its sickle-like pincers snapped, missing narrowly. Before the witcher could regain his balance, the monster bounded off the ground and attacked. Geralt defended himself with an instinctive, wide and rather chaotic sword swing, pushing the monster away. He didn't manage to hurt it, but he regained the upper hand.

He sprang, slashing from the ear, smashing the carapace on the flat cephalothorax. Before the stunned monster regained its senses, he slashed once more, taking out its left mandible. The monster pounced on him, flailing its legs, trying to gore him like an aurochs with its remaining mandible. The witcher slashed off that one as well. With a quick reverse slash, he cut off one of the palps. And slammed again at the cephalothorax.

It finally dawned on Idr that he was in danger. That he had to run, run far away, disappear, ensconce himself, and go into hiding. He lived only to kill. To kill, he needed to regenerate. He needed to run... Run...

The witcher would not allow him to run. He caught up to him, stomped the back segment of the thorax to the ground, slashed with impetus from overhead. This time, the carapace gave in, a

viscous green ichor gushing and flowing from the crack. The monster still struggled, its appendages flailing wildly at the ground.

Geralt slashed with his sword, this time completely separating the flat frontlet from the rest.

He breathed heavily.

Thunder rumbled in the distance. The breaking wind and a quickly darkening sky heralded a coming storm.

At first sight, Albert Smulka, the newly appointed district administrator, brought to Geralt's mind a bulb of rutabaga – round, unwashed, crude and generally rather uninteresting. In other words, he was no different from most other district-level officials Geralt had to deal with.

“Tis true then,” said the administrator. “You got problems, you get yourself a witcher.”

‘Jonas, my predecessor,’ he continued after a short pause, not having received any reaction from Geralt, ‘spoke very highly of you. To think I had him for a braggart. Never quite believe him, mind you. I know how things get turned into fairy tales. Especially among superstitious folk, it's miracle here, wonder there, or some other witcher of fabulous power. And now it turns out to be the truth, would you have it. See those woods there, past the stream, lotsa people been going missing there. And since it's the shorter path, they'd still used it, the numskulls... To their own doom. Wouldn't heed warnings. These days, you best not loiter 'round the woods. Monsters and man-eaters everywhere. In Temeria, the Tukay foothills, that there was scary what'd happened, fifteen people killed by some forest wraith. A village called Horns. Probably heard about it. No? Anyway, hell, I'm telling the truth. Heard even the sorcerers investigated there, in Horns. But enough stories. We here in Angegis are hereby safe. Thanks to you.’

He took a casket out of the locker. He spread a sheet of paper on the desk, dipped his quill in the inkwell.

‘You promised to kill the bogeyman,’ he said, without raising his head. ‘Turns out, you're true to your word. Unusual, for a drifter...Even saved those two. The woman and the girl. They thank you at all? Drop at your feet?’

‘They didn't,’ the witcher clenched his teeth. ‘They're still haven't fully recovered. And I will be gone before they do. Before they realise I used them as bait, assuming in my arrogance that I would defend all three of them. I will be gone before that girl realises it's my fault she's been made a half-orphan.’

He felt bad. It was probably the elixirs. Probably.

‘That monstrem,’ the administrator sprinkled the paper with sand, then whisked it off to the floor, ‘real eyesore. Had a look at the carcass when they brought it in... What was it?’

Geralt wasn't sure about that, but he was not about to admit it.

‘An arachnomorph.’

‘Pish! Call it what you want, damn thing. That the sword you sliced it up with? That blade? Mind if I have a look?’

‘Yes, I would.’

‘Ha, probably enchanted then... Must be worth a pretty penny... Tempting thing... Oh well, enough chit-chat, we haven't got all day. The deal is done, time for the payment. But first with the formalities. Sign the receipt. I mean, make a cross or some sort of sign.’

The witcher took the receipt given to him, he turned around toward the light.

‘Look at him,’ the administrator shook his head, frowning, ‘you say what, he can read?’

Geralt placed the paper on the table, pushed it towards the official.

'A small error,' he said calmly and quietly, 'has crept into the document. We settled on fifty crowns. The receipt reads eighty.'

Albert Smulka clasped his hands, rested his chin on them.

'That's no error,' he lowered his voice as well. 'Rather, it's proof of gratitude. You killed a monstrous monster, certainly wasn't easy, that... The sum won't come as a surprise to no one.'

'I don't understand.'

'Bollocks. Don't play innocent. You're telling me that Jonas, when he was in charge, never gave you this kind of receipt? I'd bet my head that...;

'That what?' Geralt interrupted. 'That he inflated bills? And that he shared half of what he purloined from the royal treasury with me?'

'Half?' The administrator scowled. 'Let's not get carried away here, witcher. Got a high opinion of yourself, eh? You'll get a third. Ten crowns. That's still a substantial bonus for you. And I deserve more, even just due to my position. State officials need to be wealthy. The more affluent an official, the higher the prestige of the state. But what would you know about that, anyway. I'm tired of this conversation. Are you signing this or not?'

The rain pounded against the roof, it was pouring outside.

But there was no thunder any more, the storm had passed.

Interlude

Two days later

‘Please, dear,’ Belohun, King of Kerack beckoned, ‘Please, sit!’

The vaulted room was decorated with a ceiling fresco depicting ships sailing among the waves, mermen and creatures that resembled lobsters. The fresco on one wall was a map of the world. The map, Coral had long since concluded was absolutely fantastic with the locations of continents and seas having very little in common with how they really were. But it was pretty and tasteful.

Two pages ran up and set down a heavily carved armchair. The Sorceress sat down, putting her hands on the armrest so that her bracelets encrusted with rubies were clearly visible and would not go unnoticed.

On the sorceress’s head was a ruby diadem and a ruby necklace sat nestled in her deeply scooped neckline. All specially selected for the royal audience. She wanted to make an impression. And she did. King Belohun’s eyes dilated and not from the rubies in her cleavage.

Belohun, son of Osmyk, was a first generation king. His father made a considerable fortune in the sea trade who also seemed to spend little time at sea. He outdid the competition and monopolised the shipping in that region, and named himself king. The act of self-styled coronation was not formalised in any way and did not upset the status quo, raise major objections or spark protests. During earlier wars and conflicts, Osmyk learned the limits and competency of his neighbours, Verden and Cidaris. It became known where Kerack began, where it ended and who ruled there. And since he ruled there, as its king, he was entitled to such a title.

As is the natural order of things, the title and the power passed from father to son, so no one was surprised after the death of Osmyk, the throne was taken by his son, Belohun. Osmyk had four sons, all renounced their right to the Crown, on even supposedly voluntarily. In this way Belohun, reigned for the last twenty years in Kerack, in accordance with family tradition of syphoning profits from shipbuilding industry, transport, fishery and piracy.

And now, on the throne, on a dais, in a sable cap, with a sceptre in his hand, King Belohun granted audiences. The majestic lout like a beetle on a pile of cow dung.

‘Dear, Lady Lytta Neyd,’ he welcomed, ‘Our favourite sorceress, Lytta Neyd. You’ve come to visit Kerack again. And surely for a longer period?’

‘I’ve come for the sea air.’ Coral provocatively crossed her legs, demonstrating her fashionable shoes. ‘With gracious permission from your Royal Majesty.’

The king looked at his sons sitting next to him. Both sat as straight as poles and in no way resembled their father who was bony, wiry and not very tall.

They did not look like brothers. The elder, Egmund, had hair as black as a raven, while Xander, the younger, was mostly blond. They both looked at Lytta without affection. Obvious annoyed at her privilege, under which a sorceress in the presence of a king sat and an audience was granted to her in a chair. This privilege was common place and one could not ignore it if one wanted to pass as civilized. Belohun’s son were eager to pass as such.

‘You have my permission,’ Belohun spoke slowly. ‘With certain conditions.’

Coral raised her hand and pointedly looked at her nails to indicate her opinion of Belohun’s conditions. The king did not understand the signal. Or if he did, he skilfully concealed it.

‘It has come to my ears,’ he huffed angrily, ‘dear Lady Neyd, that you help women who do not want to have children with magic potions. And those who are already pregnant, you remove the foetus. And we here in Kerack, believe these dealings are immoral.’

‘These women have a natural right,’ Coral said dryly, ‘so ipso facto it cannot be immoral.’

‘Women,’ the king drew his skinny frame up on the throne, ‘are entitled to expect from a man only two gifts: in the summer, pregnancy, and in the winter a measure of his seed. The first and second gifts are to anchor the woman in the house. The house is in fact the appropriate place for a woman, assigned by nature. A woman with a swollen belly and children clinging to her skirts, mind does not wander and get filled with silly ideas, and it ensure a man’s peace of mind. A man with a calm mind can work hard because wealth and prosperity are his ruler. Working tirelessly, bringing a sweat to his brow, but calm knowing that there are no silly ideas in his woman’s head. But if a woman can persuade someone to let her give birth when she wants and when she doesn’t want, to have matters her way, then dear, the social order begins to waver.’

‘Yes,’ said Prince Xander, having long been looking for an occasion to interject. ‘That’s it precisely!’

‘A woman averse to motherhood,’ continued Belohun, ‘a woman who is not tethered to a household, cradle or children, soon becomes lustful, the thing is, after all, obvious and inevitable. Then a man will lose his peace of mind, and where his original harmony was, something will begin to fester, and without that harmony there is no governance. And without that governance, the justification for the daily drudgery is gone. And this affects me. As such thoughts can only be a step to unrest. To rebellion or revolt. Do you understand, Lady Neyd? By giving these potions to prevent pregnancy or enabling their interruption, you are destroying the social order and inciting riot and rebellion.’

‘Yes,’ Xander interjected. ‘That’s right!’

Lytta said nothing and retained her semblance of authority and imperiousness. Belohun knew perfectly well that as a sorceress she was untouchable, and the only thing the king could do was talk. She refrained, however, from reminding him that his kingdom smelled for a long time of lack of governance and more like cat piss, the only harmony the inhabitants knowing was from a musical instrument, a type of accordion. And that trying to force women into maternity was not only demonstrating his misogyny but cretinism.

‘In your long recital,’ she said instead, ‘you persistently come back to the topic of wealth and prosperity. I understand you perfectly, as my own prosperity is my belief. And nothing in the world will give me anything like the prosperity it provides. I believe that a woman has the right to give birth, when she wants and not give birth if she does not want to, and I do not dispute this, everyone eventually has a right to their own views. I will note that the medical assistance provided to women is quite a significant source of my income. We have a market economy, O King. And you are interfering in the source of my income. Because my income, as you well know, goes to the Chapter of Sorcerers. The brotherhood reacts remarkably badly to the depletion of its income.’

‘Are you trying to threaten me, Lady Neyd?’

‘Certainly not. No, only to declare my extensive assistance and cooperation. Know, Belohun that if the effect of my practice comes to Kerack and unrest is ignited here, riots or the firebrand of rebellion, if the rebellious mob comes to drag you out of here by the head, dethrone you, and immediately after that, hang you from a withered branch... Then you can count on the Brotherhood. On the wizards to come here and help. We will not allow the revolts and anarchy because we are not on hand. Therefore, exploit and multiply your wealth. But multiply quietly. And do not interfere with others. I advise you nicely.’

‘You advise?’ Xander flared up, rising from his chair. ‘You advise? Father is the king! Kings do not listen to advice, kings give orders!’

‘Sit down, son,’ Belohun grimaced, ‘and be quiet. And you, sorceress, turn not your ears away. I have something to say.’

‘Yes?’

‘I am taking a new wife... Seventeen years old... The cherry, I tell you. The cherry on the cake.’

‘Congratulations.’

‘I’m doing this for dynastic reasons. With concern for the succession and the order in the kingdom.’

Egmund, who has so far been as silent as a boulder, jerked his head up.

‘Succession?’ he snapped, the evil glint in his eye did not escape, Lytta’s attention. ‘What succession? You have six sons and eight daughters, including bastards! Is that not enough?’

‘You see,’ Belohun said, waving his bony hand. ‘You see, Lady Neyd. I need to take care of the succession. Would you leave the Kingdom and Crown to someone who speaks so to their parent? Fortunately, I am still alive and in charge. And I’m going to rule for a long time. As I said, I’m getting married...’

‘And?’

‘If...’ the King scratched behind his ear, and look at Lytta from under lowered eyelids. ‘If she... My new wife I mean... Comes to you about one of these potions... I forbid you to give her one. Because I am opposed to such potions. Because they are immoral!’

‘We might just make an appointment,’ Coral smiled charmingly. ‘If she asks, I will not provide. I promise.’

‘I understand,’ said Belohun. ‘Please, let us get along, with an agreement of mutual understanding and respect.’

‘Yes,’ Xander interjected.

Egmund snorted and swore under his breath.

‘Within the framework of respect and understanding, ’ Coral wove a red lock of hair around her finger and looked up at the ceiling, ‘as well as for the sake of harmony and order in your kingdom... I have some information. Confidential information. I despise denunciations, but I despise theft and fraud even more. And it is, my king, about brazen financial embezzlement. There are those who are trying to steal from you.’

Belohun leaned forward on his throne, his face twisted in an angry grimace.

‘Who? Names!’

***Kerack**, a city in the northern kingdom of Cidaris, at the mouth of the river Adalatte. Once the capital of a separate **K.** kingdom, which due to assembly lines falling into decline, and the extinction of the ruling line falling into disrepair, was broken down and divided among its neighbours. Has a port, several factories, a lighthouse and 2,000 citizens.*

Effenberg and Talbot,

Encyclopaedia Maxima Mundi, volume VIII

Chapter Two

The bay bristled with masts and was full of sails both white and multi-coloured. Larger ships stood at anchor by the headland and sheltered by the breakwater. In the harbour, at the wooden jetties, there were moored the smaller vessels. On the beaches almost all of the free space was occupied by boats. Or the remains of boats. At the end of the cape, buffeted by waves of white surf, rose a lighthouse of white and red brick, a renovated relic from the time of the elves.

The witcher nudged his mare with his spurs. Roach lifted her head, and snorted through her nostrils. She enjoyed the smell of the sea, carried by the wind. The rode through the dunes towards the already nearby city.

The city of Kerack, the main metropolis of the kingdom with the same name, was located on the two banks of the river Adalatte and was divided into three separate and distinctly different zones.

The Adalatte's left bank was invested primarily as a port complex, docks, industrial and commercial center, including shipyards and workshops, as well as factories, warehouses, stores, markets and bazaars. The opposite side of the river, the area known as Palmyra, was filled by the huts and shacks of the poor and the workers, along with small trade stalls, abattoirs, and numerous pubs and abodes that did not come to life until after dark, Palmyra was also the entertainment district for forbidden pleasures. It was quite easy, as Geralt well knew, for one to lose a purse or get a knife in the ribs.

Further from the sea, on the left bank, behind a high palisade of thick logs was proper Kerack. A quarter of narrow streets which ran between the homes of rich merchants and financiers, banks, shoemakers, seamstresses and gourmet shops. It housed taverns and entertainment of a higher category including those offered in the Palmyra port, but with significantly

higher prices. In the center of the quarter was a market square, the town hall, theatre, court, the orchard, customs office and the homes of the city elite. In the middle of the town hall standing on a pedestal covered in seagull droppings was a monument to the kingdom's founder, King Osmyk. It was obviously bullshit as the sea town had existed long before Osmyk arrived from devil knows where.

Above, on a hill, stood the castle and the royal palace, the form and shape were unusual, because originally it had been a temple, then rebuilt when it was abandoned by the priests when they received a complete lack of interest from the general population. After the temple was built there was enough materials left over to build a bell tower in which the currently reigning king of Kerack, Belohun ordered to be rung every day at noon - and evidently to anger his subjects - at midnight.

The bell rang as the witcher entered between the first houses in Palmyra.

Palmyra stank of fish, dirty laundry and soup kitchens. The crowded streets were terrible, and riding through them cost the witcher a lot of time and patience. He breathed a sigh when he finally reached the bridge that ran to the left bank of the Adalatte. The water stank and carried dense foaming caps - the effect of the work being done at the tannery located upstream. He was now close to the road leading up to the city on the other side of the palisade.

He left his horse in the stables before the city, pay for two days in advance and leaving the groom with instructions to ensure Roach's proper care. He directed his steps towards the guardhouse. Kerack could only be reached via the guardhouse, after being subjected to inspection and the associated unpleasant procedures. The witcher was slightly irked by this, but he understood its purpose - the inhabitants of the city behind the palisade did not relish visits from the denizens of Palmyra, particularly those in the form of foreign sailors ashore on leave. He went to the guardhouse, a building of wooden

construction, containing, as he knew, guards. He thought he knew what awaited him. He was wrong.

He had visited many guardhouses in his life. Small, medium and large ones, throughout all corners of the world, close and quite distant regions more civilized, less or not at all. All across the world guardhouses had a musty smell of unwashed skin and urine as well as iron and grease used to keep it intact. The guardhouse in Kerack was similar. Or rather it would have been if the case if it was not suppressed by a heavy choking odour that reaching all the way to the ceiling, the stench of fart. Of the menu of the local soldiers, there could be no doubt, was dominated by legumes, such as peas, broad beans and colourful beans. The soldiers as it turned out was made up completely by women. It consisted of six women sitting around a table preoccupied with their midday meal. All the ladies greedily ate from earthenware bowls which contained something floating in a thin pepper sauce.

The tallest of the guards, he could see she was a commander, pushed aside her bowl and rose.

Geralt, who always believe that there were no ugly women, suddenly felt the need to revise this view.

‘Put your weapon on the table!’

Like all present, the guard was shorn to nothing. Some of her hair was growing back, creating an untidy stubble on her bald head. From beneath her unbuttoned vest and undershirt peeked abdominal muscles, reminiscent of the great Zerrikania warrior women. The biceps of the guard reminded him of a butcher as they were the size of hams.

‘Put your weapon on the table!’ she repeated. ‘Are you deaf?’

One of her subordinates, still bent over her bowl, lift herself slightly and farted loud and long. Her companions laughed. Geralt waved his glove before his face.

The guard looked at his swords.

‘Hey girls! Stand up!’

The “girls” got up, somewhat reluctantly, stretching. All of them, Geralt noted, wore rather loose fitting and airy clothes, mainly to enable the boasting of their muscles. One was wearing short leather pants, where the seams seemed unable to accommodate her thighs. And her clothing from the waist up consisted mainly of criss-cross straps.

‘A witcher,’ the first woman said. ‘Two swords. One steel the other silver.’

The second woman approached and with a movement opened Geralt’s shirt, grabbed the silver chain and pulled out his medallion.

‘The symbol,’ she confirmed, ‘is the mark of the wolf, with its teeth bared. Do we let the witcher pass?’

‘Rules do not permit swords to pass...’

‘Just I,’ Geralt calm voice joined the conversation, ‘will pass. I suppose both will be left in a secure repository? And given back to me on receipt? That I will get in a moment?’

The guards surrounded him. One prodded him reluctantly. The second, farted loudly.

‘That is your receipt,’ the first one snorted.

‘A witcher! A mercenary monster slayer! Giving up his sword! Instantly! Humble as shit!’

‘He would give up his dick had we ask.’

‘Let’s ask him then! huh, girls? Let him take it out.’

‘We will see what kind of dick, witchers have.’

‘Enough!’ the commander shouted. ‘Get gone, cunts! Gonschorek! Come here now! Gonschorek!’

From the next room emerged a not very young and balding gentleman in a dun mantle and a woollen beret. Immediately

after entering, the gentleman removed his beret and started fanning himself. Without a word he took the wrapped sword belts and gave Geralt a sign to follow him. The witcher did not hesitate. The gas that was filling the guardhouse was already dominant.

The room into which they entered, was shared by a solid iron cage. The chap in the mantle, produced a large key and put it in the lock. He hung the swords on a rack next to other swords, sabers, cutlasses and axes. He opened his tattered registry and started scribbling slowly, constantly coughing and gasping for breath. When he was finished he gave Geralt a receipt.

'I'm to understand that my swords are safe here? Under lock and key and guarded?'

The old gentleman, panting and puffing, closed the cage and showed him the key. Geralt was not convinced. Every cage can be overcome, and the sound of the ladies guards fluctuating were able to drown out any intrusion attempts. But there was no way around it. It was necessary to get into the city dispatch matters at hand and then leave as soon as possible.

The tavern - or as the sign proclaimed - the 'Natura Rerum'¹ inn was a tall, yet tasteful building made of cedar wood, topped with a steep roof with a high chimney protruding from the top. Stairs led up to a front porch which graced the building, placing invitingly around it were wood pots containing aloe plants. From the kitchen floated tasty smells, mostly of toasted grains and roasted meat. The fragrances were so inviting that the witcher took the Natura Rerum to mean Eden, the garden of delights, the isle of happiness, of milk and honey flowing freely.

It soon turned out that Eden - like every other Eden - was guarded. It had its Cerberus, its guardian with a flaming sword. Geralt had a chance to see it in action. A man, small but

¹ Latin for "Nature of things"

powerfully built, before his eyes was banishing a lean young man from the garden of delights.

The young man protested - shouting and gesticulated, which apparently annoyed Cerberus.

‘You have been banned, Muus. And you know it well. Leave. I won’t repeat myself.’

The youngster descended the stairs quickly, fast enough to avoid being pushed. He was, Geralt noticed, prematurely balding, his thin, long blond hair began at the vicinity of his crown, which gave a generally nasty impression.

‘Screw you and your ban!’ yelled the young man from a safe distance. ‘You don’t know what you’re doing! You are not the only inn; I’ll go to your competition! Smart asses! Upstarts! Your signpost may be gold-plated, but it is still a turd on a post! And that’s what it’ll always be! A shit will always be a shit!’

Geralt was slightly worried. The balding youth, although ugly of appearance, was wearing fancy clothing, maybe not for the rich, but better dressed than he himself. So if his style of clothing lack elegance...

‘And where do you think you’re going?’ Cerberus’s cool voice interrupted his train of thought. And confirmed his concerns.

‘This is an upscale establishment,’ said Cerberus, blocking the stairs altogether. ‘Do you understand the meaning of these words? It is exclusive. For some.’

‘But not me?’

‘You are not dressed appropriately,’ standing two steps above, Cerberus could look down at the witcher. ‘You are, stranger, a walking figure of wisdom. You are not dressed appropriately. Perhaps some other qualities are hidden about you, but you cannot go in. Again, this is an upscale establishment. We do not tolerate people here dressed like bandits. Nor armed.’

‘I’m not armed.’

'But you look like you are. Kindly direct your steps in another direction.'

'Stand down, Tarp.'

At the door to the establishment appeared a swarthy man in a velvet caftan, with bushy eyebrows, penetrating eyes and an aquiline nose. And fat.

'Clearly,' aquiline nose admonished Cerberus, 'you do not know who you are dealing with. You don't know who is visiting us.'

Cerberus's long silence testified that he was indeed ignorant.

'Geralt of Rivia. The Witcher. Renowned for protecting people and saving their lives, just like a week before in the area of Angegis, where he saved a mother and child. A few months earlier in Vizima, he killed a man-eating ghoul, all alone, judging by his wounds. How could I forbid entrance to my establishment to someone so worthy of such deeds? On the contrary, I am glad to have such a guest. And it's an honour that he wanted to visit me. Master Geralt, the Natura Rerum inn welcomes you to its premises. I'm Febus Ravenga, the owner of this modest establishment.'

He was led to a table where a maitre'd covered it with a fresh tablecloth. All the tables in the Natura Rerum - which were mostly occupied - were covered with tablecloths. Geralt could not remember the last time he had seen tablecloths at an inn.

Although curious, he did not stare, he did not want to come off looking like a bumpkin or simpleton. Restrained observation, however, revealed a modest decor, yet tasteful and elegant.

Exquisite - though not always tasteful - was also the clientele, mostly assorted merchants and artisans. There were masters of vessels, weather-beaten and bearded. There was also no shortage of lords and nobility. The smell was exquisite too, roasted meat, garlic, caraway and big money.

All eyes fell on him. He was being watched, his witcher senses signalled immediately. He looked around discreetly. Observing

- also very discreetly, that no ordinary mortal would have noticed - was a young woman with red hair. She pretended to be completely absorbed in her dish - something tasty-looking even from this distance. But her style and body language left no doubt. Not for the witcher. He would bet that she was a sorceress.

The maitre'd coughed interrupting his thoughts and sudden nostalgia.

'Today,' the maitre'd said solemnly and not without pride, 'we offer braised calf in vegetables, mushrooms and beans. Roast rack of lamb with aubergine and bacon. Pork served in beer with glazed plums. Shoulder roast boar with apples. Pan fried duck breast, served with red cabbage and cranberries. Squid stuffed with grapes in white sauce. Grilled monkfish in a creamy sauce, served with stewed pears. And as usual, our specialities - goose leg in white wine, with a choice of fruit baked on a plate, and turbot in caramelized cuttlefish ink.'

'If you a taste for the fish,' he did not know how but at the table appeared Febus Ravenga. 'I strongly recommend the turbot. It is the morning catch. And the pride of our chef.'

'Turbot in ink, then,' the witcher fought back in himself an irrational desire to order several dishes at once, knowing that it would be in bad taste. 'Thank you for your advice, already I was experiencing the agony of choice.'

'What kind of wine,' asked the maitre'd, 'would the gentleman wish?'

'Please choose something appropriate. I confess I know little of wines.'

'Hardly anything to confess,' Febus Ravenga smiled. 'And very rare to hear admitted. Do not worry, we will choose the brand and vintage, Master Witcher, do not bother yourself. I wish you a pleasant meal.'

The wish was not to be fulfilled. Geralt did not have the opportunity to see the wine they choose for him. The taste of turbot in cuttlefish ink also remained a mystery for him that day.

The red-haired woman suddenly gave up on discretion, and found him with her eyes. She smiled. He could not help but feel maliciously. He felt a shiver.

‘The Witcher, called Geralt of Rivia?’

The question was asked from one of three black-clad individuals who had silently approached the table.

‘That’s me’

‘In the name of the law you are under arrest.’

What judgement shall I dread, doing no wrong?

William Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*

Chapter Three

The Public defender assigned to Geralt avoided looking him in the eyes. She was stubbornly going through a folder with documents. There were few of them. Exactly two. The lawyer was probably learning them by heart. To shine with her speech. But this was - he suspected – a vain hope.

‘In custody,’ the lawyer finally lifted her eyes, ‘you had beaten two fellow prisoners. I should probably know the reason behind it?’

‘Firstly I discarded their sexual advances and they did not want to understand that no means no. Secondly I like to beat people up. Thirdly - it’s a lie. They wounded themselves. With the walls. To denigrate me.’

He was talking slowly and blankly. A week in custody had made him completely indifferent.

The defendant closed the folder. Only to open it again a moment later. Then she adjusted her coiffure.

‘Those beaten,’ she sighed, ‘it seems, will not complain. Let's focus on the instigators accusation. The assessor of the tribunal accuses you of serious crime with a high penalty.’

How could it be different, he thought, contemplating the beauty of his lawyer. He pondered at what age she went to sorceresses’ school. And at what age she left it.

Both functional wizards’ schools - males at Ban Ard and females at Aretuza on Thanedd island- besides alumni also produced waste. Despite the heavy filter of entry exams that in principle allowed throwing away of the hopeless cases, only the first semesters really allowed selection and showed those that could hide. People for which thinking was an experience both unpleasant and dangerous. Concealed fools, deadbeats and

the mental languid of both sexes had nothing to do in a school of magic. The trouble was that this was often the offspring of wealthy or otherwise important people. With boys that dropped out of Ban Ard there was no problem - they went to diplomacy. The army, navy and police awaited them. The stupidest were left with only one choice - politics. Magical waste in the form of the prettier sex was only theoretically harder to manage. Although removed the girls crossed the doorstep of magical academy and to some degree tasted the magic. And the influence of sorceresses on rulers and all spheres of political and economic life was too great to leave to the girls to themselves. They were provided with a safe haven. They became lawyers.

The defender closed the folder. And then she opened it.

'I recommend making a plea of guilty,' she said, 'we can count on a more lenient judgment.'

'Guilty of what?' The witcher interrupted.

'When his honor will ask if you admit to being guilty you will answer positively. Admitting guilt will be treated as an extenuation.'

'How then do you plan on defending me?'

The lawyer closed the folder. Like the lid of a coffin.

'Let's go - the judge awaits.'

The judge waited. Because a previous delinquent was being led away from the court. He wasn't very happy - Geralt noticed.

On the wall there was a shield covered with fly shit with the Kerack coat of arms on it - a blue dolphin *nageant*. Under this coat of arms stood a table. Sitting behind it were three people – A lean scribe. A bleached sub-judge. And a woman judge - a woman staid both in appearance and visage.

The bench on the right side was occupied by the tribunal's assessor. He looked serious. So much so as to want to avoid meeting him in a dark alley

On the opposite side was the accused bench. A place assigned to him.

From there things went fast.

'Geralt, called Geralt of Rivia, a witcher by profession, is accuse of the embezzlement of funds, and appropriating goods belonging to the crown. Acting in collusion with his partners, the accused elevated the price of invoices for his services with intention of stealing this excess. Which caused a loss for the state's treasury. Proof of it is in a report, *notitia criminis*, which was attached to files by the accuser. This report...'

The tired expression on the face of the judge, and her wandering sight clearly showed that the stately woman was elsewhere in her mind. And that she was troubled by quite a different sets of problems - laundry, children, the colour of her curtains, the dough prepared to bake poppy seed cake and the heralding crisis in her marriage from the stretch marks on her fat ass. The witcher with humility took the fact that he was unimportant. That he was not able to compete with such things.

'A crime committed by the accused,' continued accuser without emotion, 'not only brings the state to ruin, but also destroys the social order. The order of law demands...'

'The report put on file,' interrupted the judge, 'the Court must treat as a *probatio de relatio*, evidence from a relation or third party. Can the accuser provide other evidence?'

'Other evidence is lacking... As of now... The accused is a witcher, which was proven. He's a mutant, living outside the bounds society, ignoring its laws and putting himself above them. In his crime generating and sociopathic profession he meets with felons, and also non-humans, including races that

are traditionally hostile to humans. Breaking the law is in the nihilistic nature of a witcher. In the case of this witcher a lack of evidence is the best evidence. It proves perfidy and ...'

'Does the accused,' the judge it seems was uninterested in what else is proved by lack of evidence. 'Does the accused plead guilty?'

'I do not.' Geralt ignored desperate signals of his defender, 'I'm innocent, I haven't committed any crime.'

He had a bit of skill, he had met with justice before on a few occasions. He had acquainted himself with literature on the law superficially.

'I'm being accused because of prejudice...'

'Objection!' shrieked the assessor. 'The accused declaims speech!'

'Overruled.'

'As a result of prejudice against my person and profession that is due to *praeiudicium*², and *praeiudicium* implicates falseness. More - I'm accused on the basis of an anonymous report - one report at that. *Testimonium unius non valet Testis unus, testis nullus*³. *Ergo* this is not an accusation, but presumption that is *praesumptio*. And presumption leaves doubt.'

'*In dubio pro reo*⁴,' the defender spoke up. '*In dubio pro reo*, Your Honor!'

'The court,' the judge banged her wooden hammer, waking up the sub-judge, 'rules to assign a bailment fee of five hundred Novigrad crowns.'

² prejudice

³ Testimony of one is invalid. If one testifies it is like no one testified.

⁴ When in doubt, for the accused

Geralt sighed. He was curious to see if his fellow prisoners had come to their senses, and if they had learned from history. And if he would be forced to beat them up again.

What is the city but the people?

William Shakespeare, *Coriolanus*

Chapter Four

On the very edge of the marketplace there stood a shabby stall made of raw boards, served by an old lady in a straw hat, round and florid, like a good fairy out of a fairy-tale. Over the lady was a sign with an inscription on it "Happiness and joy - only here. Cucumber gratis." Geralt stopped, and took some coppers out of his pocket.

'Grandma, pour me,' he demanded grimly, 'a quarter of pint of happiness.'

He took up some air, drank up with a swing, and breathed out. He wiped the tears that were caused by the moonshine.

He was free. And angry.

What's interesting was he was freed by a person he knew. By sight. It was the same youngster that was thrown out of the inn "Natura Rerum" in his presence. Who turned out to be a tribunal pen pusher.

'You are free.' communicated the bald youngster, clasping and unclasping his fingers stained with ink. 'The bail was paid.'

'Who paid it?'

This information turned out to be classified, the bald pen pusher refused to share it. He refused also - and also brusquely - to giving Geralt his pouch back. The pouch that carried his money, and bank cheques. Movable properties of the witcher, he announced not without malice, was treated by the government as a *cautio pro expensis*, an advance on legal expenses and predicted fines.

There was no point nor any sense in arguing. Geralt had to be glad that he was given back the things that he had in his pockets when he was arrested. Personal trinkets and small change. So small that no one cared to steal it.

He counted the rest of his money. And he smiled at the old lady.

‘Another quarter of pint of happiness, please. I’ll skip the cucumber.’

After grandma's moonshine the world became markedly more beautiful. Geralt knew that it would not last, so he quickened his pace. He had things to work out.

Roach, his mare, was luckily overlooked by the court, and was not a part of *cautio pro expensis*. She was where he left her, in a clean stable stall, well cared for and fed. Something like that the witcher could not live without giving a reward, without any regard to his own wealth. From a handful of silver coins that survived in a pocket hidden in a saddle, a few were given at once to a stable boy. Such generosity left him breathless.

The horizon over the sea darkened. Geralt thought that he was seeing there sparks of lightning.

Before entering the guardhouse, he prudently breathed in fresh air. It did not help. The guard ladies must have eaten more beans than usual. Quite a lot more. Who knew? Maybe it was Sunday?

Some of them - as usual - ate. The others were occupied with a game of dice. Seeing him they have stood up. And surrounded him.

‘The witcher, look at him,’ said the commandant standing very near. ‘He came here.’

‘I’m leaving town. I’m here to claim my belongings.’

'If we let you,' a second guard elbowed him seemingly accidentally. 'What will we get in return? You have to buy yourself out, pal, buy out. Eh, wenches? What we will make him do?'

'Let him kiss every one of us on the bare ass.'

'With licking! And slipping!'

'But girls! He will infect us!'

'But he has to,' she pushed him with her breast, hard as rocks, 'please us somehow, no?'

'Let him sing a song for us,' she farted loudly, 'and adjust the melody to this tone.'

'Or mine!' The other farted even louder. 'Because mine is more melodic!'

The other ladies were in stitches.

Geralt made his way, trying to not use too much force. At this moment the door opened and the gentleman in the dun mantle and beret entered. Gonschorek, the depositary, it seemed. Seeing the witcher he opened his mouth wide.

'You?' he mumbled 'But how? Your swords...'

'Exactly, my swords. Please give them back.'

'But... but...' Gonschorek choked, hands clutching his breast, breathing heavily. 'But I don't have them.'

'Repeat that, please.'

'I don't have them...' Gonschorek face became red. And shrank, like in a paroxysm of pain. 'They've been taken.'

'What?' Geralt felt cold fury building up.

'Taken.'

'What do you mean - taken?' He grabbed the depositary by the lapels. 'Taken by whom? What the fuck is the meaning of all this?'

'The receipt...'

'Exactly!' He felt an iron grip of on his arm. The commandant of the guards pushed him away from choking Gonschorek.

'Exactly! Show us the receipt!'

The witcher did not have the receipt. The receipt from the arms deposit was in his pouch that was taken from him by the court. Taken as an advance on legal expenses and future fines.

'The receipt!'

'I don't have it. But...'

'No receipt, no deposit,' the commandant wouldn't let him finish. 'The swords were taken away, didn't you hear? You have taken them yourself surely and now you're making a play of it. You want to get something by cheating? No way! Get out of here!'

'I will not leave before...'

The commandant, not releasing her grip, dragged Geralt away, and spun him about. With his face toward the door.

'Now get the fuck out!'

Geralt usually frowned upon using force against women. But he had nothing against using force against someone that had shoulders like a wrestler, a belly like gammon, thighs like a discus-thrower and farted like a mule at that. He pushed the commandant away and whacked her in the jaw with full force. With his favorite right hook. The others froze, but only for a second. Before the commandant had fallen on a table squirting

beans and pepper sauce around, he had them on his back. He had without any thought broke the nose of one of them, and jabbed at the other so forcefully that cracking teeth could be heard. The other two were given a taste of the Aard Sign and they flew like puppets at the halberd stand, causing all the halberds to fall with indescribable boom and crash.

He was struck in the ear by the commandant dripping with sauce. The second guard - the one with hard breasts - caught him from behind in a bear hug. He elbowed her hard, and she howled. He pushed the commandant into the table, and hit her with a swinging hook. The one with smashed nose he hit in the solar plexus, and threw her on the ground, he heard her vomit. The other, he hit in the temple, slamming the shaved back of her head into pillar and instantly fogging her eyes.

But still four were still standing. And his advantages finished.

He was hit in the back of the head, and immediately after that in the ear. And then the loins. One of them tripped him, and two of them got on top of him, and pounding him with fists. The rest were not skimping on kicking him.

With a hit of a forehead in the face he eliminated one of guards lying on him, but the other instantly took over. The commandant he recognized because of the dripping sauce. With a blow from overhead he was hit in the teeth. He spat blood straight into her eyes.

‘A knife,’ she shouted, swinging her shaved head. ‘Give me knife! I will cut off his balls!’

‘Why a knife!’ shouted another. ‘I’ll bite his balls off!’

‘Stop! At attention! What's the meaning of this! At attention, I say!’

A stentorian and forceful voice cut through the battle turmoil, and mitigated the guards. They let Geralt go. He stood with

effort, somewhat sore. The sight of the battlefield brightened up his humor a bit. Not without satisfaction he looked at his achievements. The guard lying under the wall had opened her eyes already, but was unable to even sit. The second, was bent over spitting out blood and feeling her teeth with her finger. The third - the one with smashed nose tried to stand, but was constantly falling down into puddle of her beany vomit. From a whole six, only half could stand. The result was satisfying, then. Even taking into account the fact that if there had not been an intervention he would have been gravely hurt, and who knows if he would be able to stand on his feet.

The one that intervened was richly clothed and radiating with authority, a man with noble features. Geralt didn't know who he was. But he knew his companion very well. An elegant fancy hat with feather an egret stuck into it, with his blonde hair coiffured by irons. Wearing a doublet, the colour of red wine, and a shirt with a lace frill. With his inseparable lute, and inseparable insolent smile on his lips.

'Greetings witcher! O, how you look! With your gob beaten up! I'll burst with laughter!'

'Greetings Dandelion. I'm happy to see you too.'

'What happened here?' The man with noble features put his hands on his hips. 'Huh? What's with you? Report! Now!'

'It was him!' The commandant shook the rest of the sauce out of her ears and accusingly pointed her finger at Geralt. 'He's guilty honorable Instigator! He argued and got angry, and then started the fight. And all this because of some swords from the deposit, that he had no receipt for. Gonschorek will confirm. Hey, Gonschorek why you are shrinking there in corner? You crapped your pants? Move your ass, stand up, and tell our honorable instigator... Hey Gonschorek? What's up with you?'

It was enough to look closely, to guess what's with Gonschorek. There was no need to investigate his pulse, it was enough to

look at his face, white as a chalk. Gonschorek was dead. He was ordinarily and simply dead.

‘We will institute an investigation, master from Rivia,’ said Ferrant de Lettenhove, instigator of the royal tribunal. ‘As you put forth the formal complaint and lawsuit, we have to institute it, so says the law. We will ask everyone who during your arrest and in the court had access to your belongings. We will arrest the suspects.’

‘The usual ones?’

‘Pardon?’

‘No, nothing.’

‘Ah, yes. The case will surely be explained and the guilty will be put to justice. If there really was theft. I assure you that we will clear up this mystery, and the truth will be revealed. Sooner or later.’

‘I would prefer sooner.’ The witcher didn't like the tone of the instigator voice. ‘My swords are my whole existence; I can't perform my job without them. I know that my profession is seen by many as bad, and my person suffers due to a negative image. An image arising from prejudice, superstition and xenophobia. And I count on this fact not influencing the result of the investigation.’

‘It will not influence the result,’ said Ferrant de Lettenhove dryly. ‘Because law and order rule here.’

When the guards removed the deceased Gonschorek's body, on orders from the instigator, a revision of the whole deposit storeroom was carried out. It was easily guessed there was no trace of witcher's swords. Still sulky with Geralt the commandant pointed them to a support with a long needle, onto which claimed receipts had been impaled. And among

them the witcher's receipt was promptly found. The commandant looked through register to shove the receipt in their faces.

'Here you are,' she pointed with triumph, 'like an ox, a receipt of reception. Signed: Gerland of Ryblia. I said that witcher was here and got his swords. And now he cheats, counting on damages. It's because of him that Gonschorek's dead. Because of the agitation he was overflowed with bile, and was struck by a stroke.'

Neither she, nor any of other guards had decided to testify to seeing the witcher while he was receiving his weapons. "A lot of people come here", was the explanation and they were occupied because they were eating.

Over the roof of the court building gulls were circling, shrieking horribly. The wind forced the storm clouds to the south. The sun started shining.

'I would like to warn beforehand,' said Geralt, 'that my swords are strongly enchanted. Only witchers can touch them, they cause a loss of vital forces. This manifests itself mainly by decay of man power. That is impotence. Complete and irreversible.'

'We will keep this in mind,' the instigator nodded his head. 'But for now I will ask you to stay in town. I may turn a blind eye to a fight in the guardhouse, which is quite a regular occurrence. The guard ladies quite easily give in to emotions. And because Master Julian that is Master Dandelion vouches for you, I'm sure that the case in court will be solved to your advantage.'

'My case,' the witcher half-closed his eyes, 'is nothing more than harassment. Persecution that arises from prejudice and dislike...'

'The evidence will be investigated,' the instigator cut him off. 'And based on that we will act. That is what order and law

wants. Exactly the same thanks to which you are free. Bailed out, so free on conditions. And you should, Master from Rivia respect those conditions.'

'And who paid the fee?'

Ferrant de Lettenhove coldly refused to reveal the witcher's benefactor, said his goodbyes, and in the company of the guards he went in direction of the court entrance. Dandelion was waiting just on this. They had barely left the market square and entered a small street when Dandelion revealed all he knew.

'A real band of misfortunes, my friend Geralt. And unlucky incidents. And when it comes to the fee - it was paid by a sorceress named Lytta Neyd, among her friends known as Coral because of the colour of lipstick she uses. She is the sorceress that serves local king, Belohun. Everyone is guessing as to why she did it. Because she was the one that put you behind bars.'

'What?'

'I'm saying. Coral snitched on you. That didn't surprise anyone – it's commonly known that sorcerers dislike you. And then sensationally – the sorceress all of sudden pays the fee and gets you out of prison, to which she herself sent you. The whole town...'

'Commonly? Whole town? What are you saying, Dandelion?'

'I use metaphors and periphrases. Don't pretend you don't know it - you know me. Of course not the whole town, just a narrow circle of well-informed people near to the rulers.'

'And you are saying you are one being near?'

'That's right. Ferrant is my cousin, son of my father's brother. I came here to visit him. You know - family matters. And I came to know about your adventure. I stood by you immediately - you

don't doubt that? Do you? I vouched for your honesty. I told them about Yennefer.'

'Many thanks.'

'Give up the sarcasm. I had to tell them about her to make my cousin aware of fact that the local sorceress denigrates you because of envy. That this whole accusation is false, that you never embezzled any funds. As a result of my mediation, Ferrant de Lettenhove, royal instigator, highest by rank executor of law is already convinced that you are innocent.'

'I had other impressions,' said Geralt. 'Just the opposite. I felt that he doesn't believe me. Neither in the case of embezzlement nor the swords. Evidence is his fetish. Evidence of embezzlement will be reported. And the evidence of mystification with the theft of the swords will be from the signature of Gerland of Ryblia in register. And that expression on his face when he warned me about not leaving town.'

'You judge him unfairly,' said Dandelion. 'I know him better than you. That I vouch for you means to him more than a dozen fake proofs. And he was right to warn you. Why do you think we both - him and me went to guardhouse? To stop you from doing stupid things! Someone is framing you producing false evidence? Don't give that someone solid proofs. And running away would be such proof.'

'You may be right,' Geralt agreed. 'But instinct tells me otherwise. I should run before I'm completely overrun. First arrest, then bailment fee, immediately after my swords... What comes next? Dammit without my swords I feel like... Like a snail without its shell.'

'You worry too much in my opinion. Besides - are there not enough stores here? Give up those swords and buy new ones.'

'And if you had your lute stolen? A lute that you got in quite dramatic circumstances? Wouldn't you worry? Would you just

give it up? And go and buy a new lute at the store around the corner?

Dandelion instinctively clasped his hands on his lute and looked around fearfully. None of the passersby looked like a potential thief of musical instruments and no one showed improper interest in his unique lute.

‘OK, yes,’ he relaxed. ‘I understand. Just like my lute, your swords are unique, and irreplaceable. And at that... how’d you said it? Enchanted? Causing magical impotence? Dammit Geralt! Now you tell me? I was frequently in your company, and I had your swords in arm's reach. And sometimes even nearer. Now it's clear, now I understand... I've had lately, dammit, some difficulties...’

‘Calm down. It's baloney with the impotence. I thought it up on the spot, counting that rumor will spread and thief would be scared.’

‘If he gets scared, he will most likely drown your swords in a latrine,’ the still slightly pale bard quite consciously pointed out.

‘And you will never get them back. Rather depend on my cousin, Ferrant He has been a local instigator for years, and has a whole army of constables, agent and spies. They will find the thief in no time, you will see.’

‘If he is still here,’ the witcher gnashed his teeth, ‘he could have run while I was in prison. What did you say this sorceress thanks to which I landed there is called?’

‘Lytta Neyd, nickname Coral. I think I know what you want to do. But I'm not sure that this is a good idea. She's a sorceress. A witch and woman in one person - that is – an alien species, escaping rational cognition, functioning according to incomprehensible, for normal men, principles and mechanisms. What I'm telling you - you know it all too good yourself. You are widely experience in this matter... What's that noise?’

Wandering aimlessly through the streets they reached a small square that sounded with incessant clapping of hammers. Great barrel-maker's workshops were functioning. In the same street, under the same roof, boards were placed in straight prisms. From here they were carried by barefooted youths onto the table, where they were mounted in special trestles and worked upon with shaves. Readied staves were carried to other artisans. They finished them on long plane benches, standing ankle deep in shavings. The readied staves were put in the hands of coopers that put them together. Geralt looked for a while how under pressure of different mechanisms a shape of barrel was created immediately by putting on iron bands. And steam was gushing over the street from the great cauldrons where barrels were scalded. From the depth of a workshop came the smell of wood roasted on fire to harden it before farther treatment.

'Every time I see barrels,' said Dandelion, 'I get the desire to drink beer. Let's go round the corner. I know quite nice pub there.'

'Go on alone, I wish to visit the sorceress. I think I know which one is she - I saw her. She is the source and origin of my troubles. I will not wait on the development of things. I will go to her and ask straight. I can't stay here, in this town. If only because I lack funds.'

'That,' said the bard proudly, 'can be remedied. I will help you financially... Geralt? What is it?'

'Go back to the coopers and bring me a stave.'

'What?'

'Bring me a stave. Quick.'

The street was blocked by three men with unshaven and unwashed gobs. One had shoulders so broad that he was almost square, and carried in his hand thick shod club. The

second one in sheepskin, carried a cleaver, and had an axe placed behind his belt. The third, swarthy like a sailor was armed with a nasty looking long knife.

‘Hey, you there, Rivian stinker!’ shouted the square one. ‘How do you feel without your swords on your back? It’s like being naked with your ass in the wind, isn’t it?’

Geralt did not argue, he waited. He heard that dandelion was arguing about a stave with the coopers.

‘You have no fangs anymore, weirdo, venomous witchery reptile,’ continued the square one, it seemed he was the most adept in oratory art of the three. ‘A reptile without fangs will not be feared by anyone. It’s just a worm or another wormy lamprey. We will crush such vermin with our shoes. To stop it from coming into our cities, among good people. You won’t contaminate our streets with your slime you slow worm. Guys - let’s beat him!’

‘Geralt! Catch!’

He caught the stave thrown at him in flight, he avoided a blow from the cudgel, and hit the square thug on the side of his head, pirouetted, hit the guy in sheepskin in the elbow. Who shrieked and dropped the cleaver. The witcher hit him in the bend of the knee and tripped him, after that he moved to his side and banged him on the temple. Not waiting for the thug to fall down, and not stopping his movement he avoided the cudgel of the square man again, and hit the fingers clamped on the cudgel. Square guy roared in pain and dropped the cudgel and Geralt hit him in turn on the ear, the ribs and the other ear. And then kicked him in the groin with a swing. The square thug fell down and became spherical, curling, shrinking and touching the ground with his forehead.

Swarthy - the most agile and fastest of the three danced around the witcher. He tossed his knife from one hand to another and attacked with his knees bent, slashing diagonally. Geralt

effortlessly avoided being cut, moving further away, and waited for his opponent to lengthen his stride. And when it happened, with a swinging blow he deflected the knife, pirouetted around his opponent and hit him on the back of the head. The cutthroat fell to his knees, and the witcher struck him on the right kidney. The man howled and flexed. Then the witcher hit him with the stave on a nerve below the ear. Known to medics as parotid plexus.

‘Oh,’ said the witcher standing over the guy choking with a shriek and falling to his knees, ‘that’s got to hurt.’

The bandit in sheepskin took axe from behind his belt, but he stayed on his knees unsure what to do. Geralt erased his uncertainty hitting him in the neck. From the end of street guards from the city watch were coming in running. Dandelion tried to mitigate them, he feverishly explained who was aggressor and who was acting in self-defense. The witcher hailed Dandelion

‘Make sure,’ he cautioned, ‘that the bandits are imprisoned. Influence your cousin the instigator, so that he will press them strongly. They are involved in the theft of my swords themselves or they were hired by someone. They knew that I am unarmed, that's why they dared to attack me. Give the stave back to coopers.’

‘I had to buy it,’ admitted Dandelion. ‘And probably well I did. You wield it quite nicely. You should always carry it.’

‘I’m going to the sorceress. To visit her. Am I to go with a stave?’

‘Against the sorceress,’ the bard frowned, ‘something heavier would be better. Let’s say a stanchion. An acquaintance of mine - a philosopher said once: If you go to meet a woman don't forget to take with you...’

‘Dandelion!’

'OK. OK. I will explain how to get to her house, but if I may advise first...'

'Yeah?'

'Visit a bath. And a barber.'

Beware of disappointments, as appearances deceive. Things are rarely like they seem to be. And women are never like they seem.

Dandelion, *Half a century of poetry*

Chapter Five

The water in the fountain basin whirled and boiled, spraying golden droplets. Lytta Neyd, also called Coral, a sorceress, stretched her hand and chanted a stabilizing spell. The water became smooth, like oil was poured over it and started to pulse with reflections. The image, at first fuzzy and foggy came into focus and stopped shivering. Although it was slightly distorted by the movement of the water it was clear and legible. Coral leaned forward. She saw in the water the Root Market, in the main street of the city. And a man with white hair walking it. The sorceress looked at him carefully. She observed. She looked for clues. Details that would enable her proper evaluation. And allowed to predict what would happen.

On what a proper man is, Lytta had formed an opinion, created by years of experience. She could find a true man in a flock of better or worse imitations. She didn't need at all to make physical contact, which she held as a method that is not only trivial, but also misleading, and leading completely astray. Direct tasting - as she knew after few tries - maybe was some check of taste, but it too often left disgust. Indigestion. And heartburn. And sometimes even nausea.

Lytta could recognize a true man, even from afar, on the basis of seemingly meaningless clues. A true man, she knew from practice, likes fishing, but only using an artificial fly. He collects military figurines, erotic drawings, and personally built models of sail ships, including the ones in bottles. And he never lacks empty bottles in his house. He can cook exceptionally well, he can create masterpieces of culinary art. And generally speaking his looks are enough to make you eager.

The witcher Geralt, about whom the sorceress had heard much, and whom she was observing at the moment fulfilled it seems just one of this conditions.

‘Mozaïk!’

‘I’m here, mistress.’

‘We will have guest. Make sure everything is ready and in proper order. But first bring me a dress.’

‘Tea-rose? Or sea water?’

‘White. He wears black clothes, let’s give him yin and yang. And shoes, choose something with a fitting colour, but heel should be at least four inches high. I can’t let him look at me from above too much.’

‘Mistress... This white dress...’

‘Yes?’

‘It’s so...’

‘Humble? Without decoration and finery? Oh, Mozaïk, Mozaïk. Will you never learn?’

He was met on the doorstep by a huge ruffian with big belly, a broken nose and eyes of a little pig. He inspected Geralt from heel to head and back. And then moved aside to signal that he was allowed to pass.

In the anteroom a girl with smoothly combed even slicked back hair met him. Without a word, only with gesture she invited him inside.

He entered, straight to a patio full of flowers, with a splashing fountain in the middle. In the center of fountain stood a statue of a naked dancing young woman, or rather a girl judging by her barely developed secondary sex attributes. Besides being created by a master of his craft one thing called attention in this statue - it was connected to the pedestal with a single point - a

big toe. There was no way, judged the witcher, that it could be stabilized by means other than magic.

‘Geralt of Rivia. I greet you. And invite.’

To be thought about as classically beautiful, Lytta Neyd had too sharp features. Her rouge in the colour of warm peach, with which her chick bones were grazed lightly softened this sharpness, but it did not hide it. Her lips emphasized with coral lipstick had a shape so ideal, that it was too perfect. But that was not what mattered.

Lytta Neyd was a redhead. Naturally and classically red. Toned, lightly rusty redness of her hair brought forward associations with summer and the coat of a fox. If you - Geralt was absolutely sure of that - caught a red fox and put it next to Lytta, both would turn out to have the same colour, and indistinguishable. And when the sorceress moved her head, among the reds showed up lighter tones, yellowish - just like in the case of the fox. That type of redheadedness was accompanied in principle by freckles, and a lot of them, most often too much of them. There were no freckles to be seen on Lytta.

Geralt felt unrest, forgotten and dormant, waking up suddenly somewhere deep within. In his nature was a weird and difficult to explain inclination toward red-headed women. This particular colour caused him a few times to do stupid things. There was a need to be careful, and the witcher decided to do so strongly. Besides, his task was easy. It was exactly one year since doing such foolish things ceased to tempt him.

The erotically stimulating redheadedness was not the only attractive attribute of the sorceress. The snow-white dress was simple and without adornments, and this was to achieve a goal. The goal that was right, and without doubt intended. Simplicity did not distract the attention of the observer, concentrating this attention on her attractive figure. And deep cleavage. In the "Good Book" of prophet Lebioda, in an illustrated edition of it,

Lytta Neyd could with success, pose for a drawing preceding the chapter "On unclean lust".

Even shorter, Lytta Neyd was a woman with whom only complete idiot would want to join with for more than two days. Interesting was that women like these were chased by flocks of men wanting to form quite longer relationships.

She smelled of freesia and apricot.

Geralt leaned forward and pretended that he was not more interested in the figure and cleavage of sorceress than he was in the figure in fountain.

'I invite you,' Lytta repeated, pointing at a table with malachite table-top, and two wicker armchairs. She waited until he sat himself, and then sat too, showing off her shapely legs and shoes made of lizard skin.

The witcher pretended that his full attention was directed at the carafes and platter with fruit.

'Wine? This is Nuragus of Toussaint, in my opinion better than the overrated Est Est. We also have Côte-de-Blessure if you prefer red. Pour for us, Mozaïk.'

'Thank you,' he accepted a goblet from the slicked back girl and smiled at her. 'Mozaïk. Nice name.'

He saw horror in her eyes.

Lytta Neyd put her goblet down. With a thump to catch his attention.

'What,' she moved her head and her red hair locks swayed, 'brings the famous Geralt of Rivia to my humble place? I'm dying of curiosity?'

'You paid my fee,' he said purposely dryly. 'Bailment fee that is. Thanks to your generosity I'm out of prison. In which I was

locked in also thanks to you. Is that true? It was you that put me in prison for a week?’

‘Four days.’

‘Four days and nights. I'd like to know the reasons you did this. Both things.’

‘Both?’ - She raised her brows and goblet. ‘But there's one. And still the same.’

‘Oh.’ He pretended that Mozaïk hustling about on opposite site of patio had his undivided attention. ‘For this same reason, that you snitched on me, and put me in prison you got me out of prison?’

‘Bravo.’

‘I'll ask then: Why?’

‘To show you that I can.’

He took a sip of wine. Indeed a very good one.

‘You proved,’ he nodded, ‘that you can. You could as a matter of fact just had told me so, even meeting me on a street. I would have believed you. You preferred to make a point differently and more emphatically. So I'll ask: what now?’

‘I'm still thinking it over,’ she stared at him predatory with her eyes half closed. ‘But let's leave things to take their course. For now, let's say that I work for a few of my confraters. Wizards having certain plans. Those wizards, that are not unaware of my diplomatic talent, deemed me a proper person to inform you about those plans. That's all I can tell you for now.’

‘That's very little.’

‘You're right. But for now, I'm ashamed to say I don't know more myself. I did not expect that you would show up so fast,

that you would discover so quickly who paid the fee. Which was - I was told - supposed to stay a mystery. When I know more I will fill you in. Be patient.'

'What about the case of my swords? Is that an element of this play? Those secret wizards plans? Or just another proof that you can?'

'I don't know anything about your swords, whatever that's supposed to mean and regard.'

He didn't believe her fully. But he did not ask more.

'Your confraters, the wizards,' he said, 'are lately outdoing one another in showing me antipathy and hostility. They crawl out of their skin to pester me and make life unbearable for me. In every bad adventure, that befallen me I have a right to expect that they were involved. A band of unlucky occurrences. They put me in jail, and then free me, then they tell me that they have plans regarding me. What will your confraters think of now? I'm afraid to even speculate. And you - very diplomatically I must say - tell me to be patient. But I don't have a choice. I must wait for the case that your denunciation caused to come on trial.'

'But for now,' the sorceress smiled, 'you can take advantage of your freedom fully, and enjoy all of its benefits. You are released pending trial. If the case will ever come on trial, which is not at all sure. And even if it will you have no cause to worry. Trust me.'

'With trust,' he answered with smile, 'it could be difficult. You confraters doing strongly taxed my trustfulness. But I'll try. I'll now go. To trust and patiently wait. I bow to you.'

'Don't bow just yet, just a while longer. Mozaïk, wine.'

She changed her pose on the armchair. The witcher still stubbornly pretended that he didn't see her knee and thigh visible in the slit of the dress.

'Well,' she said after a while, 'there's no point in beating around the bush. Witchers were never esteemed in our circles, but ignoring you was sufficient. But only up to a certain time.'

'Up to a time,' he had enough of being evasive, 'when I came into a relationship with Yennefer.'

'Well, no. You are mistaken,' she put her jade eyes on him. 'Doubly so. *Primo* it was not you that came into relationship with Yennefer, it was the other way around. *Secundo*, this relationship did not shock anyone. There were more extravagant things going on around us. The turning point was your parting. When was it? A year ago? Oh, how fast the time passes...'

She made a long pause for effect, counting on his reaction.

'A year ago,' she continued when it was clear that there will be nothing forthcoming, 'a part of our circle... Not very big, but influential... deigned to notice you. It wasn't clear for everyone what happened between you too. Some of us were thinking that it was Yennefer that sobered up and broke up with you and threw you out. Others dared to suppose it was you that broke up with her and escaped. As a result you became the object of interest. And as you rightly guessed, antipathy. There were even those that wanted to punish you. Luckily for you the majority decided that it was not worth it.'

'And you? Which part of your circle you were in?'

'To the part,' Lytta twisted her coral lips, 'that was only amused by your affair. Sometimes it made us laugh. Sometimes it gave us an almost hazard-like entertainment. Personally I owe to you quite a bit of inflow of cash. There were bets on how long you would stand it with Yennefer. Stakes were high. I bet, as it turned out most right. And swept the board.'

'Then it would be better if I go now. I shouldn't visit you, we should not be seen together. Else they will be ready to think that we set up this bet.'

'You care about what they think?'

'Not much. And your winning pleases me. I had in mind to repay you the five hundred crowns from the fee, but as you swept the board I don't feel obliged anymore. Let's call it even.'

'You mentioning repaying the fee,' an evil flash showed in Lytta Neyd in green eyes, 'doesn't mean you hold the intention to flee? Without waiting for a trial. No, no, you could not have such an intention. You know well that such an intention will get you back behind bars. You know that, don't you?'

'You don't have to prove to me that you can.'

'I'd prefer that I was not forced to do so, I tell you with my hand over my heart.'

She put her hand over her cleavage, with the obvious goal of getting his attention there. He pretended that he did not notice it, and looked at Mozaik again. Lytta cleared her throat.

'And when it comes for compensation, or dividing the prize in the bet,' she said, 'then you are actually right. You deserve it. I wouldn't dare to propose money to you. What about limitless credit in 'Natura Rerum' for as long as you stay? Because of me your last visit at this inn ended before it really began, so now...'

'No. Thanks. I appreciate your good will and intentions. But thanks, no.'

'Are you sure? Well you undoubtedly are. I needlessly alluded to putting you in prison. You provoked me. And beguiled me. Your eyes, your weird mutated eyes, so sincere it seems, constantly wander. And beguile. You are not sincere. No. I

know I know, in the mouth of a sorceress it is a compliment. You wanted to say this, didn't you?'

'Bravo.'

'And could you can afford to be sincere? If I demanded so?'

'If you asked so.'

'Oh. Let it be so. I'll ask you then. What caused that with Yennefer? Yennefer and no other? Could you describe it, name it?'

'If this is object of a bet...'

'It's not object of a bet. Why Yennefer of Vengerberg?'

Mozaïk showed up like a shadow. With a new carafe. And cookies. Geralt looked her in the eyes. She immediately turned her head away.

'Why Yennefer,' he repeated, looking at Mozaïk. 'Why her exactly? I will tell you sincerely. I don't know. There are such women that... One look is enough...'

Mozaïk opened her mouth, moved her head slightly. Negatively and with terror. She knew. And begged that he would stop. But the game had gone too far.

'There are women,' - he still wandered his eyes over the girl's figure, 'which attract you. Like a magnet. That you can't take your eyes off.'

'Leave us, Mozaïk.' - In Lytta's voice the sound of ice grinding on iron could be heard. 'And thank you, Geralt of Rivia. For the visit. And patience. And sincerity.'

A Witcher's sword (figure 40) is noticeable for its build, it seems to be quintessence of what's best in a sword. The best steel, and method of forging, specific to dwarven foundries and forges, give the blade it lightness, but also extraordinary resilience. Witcher's swords are also sharpened in a dwarven way, a way that is secret, and will remain secret for ages as dwarves are very envious about their secrets. With dwarven crafted swords it is possible to cut in half a silken scarf thrown into air. This same trick - we know it from first hand sources - wilters could do with their swords

Pandolfo Forteguerria, *Treatise on cold steel*

Chapter Six

A short morning storm and rain refreshed the air for a short while, after that with a breeze from Palmyra came the stench of waste, burned fat, and rotting fish which became once again bothersome.

Geralt spend the night at Dandelion's inn. The room occupied by bard was snug. In direct meaning. To get to bed one had to hug the wall. Fortunately the bed was large enough for two, and it was possible to sleep. It creaked hellishly, and the mattress had been firmed by incoming merchants, known amateurs of intensely extramarital sex.

Geralt, who knows why, dreamed of Lytta Neyd.

To break fast they went to a nearby market, to market hall in which, as the bard managed to find out, exquisite sardines were served. Dandelion was paying. Geralt was not bothered by this. Often it was the other way around - Dandelion having no money took advantage of his generosity.

So they sat down behind a crudely finished table and started eating fried crispy sardines that were brought to them on a wooden platter, big like a barrow wheel. Dandelion, the witcher noticed, was looking fearful from time to time. And froze when it seemed to him that passerby looks at him too long.

'You should, I think,' he murmured finally, 'buy a weapon. And carry it in a visible place. It's worth to learn from yesterday's events, don't you think? Look there - you see chain mails and shields on display? That is an armorer's stall. I'm sure that they have swords too.'

'In this city,' Geralt chewed on a sardine and spat out a fin, 'arms are forbidden. Newcomers have their weapons taken

from them. It looks that only bandits are allowed to walk armed here.

‘They can, and they walk.’ The bard indicated a passing ruffian with a huge battle axe on his shoulder. ‘But in Kerack prohibitions are establishing prohibitions, ensuring that they are respected and punished, breaking them is done by Ferrant de Lettenhove, who is as you know my cousin. And because nepotism is a holy law of nature, we can safely ignore local prohibitions. We are I say now, entitled to having and carrying weapons. We will finish breakfast and we will go buy you a sword. Lady Hostess! Those fish are exquisite! Please fry ten more!’

‘I’ll eat these sardines and I assert that the loss of my swords is nothing more than a punishment for gluttony and snobism. For that I wanted luxuries. I got work in this neighborhood so I thought to visit Kerack and eat at the ‘Natura Rerum’ inn that is famous in all the world. And I could eat tripe, cabbage with peas or fish soup anywhere.’

‘By the way,’ said Dandelion ‘Natura Rerum’, although famous for its kitchen deservedly, is but a one of many. There are inns in which the food is not worse, and sometimes better than at ‘Natura Rerum’. For example ‘Saffron and Peeper’ in Gor Velen or ‘Hen Cerbin’ in Novigrad with its own brewery. Or even ‘Sonatina in Cidaris not far from here, has the best seafood on the whole shore. ‘Rivoli’ in Maribor and their grouse *á la* Brokilon, stuffed with pork fat, is delicious. ‘Paprzyca’ in Adelsberg and their famous hare haunch with morels *á la* king Videmont. ‘Hofmeier’ in Hirundum... Visit there in the fall, after Savoine, and try baked goose in pear sauce... Or ‘Two Loaches’ a few miles beyond Ard Carraigh, they are a normal inn at the crossroads, and they serve the best pork shanks I ever tried. Hey! Looked who visits us! Talk of the devil! Hi, Ferrant... That is Master Instigator...’

Ferrant de Lettenhove approached alone gesturing to his guards to say on the road.

‘Julian, Master of Rivia. I bring news.’

‘I make no secret,’ answered Geralt ‘of fact that I’m growing impatient. Which felons testified? Those that assaulted me yesterday, taking advantage of fact that I was unarmed. They were speaking about this loudly and openly. That is proof that they had a hand in stealing my swords.’

‘There is unfortunately no proof of that,’ instigator shrugged. ‘The three imprisoned are just scum, stupid at that. They assaulted you - that’s true, encouraged by the fact that you were unarmed. Gossip about theft spread unbelievably quickly - thanks to it seems the ladies from the guardhouse. And they were instantly willing to assault you... Which is not weird, taking into account that you are not very popular. And you don’t want popularity or liking. In prison you have beaten up your fellow prisoners.’

‘Yeah,’ the witcher nodded, ‘It’s all my fault. The guys from yesterday were hurt too. They didn’t complain? Do they demand reparation?’

Dandelion laughed, but became silent quickly.

‘Witnesses of yesterday’s events,’ said Ferrant de Lettenhove harshly, ‘testified that those three were beaten with a cooper’s stave. And beaten cruelly. So much so, that one of them soiled himself.’

‘Surely because of emotion.’

‘They were beaten,’ the instigator’s facial expression didn’t change, ‘even when they were already incapacitated and were no longer a threat. And this means overstepping the boundaries of self-defense.’

‘I’m not afraid. I have good lawyer.’

‘Sardine?’ Dandelion interrupted the heavy silence.

‘I inform you,’ said the Instigator, ‘that the investigation is in progress. The arrested were not involved in the theft. We interrogated a few people that may be involved, but no evidence was found. Our informers were unable to provide any clues. It's known however - and I arrive mainly with this information - that gossip about the swords caused quite a stir in the underworld. There appeared allegedly newcomers that want to fight a witcher, particularly unarmed. I'd advise vigilance. I can't rule out further incidents. I'm not sure Julian that in these circumstances that the company of Master of Rivia...’

‘In the company of Geralt,’ interrupted the bard, ‘I was in far dire circumstances. We were in a quagmire far more dangerous than local thugs. Provide us, cousin - if you think it prudent, with an armed escort. Let them discourage potential assailants. Because if when Geralt beats up the next scumbags, they will whine about overstepping the bounds of self-defense.’

‘If they are scumbags,’ said Geralt, ‘and not paid slaughterers hired by someone. Does the investigation take into account such possibility?’

‘We take into account all possibilities,’ answered Ferrant de Lettenhove. ‘The investigation will continue. And I will grant you an escort.’

‘We are happy.’

‘Farewell.’

Over the roofs of city sea gulls shrieked.

The visit to the armor smith, it turned out could be skipped. Geralt only needed a single look at the swords offered. When

he was given their prices he shrugged and left shop without single word.

‘I thought,’ Dandelion joined him on the street, ‘that we had an understanding. You were supposed to buy something to not look unarmed.’

‘I won't waste money on anything. Even if it is your money. They were thrash, Dandelion. Crude swords mass produced. And showy court swords, fit only for a mask ball if you wanted to dress like a fencer. And the prices were such as to cause vain laughter.’

‘Let's find another store, or workshop!’

‘It's going to be the same everywhere. There is need for arms that will serve in one good fight. And they will not serve the winners, because when taken from a battlefield it is not usable anymore. And there is need for shiny decorations with which dandies parade. But you can't cut sausage with them.’

‘You are as always overstating.’

‘In your mouth this is compliment’.

‘Unintended! Where could you get a good sword then? Not worse than those stolen. Or even better.’

‘Oh, there are masters of the sword maker's profession. Maybe they would even have some decent blade in store. But I need a sword that fits my hand, that's made specifically for me. It would take few months - maybe a year. I don't have so much time.’

‘But you need to buy some sword,’ the bard pointed out soberly. ‘And this is rather pressing. So what's left? Maybe...’

He lowered his voice, and looked around.

‘Maybe... Maybe Kaer Morhen? There are surely...’

‘Surely.’ interrupted Geralt clenching his teeth. ‘There are enough blades left, including silver. But it's far, and there's no single day without storm and rain. Rivers are overflowing. The journey would take a month. And besides...’

He angrily kicked hollow basket left by someone.

‘I let myself get robbed. Dandelion. Get cheated and robbed like a loser. Vesemir would mock me mercilessly. And the other witchers, if there would be any also would have a lot of fun. They would mock me for years. That's not an option dammit. I have to manage. And alone.’

They heard a flute and drum. They walked into a square where vegetables were traded, and a group of vagabonds played. Their repertoire was specifically for the morning - that is completely dumb and not funny at all. Dandelion walked between the stalls and there with respect-worthy and surprising, in a poet, knowledge he started to evaluate and gusted cucumbers, beet roots and apples proudly lying on stalls. And he flirted and discussed with sellers.

‘Sauerkraut!’ he stated picking said sauerkraut up with wooden pincers. ‘Try it Geralt. Its fine, isn't it? Its thing both tasty and beneficial. In winter, when there is a general lack of vitamins it prevents scurvy. It's also an antidepressant.’

‘How?’

‘You eat pot of sauerkraut, and then drink a pot of curd... and in no time depression is the least of your problems. You forget about it. Sometimes for quite a long time. At whom are you looking so closely? Who is that girl?’

‘An acquaintance. Wait here. I will talk to her and be right back.’

The girl that was spotted was Mozaïk, whom he met at Lytta Neyd. The shy and slicked back haired pupil of the sorceress. In a modest but elegant dress in colour of rosewood. And

buskins on cork, in which she moved quite gracefully, taking into account the slippery vegetable waste lying on the uneven cobbles.

He walked up to her, surprising her at the tomatoes, which she were putting into her basket with a handle on her elbow.

‘Greetings.’

She paled slightly on seeing him, despite her pale completion. And had there been no stall she would have stepped back. She made a movement like she wanted to hide the basket behind her. No – not a basket. Her arm. She was hiding her arm and hand, fully covered with a silken scarf. He didn't overlook the signal, and some inexplicable impulse caused him to act. He caught girl's hand.

‘Leave it,’ she whispered trying to get free.

‘Show me, I insist.’

‘Not here...’

She let him lead her to a place farther from the market, where they were a slight bit more alone. He unwrapped the scarf. And was unable to contain himself. He cursed. Foully and lengthily.

The left hand of the girl was reversed. Twisted around at wrist. Thumb was protruding left, and the back of the hand was facing down. The palm was pointing up. The line of long life and regular, he asserted instinctively. The line of heart clear but dashed and discontinuous.

‘Who did this to you? Her?’

‘You.’

‘What?’

'You!' she yanked her hand out. 'You used me to mock at her. She does not let such things go unpunished.'

'I couldn't...'

'Know?' she looked him in the eye. He had misjudged her. She wasn't shy, nor afraid. 'You could and you should. But you preferred to play with fire. Was it worth it? You've had your satisfaction, your humor has gotten better? You had something to brag about in the tavern?'

He didn't answer. He couldn't find words. And Mozaïk to his astonishment smiled.

'I don't mind,' she said freely. 'I enjoyed your play, and if I wasn't afraid so much I would laugh. Give me back my basket I'm in a hurry. I have shopping to do. And I have an appointment at the alchemist.'

'Wait. We can't leave it at that.'

'Please,' Mozaïk's voice changed. 'Don't get involved. You will only make it worse...'

'And I,' she added after a moment, 'I had luck. She treated me gently.'

'Gently?'

'She could have twisted both hands. Or my foot, heel in the front. She could exchange feet right to left and vice versa. I saw her doing it to someone.'

'Did it...'

'Hurt? Only for a moment. Because almost immediately I passed out. Why do you look like that? It was so. I hope it will be the same when she will reverse it. In a few days when she will had had enough of vengeance.'

'I'll go see her. Now.'

'Bad idea. You can't...'

He interrupted her with quick gesture. He heard the crowd making noise. And saw it parting. The vagabonds were no longer playing. He saw Dandelion giving him from afar an urgent and desperate sign.

'You! Witcher scum! I challenge you to a duel. We will fight.'

'I'll be damned. Mozaik, get away.'

From the crowd stepped a short and stocky man in a leather mask and chest plate of *cuir bouilli*, hardened cowhide. The man shook a trident that he held in his right hand, and with a sudden move unrolled fisher net and waved and shook it.

'I'm Tonton Zroga, also called Retiarius. I challenge you to a duel witcher...'

Geralt lifted his hand and hit him with Ard Sign, putting into it as much energy as he could. The crowd shouted. Tonton Zroga also called Retiarius flew into air waving his legs, entangled in his own net, wiped a stall selling pretzels with himself, heavily bumped into the earth and with a loud clatter hit his head on a statue of gnome made of cast iron, that stood no one knows why in front of a store offering a tailor's service. The vagabonds rewarded the flight with loud clapping, Retiarius laid alive, but rather weakly showing it. Geralt without a hurry walked to him, and with a swing kicked him in the liver. Someone caught him by the sleeve. Mozaik.

'No, please. Please, no. You can't do such things.'

Geralt would gladly kick guy with the net some more, because he knew very well what you couldn't do, what you could, and what you need to do. And he didn't listen to anyone. Particularly to people that had never been kicked.

‘Please,’ Mozaïk repeated, ‘don't take revenge on him.
Because of me, Because of her. Because you'll lose yourself.’

He listened. He took her in his arms. And looked into her eyes.

‘I'm going to visit your mistress.’ he said dryly.

‘Not good.’ she said. ‘There will be consequences.’

‘For you?’

‘No. Not for me.’

*Wild nights! Wild nights!
Were I with thee,
Wild nights should be
our luxury!*

Emily Dickinson

*So daily I renew my idle duty
I touch her here and there - I know my place
I kiss her open mouth and I praise her beauty
And people call me traitor to my face*

Leonard Cohen

Chapter Seven

The sorceress' hip was decorated by a sophisticated and extremely colourful tattoo, representing a stripe-coloured fish. *Nil admirari*, thought the witcher. *Nil admirari*.

'I don't believe my eyes.' Lytta Neyd said.

For what happened, that it happened in a way that it happened he was the only guilty party, no one else. Walking to the sorceress' house he went by a garden and could stop himself - he picked one freesia from the flowerbed. He remember the smell dominating in her perfume.

'I don't believe my eyes,' repeated Lytta, standing in the doorway. She greeted him in person, her stocky porter was absent. Perhaps it was his day off.

'You came, I guess, to insult me for Mozaik's hand. And you brought me a flower. White freesia. Come in, before it all becomes local sensation, and the town will be buzzing with gossip. A man on my doorstep with a flower! Even the oldest folk can't remember such thing.'

She wore a loose-fitting black dress, a combination of silk and chiffon, thin, waving with every breath of air. The witcher stood, gazing, with freesia in his extended hand, wishing to smile and for nothing in world couldn't do it. *Nil admirari*, he repeated in his mind a maxim that he remembered from Oxenfurt, from the university, from a cartouche above the entrance to department of philosophy, He was repeating this maxim the whole way to Lytta's villa.

'Don't shout at me,' she took the freesia out of his hand. 'I will fix the girl's hand as soon as she returns. Without any pain.'

And I will even apologize. I will also apologize to you. Just don't shout.'

He shook his head, tried to smile, again without success.

'I'm curious,' she said as she drew the freesia nearer to her face, and sank her jade eyes into him, 'do you now the symbolism of flowers? Do you know what this flower tells, and you quite consciously brought me this message? Or is the flower completely random, and the message is... subconscious?'

Nil admirari.

'But this does not matter.' She approached him, moving very close. 'Because it's either you signaling me clearly, consciously and calculating what you want... Or you hide your desire, that's being betrayed by your sub consciousness. In both cases I owe you thanks. For a flower. And for what it means. I thank you. And I will return it, I will gift you something. Here - this ribbon. Pull it. Don't be shy.'

What I'm doing, he thought pulling. The ribbon smoothly slid out of the eyelets. To the very end. And then the silk-chiffon dress floated off Lytta like water, arranging itself around her ankles. He closed his eyes for a moment, her nakedness shocked him like a sudden flash of light. *What I'm doing*, he thought, hugging her neck. *What I'm doing*, he thought felling the taste of coral lipstick on his lips. *What I'm doing is completely senseless*, he thought, delicately driving her to a chest of drawers at the patio and putting her on malachite table.

She smelled of apricot and freesia. And something else. Maybe tangerine. Or vetiver.

It took a while, and at the end the chest of drawers was waving quite strongly. Coral, although she held him strongly did not let go of the freesia. The smell of the flower was not attenuating her smell.

‘Your enthusiasm flatters me,’ she said, tearing away her mouth from his, and only then opening her eyes. ‘And compliments strongly. But I have bed - don't you know?’

True, she had bed. Huge. Spacy like a deck on a frigate. She led him there, and he followed unable to take his eyes off here. She did not look back. She had no doubt that he'd follow. That he will follow without hesitation wherever she would lead. Not taking his eyes off her.

The bed was huge, and had a canopy. The bedding was of silk, and the sheets of satin.

They used the bed - without a shadow of exaggeration - completely, over every inch. On every span of bedding. And every fold of sheet.

‘Lytta...’

‘You can call me Coral. But for now don't talk.’

Nil admirari. Smell of freesia and apricot. Red hair spilled on the pillow.

‘Lytta...’

‘You can call me Coral. And you can do this to me once again.’

Lytta's hip was decorated by a sophisticated and extremely colourful tattoo presenting a stripe-coloured fish, which owing to big fins seemed triangular in shape. Fish like that - called scalars- rich-men and snobbish upstarts used to keep in aquariums and pools. To Geralt -and not only him - they were

associated with snobism and affectations. He was surprised that Coral chose this and not any other tattoo. The surprise didn't last too long. It turned out that Lytta looked quite young. But the tattoo came from the years of her true youth. From times in which scalars brought from beyond seas were very rare, there when little rich men, and upstarts were only beginning to gather their wealth, and barely anyone could afford an aquarium. *Her tattoo is like a birth certificate*, thought Geralt, caressing the scalar with his fingertips. *Well*, he thought moving his caress into regions farther from fish, *it's nice to remember your younger years. It's hard to abandon such a memento, even if it's played out and pompously banal.*

He lifted on his elbow and looked closely, searching her body for other nostalgic souvenirs. There weren't any. He didn't count on there being any, he just wanted to take a look. Coral sighed. Bored it seems with the abstract, and not very to the point wandering of his hand she caught it decisively and directed to a place that was concrete, and only right in her judgment. *And that's very good*, thought Geralt, drawing the sorceress to him, and drowning his face in her hair. Striped fish - whoa! Like there were not better things to give attention to. Things worth thinking about.

Maybe even sailing ship models, thought Coral chaotically, barely controlling her labored breath. *Maybe military figurines, maybe fishing with an artificial fly. But what counts... What really counts is how he hugs me.*

Geralt hugged her. Just like she was his whole world.

They did not sleep a lot the first night. And even when Lytta was asleep the witcher couldn't fall asleep. Lytta held him by the waist so tightly that he had trouble breathing. Her leg was thrown over his thighs.

On the second night she wasn't so possessive. She didn't hold him so tight, like previously. She was no longer afraid, it seems that he would escape before the dawn.

'You're musing. Your expression is manly and grim. What's the reason?'

'I've been thinking about... the naturalism of our relationship.'

'What?'

'I said, Naturalism.'

'You used it seems the term "relationship". Indeed, the capacity of this term is astonishing. Moreover, it seems that you suffer from post coital sadness. A state that is natural, and it happens to all higher creatures. And I too have strange tears coming to my eyes. Brighten up, brighten up. I was just kidding.'

'You lured me... Like a male.'

'What?'

'You lured me. Like an insect. With freesia-apricot magic pheromones.'

'Are you serious?'

'Don't be mad. I'll ask nicely, Coral.'

'I'm not mad, just the opposite. I must agree with you. Yes, that is naturalism in its pure form. But it was the other way around. You lured and seduced me. From the first sight. Naturalistically and animalistically you danced before me your male nuptial dance. You jumped, you stamped, and you ruffled your tail.'

'I did not.'

'...you ruffled your tail, and waved your wings like a black grouse. You crowed, and you cackled...'

'I didn't cackle.'

'You did.'

'No.'

'Yes. Hug me.'

'Coral?'

'What?'

'Lytta Neyd... It is not your true name either, am I right?'

'My true name would be troublesome in use.'

'How could it be?'

'Then speak fast: Astrid Lyttneyd Ásgeirrfinnbjornsdottir.'

'I understand.'

'I doubt it.'

'Coral?'

'Yes?'

'And Mozaïk? How did she get her name?'

'You know witcher what I don't like? Questions about other women. And particularly when the one asking is in bed with me. And asks instead of focusing on what he has in his hand right now. You wouldn't dare to do something like that being in bed with Yennefer.'

'And I don't like bringing up certain names, particularly when...'

'Am I to stop?'

'I did not say that.'

Coral kissed his arm.

'When she got to the school she got named Aïk, I can't remember her family name. Besides having a weird name, she had problems with lack of pigment in her skin. Her cheek was speckled with brighter patches, actually looking like a mosaic. She was healed of course, already after the first term. Sorceress can't have any defects. But the malicious nickname stuck. And it ceased to be malicious. She begun to like it herself. But enough about her. Talk to me and about me. Go on.'

'Go on with what?'

'Talk about me. Tell me what I am like. Beautiful, am I not? Oh, just say it.'

'You are beautiful, redheaded and freckled.'

'I'm not freckled. I erased my freckles with magic.'

'Not all of them. You forgot about some. And I found them.'

'Where? Ahh. Yes. That's true, so I'm freckled. And what am I like besides that?'

'Sweet.'

'Pardon?'

'Sweet. Like a wafer with honey.'

'Are you kidding?'

'Look at me. Into my eyes. Do you see any insincerity?'

‘No. And this worries me.’

‘Sit on the edge of bed.’

‘Because?’

‘I want to return the favor.’

‘What favor?’

‘For finding freckles where you found them. For doing your best and careful... exploration. I want to return the favor. May I?’

‘But of course.’

The sorceress' villa, like almost every other in this part of town had a terrace with a view of the sea. Lytta like to sit there and look for hours on end at crafts on the ocean, using quite an impressive telescope on a tripod. This fascination with the sea and everything that floated on it was rather alien to Geralt but he like to be with her together on terrace. He sat close, just behind her with his face just next to her red hair, enjoying the scent of apricot and freesia.

‘This galleon which just cast anchor, look,’ Coral indicated. ‘The blue cross on the flag - it's the "Glory of Cintra", most likely on voyage from Kovir. And this cog is "Alke", from Cidaris, it is surely taking a load of skins. And there - it's "Thetis" a transport hulk, local, two hundred lasts of load, a coaster, it goes between Kerack and Nastrog. There, look, on the ocean, sails of the Novigradian schooner "Pandora Parvi", a beautiful, beautiful ship. Look into the telescope, you'll see...’

‘I can see without the telescope. I'm a mutant.’

‘Ah, true. I forgot. And there the galley "Fuchsia", thirty-two oars, and can take a load of four hundred lasts. And this graceful three-masts galley is "Vertigo", it came from Lan Exeter. And there farther away, under the amaranth flag is the Redanian galley "Albatross". Three masts, one hundred and twenty feet between bow and stern. And there, look, look, hoisting sails and heading to open sea is a postal clipper "Echo", I know its captain, he eats at Ravenga's when he moors here. And there again, look, a galley from Poviss, under full sails.’

The witcher slowly brushed away hair from Lytta's back. Slowly, one after another he was undoing hooks and laces, lowering her dress. And then he totally dedicated his hands and attention to the two galleys under full sail. Galleys that had no equal among all the seas routes, roads, docks and admiral's registers.

Lytta did not protest. And kept her eye at the ocular of telescope.

‘You behave,’ she said at some point, ‘like a fifteen years old. Like you saw them for the first time.’

‘It's always first time for me,’ he confessed with reluctance. ‘And I was never truly fifteen years old.’

‘I come from Skellige,’ she said later, already in bed. ‘I have sea in my blood. And I love it.’

‘I sometimes dream,’ she continued when he was silent, ‘of sailing away. Just me. Set sail, and go to the open sea. Surrounded by only waters and heaven. Salty froth of waves sprinkles me, wind yanking at my hair with a truly manly caress. And I'd be alone, totally alone, infinitely alone, among an alien and hostile element. Loneliness among a sea of estrangement. You don't dream of it?’

No I don't, he thought. I have it everyday.

The day of the summer solstice came, and after it came the magic night, the shortest in the year, when the fern flower was blooming in the woods, and naked girls rubbed with adder's-tongue ferns danced in forest clearings wet with dew.

A night short like blink of an eye.

A mad night, full of thunders.

In the morning after the solstice he woke up alone. In the kitchen breakfast waited. And not only it.

'Good morning Mozaik. Beautiful weather, isn't it. Where's Lytta?'

'You have your day off today.' she responded without looking at him.

'My in equable mistress is occupied. Until late. During the time that she dedicated to... pleasures her patients piled up.'

'Patients.'

'She cures infertility. And other women's illnesses. You didn't know? So you know now. Have a nice day.'

'Don't leave yet, I'd like...'

'I don't know what you would like,' she interrupted. 'But it's a rather bad idea. It would be better if you did not talk to me. Pretended that I don't exist.'

'Coral will not hurt you anymore, I assure you. Besides, she's not here, she doesn't see us.'

‘She sees all she wants to see, all she needs is an artifact and a couple of spells. And don't delude yourself into thinking that you have any influence over her. To achieve this you would need a lot more than...’ With a movement of her head she indicated the bedroom. ‘Please, don't mention my name when you are with here. Even in passing. She will remind me of it. Maybe it will take a year, but she will remind me.’

‘If she treats you like this... Can't you just leave?’

‘Where to?’ She snorted ‘To a weavers manufacture? To a Taylor's guild? Or off to a brothel? I'm no-one. And I'll be no-one. Only she can change it. I will bear anything. But please do not contribute, if you can.’

‘In the city,’ she looked at him after a while, ‘I met your friend. This poet, Dandelion. He asked about you. He was worried.’

‘Did you calmed him down? Explained to him that I'm safe here? That nothing threatens me?’

‘Why would I lie?’

‘Pardon?’

‘You are not safe here. You are here, with her, because of the sorrow after that other. Even when you are close with her you think only about the other. She knows it. But she plays a game, because she's entertained by it, and you pretend so well, you are devilishly convincing. Have you thought what will happen when you will betray yourself?’

‘Tonight you will stay with her too?’

‘Yes,’ confirmed Geralt.

‘It will be a week, you know?’

‘Four days.’

Dandelion pulled his fingers across lute's strings in spectacular glissando. He looked around the inn, pulled at his tankard, wiped froth from his nose.

‘I know that's it's not my business,’ he said, unnaturally hard and strongly. ‘I know I shouldn't interfere. I know that you don't like it when someone interferes. But some things shouldn't be left untold. Coral, if you want to know my opinion belongs to women that should have constantly and clearly placed label. Saying "Look, but don't touch". Something like that is placed in a zoo in a terrarium, where they keep rattlesnakes.’

‘I know.’

‘She plays with you and toys with you.’

‘I know.’

‘And you simply are getting over Yennefer, about whom you can't forget.’

‘So, why...’

‘I don't know.’

In the evenings they went out. Sometimes to a park, sometimes on a hill overlooking the docks, and sometimes they simply strolled through Root Market.

They visited together the inn "Natura Rerum" a few times. Febus Ravenga was very happy, on his order the waiters attended them as best they could. Geralt finally came to know the taste of turbot in cuttlefish ink. And later goose leg in white wine, and leg of calf with vegetables. Only in the beginning - and shortly after - he was disturbed by bothersome and flamboyant interest shown by other guests. Later taking an

example from Lytta he ignored them. Wine from local cellar helped with that.

Later they came back to the villa. Coral dropped her dress already in the antechambers, and completely naked went to bedroom. He went behind her. He liked to look at her.

‘Coral?’

‘What?’

‘Rumor has it that you can always see what you want to see. All you need is a few spells an artifact.’

‘I will need,’ she lifted herself on her elbow and looked him in the eye, ‘to twist some joint of that rumor. It should keep the rumor from talking.’

‘I beg you please...’

‘I was kidding,’ she interrupted. In her voice was not a single note of joy.

‘And what,’ she continued when he was silent, ‘would you like to see. Or divine? How long you will live? How and when you will die? Which horse will win The Great Tretogor? Who will be elected by a collegiate of electors to be the new ruler of Novigrad? With whom is Yennefer now?’

‘Lytta.’

‘What this is all about, if I may know?’

He told her about theft of his swords.

It flashed. And after a while with rattle in rolled a thunderclap.

The fountain was silently splashing, the pool smelled of wet stone. The marble girl froze in dancing pose, wet and shiny.

‘The statue and fountain,’ Coral hastened with an explanation, ‘don't serve to fulfill my love of pretentious kitsch nor an expression of my submission to snobbish fashion. They serve a more precise goal. The statue is a representation of me. In miniature. When I was twelve.’

‘Who would think that you would develop so nicely?’

‘It's a magical artifact, strongly coupled with me. The fountain, and more precisely water is used for divination. You know, I suppose what divination is, and what it consists of?’

‘Just the basics.’

‘The theft of your swords happened some ten days ago. To read, and analyze the past events, even those that happened very long ago the best and surest is oneiromancy, but it needs a quite rare talent for dreaming, which I don't have. Sortilegia, or cleromancy would be rather not useful to us, just like aeormancy and pyromancy witch are good for guessing a humans fate, but only if you have something that belonged to them. For items, in this instance - swords, it's useless.’

‘So,’ Lytta took a red lock of hair from her forehead, ‘we are left with divination. That one as you know enables us to see future events. The elements will help us, because we have quite a stormy season. We will join divination with ceraunoscopy. Approach. Take my hand and don't let go of it. Lean and look into the water, but under no condition touch it. Concentrate. Think of your swords. Intensely think about them.’

He heard her chanting a spell. The water in pool the reacted with every word of the magical formula frothing and waving stronger. From the bottom great bubbles started to rise.

The water smoothed and became foggy. And then completely clear.

From the depth look violet eyes. Raven black hair fall on shoulders, shining, reflecting light like peacocks feathers, coiling and waving with the smallest movement.

‘About the swords,’ Coral reminded him, quietly and maliciously. ‘You were supposed to think about swords.’

The water twisted, and the women vanished in the vortex.

‘About the swords,’ Lytta hissed, ‘not about her.’

She chanted a spell in the next flash of thunder. The statue in the fountain glowed milkily, and the water grew calm and clear. And then he saw. His sword. Hands touching it. Rings on the fingers.

...of meteorite. Exquisite weight, the weight of the blade equal to the weight of the handle.

His second sword. Silver. The same hands.

...steel core coated with silver. Along the whole length runic markings.

‘I see them,’ he whispered loudly, clenching Lytta's hand. ‘I see my swords, really.’

‘Silence,’ she responded by clasping his hand even stronger. ‘Be silent and concentrate.’

The swords vanished. Instead of them he saw a black forest. A stone plain. Rocks. One of the rocks, huge, dominating, tall, lean... Cut by the winds into a weird shape...

The water froths shortly.

A grizzled man with noble features, in a black velvet jacket, and a golden brocade vest, both hands on a mahogany desktop.

‘Lot number ten,’ he says loudly. ‘An absolutely unique, incredible find, two witcher’s swords.’

A big black cat twisting in place tries to reach with his paw to a medallion on a chain. On a golden oval of a medallion enamel, a blue dolphin *nageant*.

A river flows among trees, under a canopy of branches and boughs hanging over water. On one of the branches a woman in long tight-fitting dress is standing.

The water frothed for a short time, and then grew smooth again.

He saw a sea of grasses, limitless, reaching the horizon. He saw it from above, like from a bird's perspective. Or maybe from the top of a hill. A hill from which down the slope descended a row of fuzzy characters. When they turned their heads he saw immobile faces, unseeing dead eyes. They are dead, he realized instantly. This is procession of the dead...’

Lytta's fingers clasped his hand again. With the force of pliers. Flash. A sudden gust of wind tugged their hair. The water in the pool ruffled, coiled, covered with froth, lifted in a wave big like a wall. And crashed right into them. They both jumped away from the fountain, Coral stumbled, and he held her up. Thunder clapped. The sorceress shouted a spell, waved her hand.

In the whole house the lights were lit.

The water in the pool, a boiling maelstrom just a while ago, was smooth, calm, moved only with lazily dripping stream of fountain. And on them, although they were flooded with almost a tide, there were not a single drop of water.

Geralt sighed heavily. Stood up.

'That last image,' he murmured helping sorceress to stand.
'That last image, the hill and the row... of people... I didn't recognize it. I have not a clue what could it be.'

'I too don't have a clue,' she answered with a strange voice.
'But it was not your vision. It was destined for me. I too don't know what could it mean. But I have a strange feeling that it is nothing good.'

The thunder grew silent. The storm was passing, deeper inland.

'Charlatanism, this whole divination,' repeated Dandelion, turning pegs of his lute. 'Fraudulent phantoms for naïve people. The power of suggestion, nothing more. You thought about swords and you saw swords. What else did you say you saw? A procession of the dead, a ghastly wave. A rock with a weird shape. What shape?'

'Something like a huge key,' the witcher pondered, 'or two halves of a heraldic cross.'

The bard mused. And then wetted his finger with beer. And draw something on a table-top.

'Similar to that?'

'Yeah. Very.'

'I'll be damned.' Dandelion jerked the strings, getting the attention of whole inn. 'I'll be damned, my friend Geralt. How many times do you rescue me from troubles? How many times you have helped. Did me a favor. It can't be counted! So now it's my turn. Maybe because of me you will get your famous weapons back.'

'What?'

Dandelion stood up.

'Lady Lytta Neyd, your newest conquest, to which I give back her honor as an exquisite diviner, and unchallenged clairvoyant. In her divination she clearly and without any doubt showed you place that I know. Let's go to Ferrant immediately. He must get us an audience. And give you pass to leave town by the service gate, to avoid those shrews from the guardhouse. We will get on a trip. Short and quite near.'

'Where to?'

'I recognized the rock from your vision. Professionally it's known as mogote. Locals call it the Griffin. A characteristic point, a signpost even, leading to a seat of a person that may actually know something about your swords. The place that we are going to visit is called Ravelin. Does it tell you something?'

Not only the workmanship, nor only the artisan's aptitude make witcher's sword worthy. Just like the mysterious elven or gnomish blades, which secrets are now lost, witcher's sword are by a secret power attached to the hand and senses of the witcher wielding it. And exactly by virtue of this power the witcher's sword are very effective against dark powers.

Pandolfo Forteguerra, *Treatise on cold steel*

I will reveal certain secret to you. About witcher's swords. It's a tall story that they have some mysterious power. And that they are so excellent arms that there are no better. It's all fiction, made up for appearance. I know this from an absolutely certain source.

Dandelion, *Half a century of poetry*

Chapter Eight

They recognized the rock named the Griffin instantly, it was visible from afar.

The place that they were going to was more or less halfway between Kerack and Cidaris, a bit off the road joining the two cities, a road that was meandering through forests and rocky wastelands. The road took some time, which they filled with talking. Dandelion was doing most of it.

‘Its common knowledge,’ said the poet, ‘that swords used by witchers have magical properties. Omitting made up stories about them causing impotence, there must be something to it. Your swords are not normal swords. Would you comment on it?’

Geralt stopped his mare. Roach bored with the long stay in the stable had every now and then a fancy to gallop.

‘I certainly will. Our swords are not normal swords.’

‘It’s said,’ Dandelion pretended that he didn't hear a hint of irony, ‘that magical power, so fatal to a monster with which you fight lies in the steel, from which they are forged. From the very raw materials, that its ore coming from meteorites that had fallen from the sky. So, how it is? Meteorites are obviously non-magical, they are a natural occurrence that can be explained by science. So from where does this magic come from?’

Geralt looked up at the sky, darkening from the north. It seemed that another storm was nearing. And that they would get wet.

‘If I remember correctly,’ he answered with a question, ‘you studied all seven liberal arts?’

‘And I graduated *summa cum laude*.’

‘When there in quadrivium astronomy you attended the lectures of professor Lindenbrog?’

‘Old Lindenbrog called Opalek?’ laughed Dandelion. ‘But of course! I still can see him scratching his ass, and pointing with his pointer to maps and globes, mumbling monotonously. Sphera Mundi, eh, subdivitur into four Elemental Planes: Plane of Earth, Plane of Water, Plane of Air and Plane of Fire. Earth and Water form the planetary sphere that is surrounded from all sides by Air or Aer. Above Air, eh, spreads Aether, Fiery Air vel Fire. Above Fire are the Subtle Sideral Heavens, the Firmamentum of a spherical nature. On this are located Erratica Sidera, the wandering stars and Fixa Sidera or fixed stars.’

‘I truly don't know,’ snorted Geralt, ‘what should I admire more. Your good memory or talent for emulation. Going back to our question: meteorites, which our good Opalek named falling stars, Sidera Cadens, or something like that, break down from firmament, and fall down to dig into our old good earth. During the fall they penetrate all the other planes, that is elemental planes, and para-elemental too, as those supposedly exist too. Elements and para-elements are saturated with powerful energy, which is as it is known is the source of all magic. Of all supernatural powers. The penetrating meteorite absorbs and stores this energy. Steel smelted from this meteorite, as well as a blade forged from this steel contains the power of the elements. It is magical. The whole sword is magical. Quod erat demonstrandum. You understand?’

‘Sure.’

‘Then forget it. It's a tall tale.’

‘What?’

A tall tale. An invention. You don't find meteorites under every bush. More than a half of witcher's swords are forged from steel smelted from magnetite ores. I myself used such swords. They are equally as good as swords made from siderites fallen from the skies and penetrating elements. There is absolutely no difference. But keep it to yourself, Dandelion, I'm asking you very nicely. Don't tell it to anyone.'

'But why? I'm supposed to be silent? You can't demand it! What sense is there in knowing something you can't share?'

'Please. I prefer to be treated as a supernatural being with supernatural swords. As such they hire me, and as such they pay. Being common is being nondescript. And nondescript means cheap. So I'm asking you - keep your mouth shut. You promise?'

'OK. Let it be so. I promise.'

They recognized rock named the Griffin instantly, it was visible from afar.

Indeed, with a bit of fantasy it could be seen as a griffin head atop a stretched neck. But it looked more like the neck of a lute or other stringed instrument.

The Griffin as it turned out was a mogote that towered over a huge karst spring. The Karst spring - Geralt remembered some tales - was called an Elven Stronghold, because of its quite regular shape, suggesting ruins of some old buildings, with walls, towers, and the rest. There never was any stronghold, elven or otherwise, the shapes of the spring were a creation of Nature, and a fascinating one at that.

'There, below,' pointed Dandelion, standing in his stirrups. 'You see it? That's our goal. The Ravelin.'

And this name was appropriate too, as the mogote drew a surprisingly regular shape of a great triangle, advanced in front of the Elven Stronghold like a bastion. Inside the triangle was a building, resembling a fort. Surrounded by something that looked like a fortified camp.

Geralt remembered the gossip circulating about The Ravelin. And about a person that resided therein.

They turned from the road.

Beyond the first fence where a few entrances, every one of them guarded by sentries armed up to their teeth, judging by the gaudy and diverse clothes they were easily recognized as mercenaries. They were stopped at the first post. Despite Dandelion quoting he had an appointed audience and very good relations with their bosses they were force to get off their horses and wait. Quite long. Geralt even began to get impatient when a large ruffian with the appearance of a galley-slave, told them to follow him. Immediately it turned out that they were being lead in a roundabout way, to the back of the complex. From the center of the complex loud music and the buzz of voices could be heard.

They went across a bridge. Just beyond it a man was lying, barely consciously, feeling his surroundings with his hands. His face was bloodied and so swollen, that his eyes were barely visible. His breathing was heavy, and each breath caused bloody bubbles to appear from his squished nose. The ruffian leading them showed no interest in him, so Geralt and Dandelion pretended that they don't see anything. They were in a place where one should not show excessive curiosity. It was not recommended to put your nose in the affairs of Ravelin. In Ravelin - gossip had it - the nose split with his owner and was left where it was put in.

The ruffian led them through the kitchen, where cooks worked frantically. Cauldrons gurgled, and in there - as Geralt noticed - were boiled crabs, lobsters and crayfish. In vats wriggled eels

and morays, in pots, steamed mussels and clams. On great pans sizzled meats. Servants took ready meals on trays and brought them into corridors.

The next room for a change smelled of women's perfumes and cosmetics. In front of a row of mirrors several women in various state of undress including completely, were chatting incessantly were taking care of their beauty. Also here Geralt and Dandelion kept their eyes from wandering.

In the next room they were thoroughly searched. The persons doing the searching were looking seriously, acting professionally and firm in action. Geralt's dagger was confiscated. Dandelion, who never carried any arms had to give up his comb and corkscrew. But - after some consideration - he was allowed to keep his lute.

'In front of His Reverence there are chairs,' they were informed at last. 'Sit on them. Sit and do not stand up until His Reverence says so. Do not interrupt, while His Reverence talks. Don't talk until His Reverence gives a sign that it's allowed. And now off you go. This door.'

'His Reverence?' murmured Geralt.

'He was a priest once,' answered the poet. 'But don't be afraid - he did not fall into bad habits. His subordinates have to address him somehow though, and he dislikes being called boss. We don't have to address him in any special way.'

When they entered, something immediately stood in their way. Something that was big as a mountain and reeked of musk.

'Howdy, Mikita,' Dandelion greeted the mountain.

The giant called Mikita, obviously a bodyguard of the reverent boss, was a metis - a result of cross between dwarf and an ogre. The effect of this cross was a dwarf with a height of well above seven feet, completely lacking a neck, with a curly

beard, tusks sticking out like in a boar, and arms reaching to his knees. Such cross was infrequently seen – the species were as it was believed, completely different genetically - so something like Mikita could not be a natural being. A very strong magic had to have been used. Magic that was, by the way, forbidden. There was gossip that quite a lot of wizards ignored the prohibition. Geralt had proof that this gossip was true in front of him.

They sat down in two wicker chairs, according to local rules. Geralt looked around. In the farthest corner of the room, on a great chaise longue two naked girls were playing with themselves. There were being watched by a short, inconspicuous, stoop-shouldered, nondescript man feeding a dog. The man was wearing a slack, embroidered robe and a fez with a tassel. Having fed the last piece of lobster to the dog, the man rubbed his hands and turned.

‘Greetings, Dandelion,’ he said, sitting himself in something that looked like a throne but was made of wicker. ‘My deep respect, Master Geralt of Rivia.’

Reverent Pyral Pratt, considered - and not without reason - to be the boss of organized crime for the whole region, looked like a retired silk merchant. In a picnic of retired silk merchants he would not stand out, and could not be identified by someone from outside the trade. At least at a distance. Observation at a closer range allowed one to see in Pyral Pratt things uncommon in a merchant. An old paled scar on his cheekbone - a trace of a knife cut. The ugly and ominous grimace of his narrow lips. Bright, yellowish eyes, immobile like in python.

He was silent for a long while. From somewhere beyond the wall, music and the buzz of voices could be heard.

‘I’m glad to see and meet both of you, gentlemen,’ Pyral Pratt said finally. In his voice one could easily spot the old and unrusting love for cheap and badly distilled beverages.

'I'm particularly glad to see you, singer,' The Reverent smiled at Dandelion. 'We have not seen each other since the wedding of my grand-daughter, which you honored with your performance. And I was thinking of you, because another grand-daughter of mine hurries to be married for some reason. I dare guess that you will not refuse me, an old friend? Eh? Will you sing at her wedding? You will not make me ask you for as long as it took last time? Will I need to... convince you?'

'I'll sing, I'll sing,' Dandelion hurried with confirmation, going slightly pale.

'And now,' continued Pratt, 'you've dropped in to ask about my health? Well it's shitty, this health of mine.'

Dandelion and Geralt did not comment. The Ogre-dwarf stunk of musk. Pyral Pratt sighed heavily.

'I've got,' he announced, 'ulcers of the stomach and anorexia, so the pleasures of the table are not for me anymore. I was diagnosed with a diseased liver, and forbidden to drink. I've got slipped discs in both lumbar and cervical and this eliminated from my entertainments hunting and other extreme sports. Medicines and healing take a lot of money, which I used to spend on hazards. My prick sometimes gets stiff, but how much work it takes! The thing will tire earlier than delight... So, what's left? Eh?'

'Politics?'

Pyral Pratt laughed so hard that even the tassel on his fez shook.

'Bravo, Dandelion. As usual - to the point. Politics - oh yes, that's something for me. I was not very favorable to the idea before. I thought to take up debauchery and invest in brothels. I mixed among politicians and I got to know a lot of them. And I came to know that it's better to be among whores, as whores at least have some honor and some rules. On the other hand, you

cannot rule from a brothel as well as from the city hall. And one would want to rule, if not the world then at least the county as old saying says. As old saying goes - if you can't beat them - join them...'

He stopped. Looked at the chaise lounge, and stretching his neck.

'Don't feign it girls!' he shouted. 'Don't pretend, more eagerness! Where was I...'

'Politics.'

'Oh right. But politics is politics, and you've had your swords stolen, witcher. Isn't that why you are here.'

'That's exactly the reason.'

'Stolen swords,' nodded Pratt. 'A painful loss, I take it? Of course it's painful. And irreparable. Well I always said that in Kerack there is a thief for every thief. The locals will steal - that's a well-known fact - everything that is not nailed down. And for the case of nailed down things they always bring crowbars.'

'An investigation - I hope - is under way?' he continued after a while. 'Ferrant de Lettenhove acts? Look the truth in the eyes gentlemen. You can't expect wonders from Ferrant. No offense Dandelion, but your cousin would be a better bookkeeper than he is an investigator. There is nothing for him but books, codices, paragraphs, rules and those proofs, proofs and proofs of his. Like the joke about the goat and cabbage. Once a goat was locked in a sty with a head of cabbage. In the morning there was no cabbage and goat crapped green. But there is no proof, and no witnesses, so the case was discontinued, *causa finita*. I would not want to be a bad prophet, but this may be the case with your swords.'

Geralt yet again did not comment.

‘The first sword,’ Pyral Pratt scraped his chin with a ringed finger, ‘is steel. Siderite steel, the ore came from a meteorite. Forged in Mahakam, in dwarven machine forges. Its full length forty and a half inches, the blade, twenty seven and a quarter. Exquisite balance, the weight of the blade is exactly equal to weight of handle. The weight of the whole sword surely below forty ounces. Workmanship simple, but elegant’.

‘And the second one, similar in length and weight, silver. Partially of course. Steel core clad with silver, also the edges are steel, pure silver is too soft to sharpen it enough. On the cross guard and down the full length of the blade are runic signs, that my specialist found impossible to decipher, but surely magical.’

‘A Precise description,’ Geralt’s face looked like it was made of stone. ‘Like you’ve seen them.’

‘But I did. They were brought to me and offered for sale. The middleman representing the interests of the present owner, a person with a unscathed reputation and known to me personally, was guaranteeing that the swords were excavated in Fen Carn, an ancient necropolis in Sodden. A lot of treasures had been dug up at Fen Carn so there was no reason to disbelieve him. But I had my suspicions, and I didn't buy the swords. You listening to me, Witcher?’

‘Carefully. I’m waiting for the conclusion. And details.’

‘The conclusion is like this: Details cost. Information has a price tag.’

‘You know,’ snorted Dandelion, ‘I came to you as an old friend, with a friend in distress...’

‘Business is business,’ Pyral Pratt interrupted. ‘I said, the information that I have has its price. If you want to know something about the fate of your swords, witcher of Rivia you have to pay.’

‘What's the price on the tag?’

Pratt took a large golden coin from under his robe and gave it to the ogre-dwarf. And he without any visible effort broke it in his fingers like it was biscuit. Geralt shook his head.

‘A banality on a level of market theater,’ he said through clenched teeth. ‘You will give me half of this coin, and sometime in the future, maybe in few years even, someone will find me and show me the other half. And will demand that I’m to fulfill his wish. A wish I will have to fulfill unconditionally. No way. If this is to be the price, then no deal. *Causa finita*. Let's go Dandelion.’

‘You don't want to get your swords back?’

‘Not that much.’

‘I suspected as much. But I had to try anyway. I will make another offer. An offer that can't be refused this time.’

‘Let's go, Dandelion.’

‘You will walk away,’ Pratt indicated with his head, ‘but through other door, this door, and without your clothes, except for your pants.’

Geralt thought that he had control of his face. He must have been mistaken as the ogre-dwarf roared cautionary and stepped toward him, lifting his hands and stinking doubly.

‘This is some kind of mockery,’ announced Dandelion loudly, being, as always when having the witcher at his side, brazen and mettlesome.

‘You are making fun of us Pyral. That's why we will say goodbye and leave. And through exactly the same door that we came in. Don't forget who I am. I'm leaving!’

'I don't think so,' Pyral Pratt shook his head. 'That you are not especially wise we established earlier. But to try to walk away, you are stupid.'

To bolster the boss' speech the ogre-dwarf put his fist under his noses. A fist the size of a watermelon. Geralt was silent. He was inspecting the giant for a while looking for a place to place a kick. Because it seems that it would come to kicking.

'Oh, well,' Pratt with a gestured mitigated the giant. 'I will yield a bit, I will show my good will and ability for compromise. The elite of trade, industry and finance, politicians, nobles, clergy, even a prince in incognito gathered here. I promised them a show, which they hadn't seen yet, and they surely had not seen a witcher in his underpants. But OK, I will yield a bit. You can go naked from the waist up. In return you will get your information, and instantly at that. Moreover, as a bonus...'

Pyral Pratt took a sheet of paper from the table.

'As a bonus, two hundred novigradian crowns, for the witcher's retirement fund. Here is a bearer's cheque, from the Giancardi bank. You can collect it in any of their branches. What do you say?'

'Why do you ask?' said the Witcher half-closing his eyes. 'You made it clear - as it seems - already that I can't refuse.'

'You're right. As I said - you can't refuse this offer. But I suppose it's beneficial for both sides.'

'Dandelion, take the cheque.' Geralt undid and took off his jacket. 'Now tell me, Pratt.'

'As I already mentioned,' the Reverent stretched on his throne, 'I refuse to buy the swords from the middleman. But as it was, as I said, a trusted person, and well known to me, I suggested another way to sell the swords. I told him to put the swords on an auction at Borsody's in Novigrad. It's the largest and most

esteemed collector's auction. Amateurs of rarities, antiques, rare pieces of art, unique works and all kind of curios come from all around the world. To come into possession of this or that phenomenon they bid like mad, so exotic weird stuff reaches astronomic prices at Borsody's. You can't sell any higher.'

'Go on, Pratt,' Witcher took off his shirt. 'I'm listening.'

'The auctions at Borsody's are held every quarter. The nearest will be held on the fifteenth of July. The thief will surely be there with your swords. With a bit of luck you will be able to get them back before auction.'

'That's all?'

'That's quite a lot.'

'Who is the thief? Or the middleman?'

'I don't know who the thief is,' Pratt said. 'And I will not reveal the middleman. This is business, there are laws, rules, and not the bit less important than customs. I would lose my face. I've revealed enough to you, considering what I demand of you. Mikita, Lead him away to the arena. And you, Dandelion, come with me, we will look too. What are you waiting for, witcher?'

'Am I to go without a weapon? Not only naked from waist up, but also unarmed?'

'I promised my guests,' said Pyral slowly, like he was talking to a child, 'something that they had not seen before. Witchers with weapons have been seen.'

'Brilliant.'

He found himself in the arena, on the sand, in a circle that was defined by logs dug into the ground, washed by the twitching light of lampoons, hanging from iron bars. He heard shouts,

claps and whistles. He saw above the arena, faces, open mouths, excited eyes.

In front of him, on the opposite side of the arena something moved. And jumped.

Geralt had barely succeeded in forming his arms into the Heliotrope Sign. The spell deflected and knocked back the attacking beast. The crowd shouted in unison.

It was a two-legged lizard resembled a wyvern, but smaller, the size of a large dog. It had however a much larger head than wyvern's. Many more teeth in its muzzle. And a much longer tail, with the end as thin as a whip. With this tail the lizard energetically waved, swiped the sand, and cut at the logs. Leaning its head the monster attacked again.

Geralt was ready, he hit it with the Aard Sign and threw it back. But the lizard succeeded in hitting him with the end of its tail. The spectators shouted again. The witcher felt a lump as thick as a sausage growing and swelling on his naked shoulder. He knew now why he was made to take off his clothes. He also recognized the enemy. It was vigilosaur. A specially bred, magically mutated lizard used to guard and protect. Things were not good. The vigilosaur treated the arena as a place that he was supposed to protect. Geralt was the intruder that must be stopped. And eliminated if necessary.

The vigilosaur circled the arena, scraping the logs, hissing angrily. And attacked, quickly, not giving him any time to use a Sign. The witcher dexterously jumped out of the reach of the toothed muzzle, but failed to evade the tail. He felt another lump swelling next to the previous one.

Using the Sign of Heliotrope he blocked the attacking lizard. The lizard was lashing its tail with a whiz. Geralt heard a change in the whiz, hearing it a second ahead of tail hitting his back. Pain almost blinded him and blood flowed from his back. The spectators went mad.

His Signs were growing weaker. The vigilosaur was circling so fast that the witcher was barely able to keep up with it. He evaded two blows of the tail, but third hit him again. Again in shoulder blade, again with the sharp edge. Blood was flowing in rivulets.

The audience was rumbling, the spectators were shouting at top of their lungs and jumping. One of them, to see better, leaned quite a bit through railing, supporting himself on a bar with a lampoon. The bar broke, and with the lampoon it fell down into the arena. The bar dug into the sand, while the lampoon hit the vigilosaur in the head and caught ablaze. The lizard threw it off, spilling cascades of sparks, hissed, and rubbed its head on the logs. Geralt instantly saw an opening. He took the bar out of sand, with a short run-up, jumped and impetuously thrust the bar into the lizard's skull. The bar went through. The vigilosaur thrashed about, incoherently lashing with his front paws, trying to get rid of the iron poking into its brain. In uncoordinated jumps it hit the logs and bit into the wood. For some time it convulsed, clawed the sand and thrashed it with its tail. Then it finally went limped.

The walls shook with applause.

He left the arena using a dropped ladder. The enthusiastic crowd surrounded him from all sides. Someone patted him on his swollen shoulder, he stopped himself with great effort from hitting him. A young woman kissed him on cheek. Another still younger wiped the blood off of his back with a batiste handkerchief, which she instantly folded presenting it to her companions triumphantly. Another, much older took a necklace from her wrinkled neck, trying to give it to him. His expression made her retreat into the crowd.

It stunk of musk, through the crowd like a ship through the gulf-weed broke the ogre-dwarf, Mikita. He shielded the witcher and led him out.

They called a medic to dress Geralt wounds and stitched them. Dandelion was very pale. Pyral Pratt was calm. Like nothing had happened. But the witcher's face yet again must have told a lot, as he hurried with an explanation.

'By the way,' he said, 'that bar, previously filed and sharpened, fell into arena on my order.'

'Thank you that it was given so quickly.'

'The guest were in seventh heaven. Even the mayor Copenrath was satisfied, he was even glowing, and that motherfucker is hard to please. He doesn't like anything, he is grim like a brothel on a Monday morning. A seat on the council, it seems is heh heh mine. And maybe even a higher one, if... Would you put on a show next week, Geralt? With a similar routine?'

'Only if,' the witcher moved, hurting his shoulder, 'instead of a vigilosaur it's you, Pratt in the arena.'

'A joker, heh heh. Did you hear Dandelion, what a joker he is?'

'I heard,' confirmed the poet, looking at Geralt's back and clenching his teeth. 'But it was no joke. It was completely serious. I too, quite seriously announce, that the wedding of your grand-daughter will not be honored by my performance. After what you did to Geralt you could forget about it. Just like any other occasion, including christening and funerals. Including your own.'

Pyral Pratt looked at him and in his saurian eyes something flashed.

'You don't show respect, singer.' He said through clenched teeth. 'You once again show me no respect. You are asking for a lesson in this topic...'

Geralt approached, stood in front of him. Mikita panted, lifted his fist, reeking of musk. Pyral Pratt gestured him to be calm.

‘You’ll lose face, Pratt.’ said the witcher slowly. ‘We struck a deal, classically, according to laws, rules, and not a bit less important customs. Your guests are satisfied, you got your prestige and perspectives for a seat on the city council. I got needed information. Both sides are satisfied, so we should part company without anger and grudge. Instead you threaten me. You lose face. Let’s go, Dandelion.’

Pyral Pratt paled a bit. And turned his back on them.

‘I wanted,’ he said, ‘to invite you for dinner. But it seems that you are in a hurry. Farewell then. And be glad that I let you leave Ravelin with impunity. I used to punish lack of respect. But I will not stop you.’

‘And with good reason.’

Pratt turned.

‘What?’

Geralt looked him in the eyes.

‘You are not, although you think differently, very wise. But to try stopping us would be stupid.’

They barely went past karst spring and got to the first of the roadside poplars when Geralt stopped his horse and listened.

‘There is someone coming after us.’

‘Damn it!’ Dandelion chattered with his teeth. ‘Who? Pratt’s bandits?’

‘It’s not important. Go, go with full speed to Kerack. Get to your cousin. In the morning go to the bank with the cheque. We will meet later at the "Under Crab and Garfish".’

‘And you?’

'Don't worry about me.'

'Geralt...'

'Stop talking, hurry your horse. Go!'

Dandelion listened, leaned in his saddle and forced the horse into a gallop. Geralt turned back and waited calmly.

From darkness emerged riders. Six riders.

The witcher, Geralt?'

'That's me.'

'You will come with us,' spoke the one nearest in a hoarse voice. 'No tricks, OK?'

'Leave my reins, or I will hurt you.'

'No foolishness.' The rider took back his hand. 'And no violence. We stand for the law and for order. We are not bandits. We are on prince's orders.'

'What prince?'

'You will know soon enough. Come with us.'

They went. There was a prince, remembered Geralt, in Ravelin, incognito, as Pratt said. Things did not look good. Contacts with princes were rarely pleasant. And they almost never ended well.

They didn't go far. Just to an inn at the crossroads smelling of smoke and with lights flashing in the windows. They went into the common room, which was almost empty, not counting a few merchants at a late dinner. The entrance to an alcove was guarded by two armed guards wearing blue capes, similar to Geralt's escort. They went in.

'Your Grace...'

‘Get out. And you, witcher, sit down.’

A man sitting behind the table wore a cape similar to his soldiers but richer in finish. He covered his face with a hood. He didn't have to. The oil lamp on the table lit up only Geralt, hiding the mysterious prince in shadow.

‘I saw you in the arena at Pratt's,’ he said. ‘It was indeed an impressive show. That jump and blow from overhead, strengthened by the full weight of your body.... The iron, although a blunt bar went through that dragon's skull like through butter. I think that it would be, let's say like a spear passing through chain mail, maybe even plate... What do you think?’

‘The night is late. It's difficult to think when sleep overcomes you.’

Man in the shadow snorted.

‘Let's not waste time then. And get to the point. I need you. You, a witcher. For a witcher's job. And things are so strange, that you also need me. Maybe even more. I'm prince Xander of Kerack. I wish strongly to be Xander the First, king of Kerack. At the moment to my regret and the state's harm, Kerack's king is my father, Belohun. An old man, still in his full health, and he could rule, touch wood, another twenty years. I don't have neither the time nor the patience to wait so long. Well, even if I waited so long, my succession is not so sure. The old man could indicate another heir at any time, he has a lot of offspring. And he plans to spawn another, for at Lammas he plans a royal wedding, with pomp and splendor, which this country can't afford. He's like a miser that goes to relieve himself in a park to preserve the enamel on his chamber pot, then spends a whole mountain of gold on a wedding. Bringing ruin to the treasury. I would be a better king. Problem is - I want to be king now. As soon as possible. And for this I need you.’

'Among the services I render there is no regicide. Or staging palace coups. If this is what you had in mind.'

'I want to be a king. To make it happen my father must cease to be the king. And my brothers must be eliminated from succession.'

'Regicide and fratricide. No, your grace. I must refuse. With regret.'

'Not true,' snarled the prince from the darkness. 'You don't regret. Not yet. But you will, I promise.'

'Your grace will deign to keep in mind that threatening me with death is pointless.'

'Who says anything about death? I'm a prince, not a murderer. I tell you about your choice. Either my grace, or disfavor. You will do what I demand and you will enjoy my grace. And you will need it, believe me. Now that you are awaiting trial for embezzlement of funds. You will spend the next few years by the oar on a galley. You seem to think that this is all over? That the case is discontinued, that the witch Neyd who because of her caprice lets you fuck her will drop the accusation and that will be all? You are mistaken. Albert Smulka, the administrator from Ansegis, has made a confession. And it incriminates you'.

'That confession is false.'

'You will have hard time proving it.'

'You have to prove guilt. Not innocence.'

'Good Joke. Very funny. But I wouldn't laugh if I was in your shoes. Look here. These,' he dropped a file of papers, 'are documents. Certified testimonies, relations of witnesses. The locality of Cizmar, hired a witcher, and he killed a leucrota. On the invoice is seventy crowns, in reality he was paid fifty five, the excess shared fifty-fifty with the local clerk. In Sotonin village, a giant arachnomorph. Killed according to the invoice

for ninety crowns, actually according to testimony of the prefect - for sixty five. In Tiberghien a harpy was killed, the invoice for a hundred crowns, paid seventy. And your earlier stunts and scams: A vampire from a castle in Petrelsteyn that did not even exist, and it cost the duke a round thousand orens. A werewolf in Guaamez, for hundred crowns, supposedly disenchanting, and magically un-werewolfe, a very suspicious case, because it's quite a cheap disenchantment. An echinops, or rather something you called an echinops and brought to the prefect in Martindelcampo. Ghouls from the cemetery of Zraggen, that cost commune eighty crowns, although no-one ever saw their dead bodies, because there were eaten by other ghouls, heh heh.'

'The prince deigns to err,' said Geralt calmly. 'These are not evidence. They are fabricated slander, fabricated incompetently at that. I was never hired at Tiberghien. I've never even heard about Sotonin. All invoices from these places are obviously fake. This will not be hard to prove. And ghouls killed by me at Zraggen were heh-heh, eaten by other ghouls heh-heh, because such are the customs heh-heh. And the dead buried at the cemetery since then have been undisturbed and turn slowly into dust, as the remnants of ghouls moved from there. And I don't even want to comment on the rest of this nonsense in these papers.'

'Based on these papers,' the prince put his hand on top of the documents, 'you will be accused. The process will take a long time. Will they prove to be true? Who knows? What will be court's sentence? And who cares? It's meaningless. What's important is the stink that will spread. And it will last to end of your days.'

'Some people,' he continued, 'despise you, but tolerated you because they must, as a lesser evil, as a killer of the monsters threatening them. Some of them hate you because of you being mutant. They fell revulsion for this abomination as for an inhuman creature. Other fear you, and hated you for this fear.'

All this will be forgotten. The fame of an efficient killer and a reputation of an evil warlock will fly off like a feather on the wind, the revulsion and fear will be forgotten. They will remember you only as being a greedy thief and a cheat. The one that yesterday feared you and your spells, who turned away his eyes, the one that spat when he saw you or took out amulets, will laugh tomorrow, will elbow his companion. Look, the witcher Geralt, the puny cheater and swindler is coming! If you will not take up the task that I will commission to you then I will destroy you. I will destroy your reputation. Unless you serve me. So decide. Yes or no?’

‘No.’

‘Don't have any delusions, about your connections helping you in any way. Ferrant de Lettenhove or your red witch lover. The Instigator will not risk his career, and the witch will be forbidden by her Chapter to meddle in a criminal affair. No one will help you when the machine of justice will start to grind you. I ordered you to decide. Yes or no?’

‘No. A final no, your grace. The one hidden in the side chamber can come out now.’

The prince, to Geralt's astonishment, laughed. And hit the table with his hand. The door screeched, and from the adjoining room emerged a person. Geralt recognized him even in the dark.

‘You win the bet, Ferrant,’ said the prince. ‘Pick up the price from my secretary tomorrow.’

‘Thank you, your grace,’ Ferrant de Lettenhove the royal instigator said with a slight bow, ‘but I've treated this bet as purely symbolic. To show how sure I was that I was right. It was never about the money...’

‘The money, that you won,’ interrupted the prince, ‘is for me only a symbol too, the same as a symbol of the Novigrad mint

on the coins, and the profile of recent hierarch. Know, you both, that I won too. I recovered something that I considered lost irretrievably. Faith in humankind. Geralt of Rivia, Ferrant was absolutely sure of your reaction. I on the other hand, I confess, thought that he was being naive. I was convince that you would falter.'

'Everyone wins something,' said Geralt sourly. 'What about me?'

'You too,' the prince became serious. 'Tell him Ferrant. Explain what has happened here.'

'His grace, present here is Prince Egmund,' explained the instigator, 'he deigned to impersonate for a while his brother Xander. And also, symbolically, his younger brothers, who have designs on the throne. The prince suspected that Xander, or some other brother would use a witcher to get to the throne. We decided to... stage something like that. And now we know, that if it actually happened... If someone would actually voice such a mean proposition, that you will not follow it. You would not fall for fear of a prince's graces. You would not fear threats nor blackmail.'

'I understand,' the witcher nodded. 'And I pay homage to your talent. The prince deigned to fall into the role exquisitely. In what he told about me, in the opinion held about me I couldn't find any acting. I felt pure sincerity.'

'The masquerade had its purpose.' Egmund interrupted the awkward silence. 'It achieved it, and I will not explain myself. And you will have your advantage too. Financial. I namely really plan to hire you. And to pay for your service generously. Tell him Ferrant.'

'Prince Egmund,' the instigator said, 'fears an assassination attempt against his father, king Belohun, that may occur during the royal wedding planned on Lammas. The prince would be calmer if the security of king was cared for by... someone like

you, witcher. Yes, yes, don't interrupt, we know that witchers are not bodyguards, that they exist to protect people from monsters, magical, supernatural and unnatural...'

'That's according to the book,' interrupted the prince. 'In real life it is different. Witchers are getting hired to protect caravans, wandering through wastelands abundant in monsters. It happened that bandits attacked such caravan, and the witchers had nothing against cutting them to bits and pieces. I think that the royal wedding could attract... basilisks. Would you be up to protecting against basilisks?'

'It depends.'

'On what?'

'On that, if this is further staging. And I'm not an object of provocation. From any other brothers for example. A talent for acting I presume runs in the family?'

Ferrant snorted. Egmond hit the table with his fist.

'Don't overstep yourself,' he snarled. 'And don't forget yourself. I asked if you will protect the wedding. Answer!'

'I could,' nodded Geralt, 'take up protecting the king from hypothetical basilisks. Unfortunately, in Kerack my swords were stolen. The royal services were not able to track them, and frankly they seem not able to do too much in this direction. I will not be able to protect anyone without swords. So I must refuse due to objective reasons.'

'If this is only a question of swords, then there will be no problem. We will get them back. Isn't it so, Master Instigator?'

'Absolutely.'

'You see. The royal instigator absolutely affirms. So how will it be?'

‘Let me get back my swords first. Then absolutely.’

‘You are a stubborn man. But alright. I’ll point out that you will be paid for your services and I assure that you will not find me a miser. As to other advantages you will get some of them now, in advance, as proof of my good will. You can think of your trial before the court as discontinued. The formalities must be met, and bureaucracy knows no hurry, but you can think of yourself as a person free from any charges, and with full freedom of movement.’

‘I’m grateful beyond measure. What about testimonies and invoices? Leucrota in Cizmar, werewolf in Guaamez? What with these documents? Those that your grace deigned to use as... a theatrical prop?’

‘The documents,’ Egmond looked him in the eyes, ‘will temporarily stay with me. In a safe place. Absolutely.’

When he arrived back Belohun's bell sounded midnight.

Coral, to tell the truth kept calm when she saw his back. She could keep her self-control. Even her voice did not change. Almost did not change.

‘Who did this to you?’

‘A vigilosaur. A kind of lizard...’

‘A Lizard stitched you? You let the lizard stitch you?’

‘The stitches were put by a medic, and the lizard...’

‘To hell with the lizard! Mozaïk! Scalpel, scissors, pincers! Needle and catgut! Pulchellum elixir! Aloe decoction! *Unguentum ortolani!* Gauze and sterile dressing! And prepare a synapism from honey and white mustard! Move, girl!’

Mozaik finished in admirable hurry. Lytta began the operation. The witcher sat and suffered in silence.

‘Medics not knowing magic,’ said the sorceress through clenched teeth, ‘should be forbidden to practice. Lecture at university - yes. Sew the body after an autopsy - yes. But they should not have access to live patients. But I will not live to see it I fear, everything goes in opposite directions.’

‘Not only magic heals,’ Geralt risked an opinion. ‘And someone has too. Specialized wizards-healers are few, and regular wizards show no will to heal. They don't have the time, or they think that it's not worth it.’

‘And they rightly think so. The results of overcrowding could be fatal. What is it? With what are you playing?’

‘The vigilosaur was marked by this. It had it permanently attached to its skin.’

‘You took it of it as a trophy, due the winner?’

‘I took it to show it to you.’

‘A curious coincidence,’ she said, putting winter cress on his back. ‘Taking into account that you were heading in this direction.’

‘Heading? Oh, yes, true I forgot. Your confraters and their plans regarding me. Does it mean that the plans have become more defined?’

‘Exactly. I received a message. You are asked to come to castle Rissberg.’

‘I'm asked, touching. To the castle Rissberg. Seat of the famous Ortolan. A request I can't refuse I guess.’

'I would not advise it. They request that you come quickly. Taking your wounds into account when will you be ready to go?'

'Having my wounds in mind, you tell me. Medic.'

'I'll tell you. Later... Now... You will be absent for quite a long time, I'll miss you... How do you feel now? Will you be able... That's all Mozaïk. Go to your room, and don't disturb us. What was this smile of yours to mean? Am I to freeze it on your lips forever?'

Interlude

Dandelion, *Half a century of Poetry*

(fragment of draft that never made it to official issue)

Truly, the witcher owed me much. And every day it was more.

The visit to Pyral Pratt in Ravelin ended, as you know, stormy and bloody, but it also brought some profits. Geralt found a trace of the thief who stole his swords. It was my merit, so to say, because it was me that, due to my cunning, directed Geralt to Ravelin. And the next day, it was me, and no other that armed him with new a weapon. I couldn't look at him walking around so defenseless. You say that a witcher is never defenseless? That he is a mutant exercised in every form of fighting, with twice the strength of a normal man and ten times his speed? One that puts down three armed ruffians with a cooper's stave? And in addition has magic, his Signs that are quite a weapon? True. But a sword is a sword. He told me over and over that without sword he feels naked. So I gave him a sword.

Pratt, as you already know, rewarded us both financially, not overly generously, but cash is cash. The next day, in the morning, as witcher told me, I hurried with the cheque to Giancardi's. I collected on the cheque. I stood there, and look around. And I could see that someone as watching me carefully. A Woman, not old, but not a young one either, in tasteful and elegant clothes. I'm not surprised by the delighted sight from women, many women find my manly and predatory beauty irresistible.

This woman approached me suddenly, presenting herself as Etna Asiderr, and says that she knows me. What a sensation! Everyone knows me, my fame precedes me, wherever I go.

'I was told,' she says, 'about an unfortunate adventure that happened to your friend, master poet, the witcher, Geralt of Rivia. I know that he lost his swords, and that he urgently

needs a new one. I know how hard it is to come upon good swords. So it happens that I have such a sword. It belonged to my late husband, gods have mercy upon his soul. I just went to the bank to sell it, because what use does a widow have for a sword? The bank priced the sword and wants to take it into consignment. But I need cash urgently, because if I don't pay my husband's debt his creditors will devour me. Then...'

Having said that she took off a cover of damask, and unwrapped the sword. A wonder I tell you. Light as a feather. The scabbard tasteful and elegant, with a handle of lizard skin, the crossguard gold-plated, and in the pommel a jasper the size of a pigeon's egg. I take it out of the scabbard and I can't believe my eyes. On the blade just above the crossguard the craftsman's sign in shape of a sun. And just above that an inscription "Don't draw without a reason, don't sheath without honor". That means the blade was forged in Nilfgaard, in Viroled, a city known for its sword-maker's forges. I touched the edge with tip of my finger - sharp as a razor, I tell you.

Because I'm nobody's fool, I did not show a thing, I look indifferently at clerks hurrying, and some old lady polishes doorknobs.

'Giancardi's bank,' says the widow, 'put the price at two hundred crowns. In consignment. But if in cash I will let it go for one hundred and fifty.'

'Whoa,' I said back, 'that's quite a lot. One hundred and fifty is a bag of money. For that much you could buy a house. A little one. And in the suburbs.'

'Oh, Master Dandelion,' she wrings her hands. 'You mock me. You're a cruel man, sir. But I'm in a trap, so let it be - a hundred.'

And in such a way, my dear friends, I resolved the witcher's problem.

I hurried to the "Under Crab and Garfish", Geralt was already sitting there, over scrambled eggs with bacon, heh, surely at a redheaded witch's for breakfast there was cheese and leek again. I approach and - BOOM! - sword on the table. He went mute. He drops his spoon, takes the sword out of the scabbard and looks at it. Face like a stone mask. But I've gotten used to his mutation, I know that emotions have no hold over him. He could be inconceivably happy and delighted and he would not show it.

'How much you paid for it?'

I wanted to say that it wasn't his business, but just in time I remembered that it was his money that I paid with. So I told him. He shook my hand, didn't say a word, and did not change his expression. He was like that. Simple but sincere.

And tells me that he must leave. Alone.

'I would like you,' he preceded my protest, 'to stay in Kerack. And keep your eyes and ears open.'

He told what happened to him the previous day, about his nightly talk with prince Egmund. And during this time was playing with his viroledan sword, like a child plays with new toy.

'I don't plan,' he summed up, 'to serve the prince. Or take part in the royal wedding in August as a bodyguard. Egmund and your cousin are sure that they will soon catch the thief of my swords. I don't share their optimism. And this is frankly a good thing. Having my swords, Egmund would have leverage. I prefer to catch the thief myself, In Novigrad, in July before the auction at Borsody's. I will get my swords back and will never return to Kerack. And you Dandelion keep your mouth shut. About what Pratt said to us no one should know. No one. Not even your cousin the instigator.'

I swore that I would be silent as a grave, he was looking at me strangely. As if he did not believe me.

‘And because it may play out in many ways,’ he continued, ‘I have to have a backup plan. I'd like then to know as much about Egmond and his brothers and sisters, all potential heirs to the throne, about the king himself, and the whole royal family. I'd like to know what they plan to do. Who is in agreement with who, what factions are acting here, and so one? Is that clear?’

‘Lytta Neyd,’ I responded, ‘as a source of such information is out of question, I take it? I believe you are right. The red headed beauty has a perfect reckoning of problems in question, but she's too entangled with the local monarchy to try double loyalty, that's the first point. Second - don't tell her you plan on leaving and never coming back. Because her reaction could be violent. Sorceresses as you already know don't like disappearing acts.’

‘As to the rest,’ I promised, ‘you can count on me. I will have eyes and ears at the ready, and will aim them where needed. And I've already gotten to know about the local royal family, and I've listened to enough gossip. Gracefully ruling here is Belohun who has worked up a lot of offspring. He changed wives often and easily, when he looks up a new one the previous one conveniently left this pile of dirt, weird coincidence - an illness that left the medics completely helpless. So as of now this way Belohun has four legal sons, every one of them born by a different mother. A lot of daughters I do not count, as they can't claim the throne. I do not count bastards either. It's worth mentioning that all the more meaningful positions are taken up by the daughters' husbands, cousin Ferrant is the exception. And sons born on wrong side of sheet are in charge of industry and trade.’

The witcher, I saw, was listening carefully.

‘The four rightful sons,’ I told him further, ‘are in order of age the first-born, whose name I do not know, in court it's forbidden to mention him, after argument with his father he went away,

there's no trace of him and no one saw him again. Second, Elmer is a mentally ill drunkard kept under lock. This is meant to be a state secret, but everyone in Kerack knows it. The real pretendents are Egmond and Xander. They hate each other, and Belohun cunningly uses it, keeping both in constant uncertainty, as it comes to succession he is able even to favor one of his bastards and lure him with promise of throne. Now it's whispered in the corners that that he promised throne to a son born of his new wife that he is going to wed on Lammas.'

'I and cousin Ferrant believe,' I said further, 'we think that those are vain promises to force the young lady to bed sports. That Egmond and Xander are the only true claimants. And if a coup d'etat will be needed to get to the throne - it'll be one of them that will do it. I came to know both of them through my cousin. Both are ... at least it was my impression... slippery as a shit in mayonnaise, if you know what I mean.'

Geralt confirmed that he knew. That he himself had similar a feeling while talking with Egmond, he just could not find proper words to describe it. And then he was lost in thought.

'I'll be back soon,' he said finally. 'And you can act and watch things.'

'Before we take leave of each other,' I responded, 'be a friend and tell me something about the pupil of your magician. The slicked one. She's a true rose bud, a little work and she will bloom wonderfully. I thought that I will be the one sacrificing himself...'

His face changed. And he abruptly hit the table with his fist, making even the tankards jump.

'Hands off Mozaïk, fiddler,' he told me, without a bit of respect. 'Get her out of your mind. Don't you know that even the most innocent flirt is forbidden to sorceress' pupils? For even the slightest such offense Coral will think her unworthy of tutoring and will send her back to school, and this is an awful faux pas

and a fall from grace, I heard about suicides due to this. And there is no joking with Coral. She has no humor.'

I wanted to advise him to tickle her ass with a feather - this amuses even the most grim ones. But I kept silent, because I know him. He hates speaking of women in such a way. Even those for single night. I vowed for my honor that I would not make attempts on slied adept's innocence, and that I wouldn't even flirt with her.

'If you have such a pressure,' he said brightening up, and leaving, 'then know that I've come to know in the local court, a certain lawyer. She seemed eager. Court her.'

Well. What, was I supposed to fuck with justice?

On the other hand...

Interlude

Highly Respected Lady
Lytta Neyd
Kerack, Upper City
Villa "Cyclamen"
Rissberg Castle, 1st July 1245

Dear Coral,

I hope that my letter will find you in good health, and good mood. And that everything goes as you planned.

I hurry to inform you that the witcher called Geralt of Rivia deigned to finally visit our castle. Immediately after arrival, in time shorter than an hour, he managed to alienate absolutely everyone including honorable Ortolan, a person that can be thought of as embodiment of kindness and benevolent to everyone. Opinions about this individual are not, it turns out, in any degree overstatements, and antipathy and hostility that he meets everywhere are well deserved. Where there is need to respect him I will however do it first, sine ira et studio. This individual is a professional in every inch, and in his profession absolutely dependable. He will do what he takes on, or will die trying, there can be no doubt about it.

The goal of our enterprise will be achieved, mainly thanks to you, dear Coral. We thank you for your efforts, we will be forever grateful for that. Particularly my gratefulness is yours. I understand how much you must have suffered due to proximity of this individual, being conglomerate of shortcomings that you hate. Cynicism arising from deep complexes, a bristled nature and introvert, insincere character, a primitive mind, a mediocre intelligence, and a monstrous arrogance. I'm not talking about tatty hands, and dirty fingernails so you would be not irritated dear Coral, I know how you hate it. But how it was said your suffering, troubles and unrest came to an end. There is nothing more preventing you from interrupting any relations with said individual. Thus definitively ending and repelling the slander

spread by ill-disposed tongues, trying to make a cheap romance from your alleged and obviously fake kindness toward the witcher. But enough about it, it's a matter unworthy of deliberation.

I would be a most happy man if you wanted to visit me here at Rissberg. I don't need to add that a single gesture, a single smile is enough for me to hurry to you.

Yours in deep respect

Pinety

PS the ill-disposed tongues that I referenced, suppose that your kindness for witcher was a way to spite Yennefer, supposedly still interested in witcher. It's a pathetic lack of knowledge and naivety. It's generally known that Yennefer is in a relationship with a certain young businessman working in the jewelry industry, and cares about the witcher and his passing romances as much as about last year's snow.

Interlude

Highly Respected Sir
Alernon Guincamp
Rissber Castle

Sent from Kerack, 5th July 1245.

Dear Pinety,

I thank for your letter, you had not written for quite a while, well, there probably was nothing to write about, and there was no sense in writing.

Your care for my health and mood and for my plans going as I want is touching. With satisfaction I announce that everything goes as planned for me, and everyone is, as it's known, a helmsman of his own ship. Know that I lead my ship with a firm hand through squalls and reefs, raising my head every time the storm rumbles around me.

As for health, then it is indeed good for me. Physically as usual, psychic as well, since while I have what I lacked after so long. How much I lacked I got to know when I no longer lacked it.

I'm happy then, that your enterprise calling for the witcher's participation is going to succeed, I'm filled with pride thinking of my contribution to the enterprise. You are getting sad in vain, though, dear Pinety thinking that it needed sacrifice, suffering, trouble and unrest. It was not so bad. Geralt is indeed a conglomerate of shortcomings. I discovered in him - sine ira et studio - some merits. And not just little ones. Many would be worried, had they known about them. And many would envy.

To gossip, intrigues, whispering and tales that you, Pinety write about, we are all used to, and we all know how to treat it - and the advice is quite simple - you just ignore it. You remember surely gossip about you and Sabrina Glevissig, in times, when

something was allegedly happening between us. I ignored it. I advise you do the same.

Bene vale,

Coral

PS I'm very busy. Our meeting doesn't seem to be possible in foreseeable future.

They wander different countries, and their liking and humor makes them avoid any dependence. It means that they do not recognize any powers, neither human nor godly, that they do not respect any rights nor rules, they think themselves free of any duty to anyone and anything and unpunished. Being natural swindlers they make a living with fortune telling with which they beguile folks, they serve as spies, they deal in false amulets, fraudulent medicines, they take to pimping, that is they bring indecent girls for wicked fun of those that pay. When they are struck with poverty they are not ashamed to beg, or simply steal, but they prefer swindles and cheating. They deceive the naive, saying that they kill monsters for their safety, which is lie, it's long proved that they kill for their own pleasure, as murder is their prime diversion. Preparing for their actions they make some witchcraft, but this is only to deceive those watching. Reverent priests instantly discovered this lie to the confusion of those devil's servants called witchers.

Anonymous, Monstrum, or Description of the Witcher

Chapter Nine

Rissberg was not menacing. It was not even impressive. Just a castle, like many others, gracefully fitted onto a mountain slope, embracing the crevice, contrasting its bright walls with the eternal green of a spruce forest, towering with roof tiles of two towers, one higher the other lower, over the tree tops. The wall encircling the castle, as it turned up when approached, wasn't very high and had no battlements, the towers located in the corners and over the gate were more of a decoration than defenses.

The road meandering around the hill showed traces of heavy usage. And it was in use, and quite intense at that. The witcher had to overtake the carts, carriages, single riders and people on foot. Quite a number of wanderers went the opposite way, away from the castle. Geralt suspected the goal of such a pilgrimage. That he was right it turned out as soon as he left forest.

The flat hilltop under the curtain of wall was occupied by a town made of wood, reed and straw - a whole complex of smaller and bigger buildings and roofs, encircled with a fence and corrals for horses and cattle. The buzz of voices could be heard from there, and the traffic was quite lively, just like it was at a fair or festival. In fact it was a fair, a bazaar, a large market, just no fowl, fish nor vegetables were traded here. The products offered by Rissberg castle was magic - amulets, talismans, elixirs, opiates, philters, decoctions, extracts, distillations, concoctions, incense, perfume, syrups, powders and unguents, and additionally various enchanted items, tools, housewares, decorations and even toys for children. These products attracted masses of customers here. There was demand - so there was supply - and business was running, as could be seen, very well.

The road forked. The witcher headed into the one that went towards the castle gate, which had been much less used than the one directing customers to the market square. He rode through a cobbled road in front of the gate, the whole time among rows of menhirs placed here on purpose, of which most were much higher than he was on horseback. He was shortly met by a gate, more palace than castle in type, with decorated pillars and a fronton. His witcher's medallion shook violently. Roach neighed, beating a hoof on the cobbles and froze.

'Identity and the goal of your visit.'

He lifted his head. The raspy and booming with an echo, but undoubtedly female voice, as it seemed, originated from the wide open mouth belonging to a harpy represented on a tympanum. His medallion was shaking, the mare was snorting. Geralt felt a strange pressure in his temples.

'Identity and the goal of your visit,' came again from a hole in the relief. Slightly louder than the previous time.

'Geralt of Rivia, witcher. I'm expected.'

The harpy's head emitted a sound akin to a trumpet. The magic blocking the portal vanished, the pressure in his temples stopped immediately, and his mare started moving without hurrying. Her hooves beating on the cobbles.

He went from the portal to a cul-de-sac surrounded by galleries. He was instantly approached by two servants, boys in utilitarian tan clothes. One took care of his horse, the other served as a guide.

'This way, sir.'

'Is it always like that? Such movement? There in foulburg?'

'No, sir,' servant looked at him, slightly frightened. 'Only on Wednesdays. Wednesday is a market day.'

On an arcade at the top of the next portal was a cartouche, surely magical too. This one presented a muzzle of an amphisbena. The portal was closed by a decorative and solid looking grate, which however when pushed by the servant moved lightly and smoothly.

The second bailey was much bigger. And this place enabled access to the castle properly. The view from afar was misleading.

Rissberg was much larger than it seemed. It cut deep into the mountain, went into it with a whole complex of buildings, edifices rough and ugly that were not usually a part of castle architecture. They looked like factories, and probably where factories. There were chimneys and ventilation pipes sticking out of them. The smell of something burning, sulphur and ammonia could be felt. A slight vibration of the ground could be felt too - evidence of some subterranean machines working.

The servant took Geralt's attention away from the factory complex with a grunt. They were supposed to go the other way - to the castle tower, the lower one, towering above the more classical palace buildings. The interior proved to be also that of a classical palace. It smelled of dust, wood, wax and old things. It was bright - under the ceiling, sleepy fish in an aquarium floated surrounded with an aureole of light magical balls, the standard lighting of wizard houses.

'Greetings, witcher.'

The greeting ones proved to be two wizards. He knew both of them, although not in person. Harlan Tzara was shown to him by Yennefer, he remembered him, as he was probably the only wizard to shave his head bald. Algernon Guincamp, also known as Pinety he remembered from Oxenfurt, from the academy.

'We welcome you in Rissberg,' greeted Pinety. 'We are glad that you wanted to visit us.'

‘You mock me? I'm not here of my own free will. To force me to come here Lytta Neyd put me in prison...’

‘But then she got you out of it,’ interrupted Tzara. ‘And generously rewarded you. Recompensed the discomforts with great, hmm, adoration. It's said that for at least a week you were with her in good... relations.’

Geralt fought away a great need to strike him in the face. Pinety had to see it.

‘Stop, Harlan,’ Pinety lifted his hand. ‘Stop. Let's stop the arguments. Let's give up these fights using sarcasm and allusions. We know that Geralt is prejudiced against us, it can be heard in his every word. We know why that is the way it is, we know how depressed he was by the scandal with Yennefer. And our circle reaction on this scandal. We can't change it. But Geralt is a professional, he will be able to rise above it.’

‘He will,’ confirmed Geralt wryly. ‘The other question is will he want to. But let's get to the point. Why I'm here?’

‘You are needed here,’ Tzara said dryly. ‘Only you.’

‘Only me. Am I to feel honored? Or should I be afraid?’

‘You are famous, Geralt of Rivia,’ said Pinety. ‘Your deeds and feats are generally recognized as truly remarkable and spectacular. For our wonder, as you surely know yourself, you can't count, we are not quick to show admiration to someone like you. But we can respect professionalism and experience. Facts fend for themselves. You are, I dare say, outstanding... hmm...’

‘Yeah?’

‘An eliminator,’ Pinety found the word without effort, evidently having it prepared earlier. ‘Someone that eliminates monsters and beasts that endanger people.’

Geralt did not comment on that. He waited.

'It's also our goal, the goal of wizards to provide humanity with safety and well-being. We can therefore talk about the bond of our businesses. An occasional misunderstanding should not interfere with that. It was indicated by the master of this castle. Who heard about you. And wanted to get to know you in person. He wished it so.'

'Ortolan.'

'Archmaster Ortolan. And his closest collaborators. You will be presented to them. Later. Servant will point you to your quarters. Please refresh yourself after your journey. Rest. We will call upon you shortly.'

Geralt was thinking. He remembered everything that he ever heard about Archmaster Ortolan. Being as it was common knowledge a he a living legend.

Ortolan was a living legend, a person with a vast merit for the wizard arts.

His obsession was popularizing magic. In contrast to other mages he thought, that the benefits and advantages of supernatural powers should be used for the common good, and should serve the strengthening of general well-being, comfort and common happiness. Every man - dreamed Ortolan - should be guaranteed free access to magical medicines and elixirs. Enchanted amulets, talismans, and all artifacts should be commonly accessible and free of charge. Telepathy, telekinesis, teleportation and telecommunication should be a privilege of every citizen. To achieve this Ortolan incessantly invented something. That is - he made inventions. Some of them as legendary as he was.

Reality painfully verified the dreams of the old wizard. Not a single one of his inventions created to bring magic to masses and make it democratic went out of the prototype phase. Everything that Ortolan thought of, that was supposed to be simple turned out to be very complex in practice. What was to be mass produced proved to be extremely expensive. Ortolan however did not lose his spirit, his failures instead of discouraging him, excited him to new efforts. Leading to new failures.

It was suspected – Ortolan himself, of course, never had such thoughts - that the failures of the inventor were a result of simple sabotage. And it was not - or at least not only – the simple envy of the wizards brotherhood, about the reluctance to popularize art, that wizards would like to see in hands of the elite - that is themselves. It was more of an anxiety of the inventions being used in a military or murderous character. And it was not unfounded. Like every inventor, Ortolan had stages of fascination with explosives, incendiary materials, bombards, armored chariots, firearms, and poisonous gases. A condition of well-being, argued the old man, is a common peace between the nations, and peace is achieved by armaments. The surest way to detract from war is scaring it away with scary weapons, and the scarier the weapons the longer and more stable the peace. As Ortolan did not listen to any arguments, saboteurs were secretly placed into his inventive group, which hindered the dangerous inventions. Almost none of them saw the light of day. An exception was the famous, and the point of many anecdotes, ball thrower. It was a kind of telekinetic arbalest with a great flagon for lead balls. The ball thrower - as the name suggests - was supposed to throw balls into a target, and in quick succession. The prototype went, to his surprise, beyond the walls of Rissberg, it was even tested out in some battles. With poor effect however. The shooter using the invention when asked about the arm's usefulness reportedly said that the ball thrower was like his mother-in-law. Heavy, ugly, absolutely useless and there's nothing to do with it but drown it in river. The old wizard did not take it to heart however. The ball thrower

was a toy, he supposedly said, he had on his drawing board, other projects far more advanced, able to strike in mass. He, Ortolan, would give humanity the benefit of peace, even if it meant killing half of mankind.

The wall of the room, to which he was lead into was decorated with a large tapestry, a masterpiece of weaver's craft, an Arcadian *verdure*. It was fouled by a poorly removed stain looking a bit like a giant squid. Someone, appraised the witcher, probably quite recently, must have vomited on the weaver's masterpiece. Behind the great table occupying center of the room sat seven people.

'Master Ortolan,' Pinety bowed slightly, 'let me introduce. Geralt of Rivia. A witcher.'

Ortolan looks did not surprise Geralt. It was thought that he was the oldest living wizard. Maybe it was true, maybe it was not, but the fact was that Ortolan was the oldest looking wizard. It was strange considering the fact that it was Ortolan and no one else that had invented the *mandrake* decoction, an elixir that was used by wizards to prevent ageing. Ortolan himself, when he finally got a working formulation of magical liquid did not profit from it because he was quite already old. The elixir prevented aging but it did not rejuvenate. This was why Ortolan, although he had used elixir for a long time looked like an old man - particularly when compared to other mages - aged wizards, looking like middle-aged men, and sorceresses worn with life looking like girls. The overflowing with youth and charm sorceresses and slightly grizzled sorcerers, whose true birth dates were lost at the dawn of the ages were cherishing the secret of the elixir like the apple of their eye, and sometimes even denied its existence. They kept Ortolan in the belief that the elixir was commonly available, and thanks to it, humankind was practically immortal - and - as a result - absolutely happy.

'Geralt of Rivia,' repeated Ortolan, crumpling a lock of his beard. 'O, yes, yes, we've heard about you. A defender, as they say, a defender, bringing salvation from monsters to people. Considered a preservative and antidote for all monstrous evil.'

Geralt put a humble look on his face and bowed.

'Of course, of course,' continued the wizard pulling at his beard. 'We know, we know. Forced to defend people by all assertions you do not spare, boy, you don't spare. And truly worthy of esteem is your profession, a truly honorable craft. We welcome you in our castle, happy that fate has brought you here. Because, although you yourself may not know it, you are returning like a bird to its nest... I rightly say, like a bird. We like you, and we think that you like us, eh?'

Geralt was on the spot to address Ortolan. Wizards did not approve of honorifics, and they did not expect them from others. He did not know however the proper way to address the old man, a live legend at that. So instead of speaking he bowed again.

Pinety presented the sorcerers sitting behind the table one by one. Geralt knew some of them. Others from rumors.

Axel Esparza, more widely known as Axel Pitted, really had his forehead and cheeks covered with pockmarks. He did not remove them out of simple spite, gossip had it. Lightly grizzled Myles Trethevey and somewhat more grizzled Stucco Zangenis looked at the witcher without much interest. The interest shown by Biruta Icarti, a moderately beautiful blond sorceress was a bit higher. Tarvix Sandoval, broad of shoulders, by stature more knight than a mage was looking to the side, at the tapestry, like he was also admiring the stain, and investigating how it come to be and who was guilty.

A seat closest to Ortolan was occupied by the youngest, as it seemed among the gathered mages, Sorel Degerlund, with long hair and quite feminine looks.

‘We too,’ said Biruta Icarti, ‘greet the famous witcher, defender of the people. We are happy to greet him, as we too, here, in this castle, are under the auspices of the Archmaster Ortolan to make efforts to make people's lives lighter and safer by progress. For us too, the good of the people is our highest goal. The age of the Archmaster makes it impossible to make this audience overly long. I will ask then, as it's proper: do you have any wishes, Geralt of Rivia? Is there something we could do for you?’

‘My thanks to,’ Geralt bowed again, ‘Archmaster Ortolan. And to you, respectful ones. And because you dare me with a question... Yes, there is something that you could do for me. You could explain to me... this. This thing. I tore it from a vigilosaur that I killed. He put on the table an oval metal plate about the size of child's hand. With embossed signs.’

‘RISS PSREP Mk IV/002 025’ Axel Pitted read aloud. He passed the plate to Sandoval.

‘A mutation, created here, in Rissberg,’ Sandoval appraised wryly. ‘In the pseudoreptile section. A guardian lizard. Fourth model, second series, twenty fifth specimen. Outdated, we have been creating better for a long time. What else is there is to explain?’

‘He says that he killed the vigilosaur,’ Stucco Zangenis winced, ‘so this is not about an explanation, it is about resentments. We judge complaints only from legal buyers, and only with proof of purchase. Exclusively basing on proof of purchase we will service, and fix flaws...’

‘The guarantee for this model expired long ago,’ added Myles Trethevey. ‘And no guarantee includes faults that were caused by improper use, or use inconsistent with the user manual. If the product was used improperly Rissberg does not take responsibility. Any responsibility.’

‘And for this,’ Geralt took out of his pocket and put down a second plate, ‘do you take responsibility?’

The second plate was of a similar size and shape, but darkened and corroded. Into the embossment dirt was embedded. But the signs were still legible:

IDR UL Ex IX 0012 BETA

A long silence fell.

‘Idarran of Ulivo,’ –Pinety said finally, surprisingly quietly, and surprisingly unsure. ‘Alzur's apprentice. I did not think...’

‘From where did you get this, witcher?’ Axel Pitted leaned over table. ‘How did you come by this?’

‘You ask, as if you don't know,’ answered Geralt. ‘I tore it from the carapace of creature that I killed. And a creature that killed at least twenty people in the region. At least, because I think that there was many more. I think it had murdered for years.’

‘Idarran...’ murmured Tarvix Sandoval. ‘And before him Malaspina and Alzur...’

‘But that's not us,’ said Zangenis. ‘Not us, not Rissberg.’

‘The ninth experimental model,’ added Biruta Icarti in reverie. ‘A beta version, twelfth...’

‘The twelfth specimen,’ Geralt spoke up, not without malice. ‘And how many there were? How many were created? I will not get, of course, an answer to the question about responsibility, as it was not you, not Rissberg, you are clear, and you want me to believe in this. But tell me at least, because you surely know, how many like this one are there in forests and murder people. How many need to be found. And chopped up. I want to say: eliminated.’

‘What is it, what is it?’ Ortolan suddenly livened up. ‘What do you have there? Show me! Oh...’

Sorel Degerlund leaned over the old man and whispered into his ear for a long time. Myles Trethevey, showing him the plates, whispered from the other side. Ortolan was pulling his beard.

‘Killed?’ he shouted suddenly. ‘Witcher? You destroyed the genial work of Idarran? Killed? Destroyed thoughtlessly?’

The witcher could not stand it anymore. He snorted. Any respect for old age and gray hair vanished instantly. Then he snorted again. And laughed. Sincerely and irrepressibly.

The frozen faces of the mages behind the table instead of stopping him made him laugh even harder. *Damn it, he thought, I can't remember when the last time I laughed sincerely like this was. Probably Kaer Morhen, he remembered, yes, Kaer Morhen. When the rotten board in the privy broke under Vesemir.*

‘And he laughs, the snotnose,’ shouted Ortolan. ‘Whinnies like a donkey. Witless squirt! Just think that I took your side when others were denigrating you. And that he fell in love with little Yennefer. And that little Yennefer loves him back? The heart wants what it wants, I say, do leave them in peace!’

Geralt stopped laughing.

‘And what have you done, the most stupid of slaughterers?’ the old man continued to shout. ‘What have you done? Do you understand what kind of masterpiece, what a wonder of genetics you destroyed? No, no, to the layman it's beyond the grasp of your small reason. You are unable to understand the ideas of the geniuses. Such as Idarran, and Alzur, his teacher which were both gifted by extraordinary talent and genius. Which great things they invented and created, bringing great good to people, and not seeking gain or indecent wealth

bearing in mind, nor pleasures and fun, but progress and common good. But what do you understand of this? You don't understand anything, nothing, not a bit.'

'And I will tell you additionally,' gasped Ortolan, 'that you have disgraced the work of your fathers with this imprudent murder. Because it was Cosimo Malaspina, and after him his apprentice Alzur, exactly Alzur that created witchers. It was they that invented mutation, thanks to which you were created. Thanks to which you exist, thanks to which you walk the world, you ingrate. You should esteem Alzur, and his followers, and their work and not destroy them. Oh... Oh...'

The old wizard fell suddenly into silence, rolled his eyes and sighed heavily.

'I must go for a stool,' he said. 'I must go quickly. Sorel! Kind boy!'

Degerlund and Trethevey rushed from their places, and aided old man to rise, and lead him out of the room.

After a short while Biruta Icarti stood up. She looked at the witcher in a way that said much, and left without a word. Next, following her, without looking at the witcher at all left Sandoval and Zangenis. Axel Pitted stood up, crossed his arms and looked at Geralt for a long time. Looked long and rather unkindly.

'It was a mistake to invite you here,' he said finally. 'I knew it. I hoped however that you would show some signs of polish.'

'It was mistake to accept your invitation,' said coldly Geralt. 'I knew it too. Yet I still hoped that I would get an answer for my questions. How many numbered masterpieces were created by Malaspina, Alzur and Idarran. How many were created by your respected Ortolan? How many monsters with your plates will I have to kill? I, a witcher, preservative and antidote? I didn't get

any answers and I understand well why that was. As to the polish: fuck you, Esparza.'

Exiting, Pitted slammed the door. So forcefully that plaster felt from the stucco.

'I did not make a good impression it seems.' appraised the witcher. 'But I did not expect that I would, so no disappointment here. But that's not all, right? All this effort to get me here... And this is supposed to be all? Well if it is... Do you have any inn with drinks in the foulburg? May I go?'

'No,' responded Harlan Tzara. 'You can't go.'

'Because that's not all,' confirmed Pinety.

The room that he was lead into, was not a typical room in which wizards used to meet their customers. Usually - Geralt managed to get to know this custom - mages granted audience in rooms with very formal decorations, very often rather austere and depressing. It was rather unthinkable to meet someone in a private room, a personal one, and thus able to provide information about the mage's character, his preferences - particularly about the kind and specifics of magic he performs.

This time it was completely different. The walls of room were decorated by numerous engravings and watercolour paintings, every single one erotic, and some even pornographic in character. On shelves proudly stood models of sailing ships, caressing the eye with the precision of detail. Little ships in bottles proudly bulged their miniature sails. Numerous showcases, bigger and smaller, were full of figurines of little soldiers, infantry, raiders, in various formations. Opposite the entrance, under glass too, hung a stuffed brown trout. Quite large for a trout.

'Sit, witcher,' Pinety, it became instantly clear was host here.

Geralt sat down, looking at the trout. When it was alive the fish had to have weighed a solid fifteen pounds. If it was not an imitation made of plaster.

‘Magic will protect us,’ Pinety moved his hand through the air, ‘against eavesdropping. So we can talk freely, and finally about the true reasons we brought you here, Geralt of Rivia. The trout that interests you so much was caught using an artificial fly in the Ribbon river, it weighed fourteen pounds and nine ounces. I let it go free, this is a magical copy. And now focus please. On what I have to say.’

‘I’m ready. For everything.’

‘We are curious as what are your experiences with demons.’

Geralt lifted his brows. For that he was not prepared. And quite recently he thought that nothing could surprise him.

‘And what is a demon? In your opinion?’

Harlan Tzara winced and moved abruptly. Pinety mitigated him with look.

‘In Oxenfurt University,’ he said, ‘there is a department of supernatural phenomena. Masters of magic visit and give lectures there. Lectures talking, among others things, about demons and demonism, and many aspects of this phenomenon, including physical, metaphysical, philosophical and moral. But I think I’m telling you all this unnecessarily, as you were there. I remember you, although as a free student, you usually sat in the last row of the hall. I will ask again about your experience with demons. And please be so good as to answer. Without sophistry if we may. And without fake surprise.’

‘In my surprise,’ replied Geralt dryly, ‘there is nothing fake, not a bit of pretending, it’s so sincere that it is painful. How can I not be surprised by the fact that you are asking about my

experience with demons, a simple witcher, a simple preserver and simpler antidote. And asking are masters of magic, which lecture about demonism and its aspect at university.'

'Answer the question.'

'I'm a witcher, not a wizard. And it means that my experience is nothing compare to yours. I listened to your lectures at the university in Oxenfurt, Guincamp. What was important carried to the last rows of the hall. Demons are beings from worlds other than our own. Elemental Planes... dimensions, planes, time-spaces, or whatever you like to call them. To have any experience with them you have to summon them, that is by violence pull them out of their plane. It can be done only with magic...'

'Not magic, goetia,' interrupted Pinety. 'The difference is crucial. And don't explain to us, what we already know. Answer the question. I'll ask you for the third time, and I surprise myself with my patience.'

'Answering the question: yes, I have had dealings with demons. I was hired a time or two to ... eliminate them. I've managed two demons. One that entered a wolf. And one that had possessed a man.'

'You managed.'

'I managed. It was not easy.'

'But it can be done,' put in Tzara. 'Against what is said. That you can't kill demon at all.'

'-I'm not telling you that I destroyed any demons. I killed a wolf and a man. Are you interested in the details?'

'Very.'

'With the wolf, that earlier in the bright daylight had bitten to death and torn apart eleven people, I acted in cooperation with

a priest, sword and magic triumphed together. When after a difficult fight I finally killed the wolf, the demon got loose in the form of a huge shining ball. And destroyed quite an area of forest, laying trees flat. He did not notice neither me nor the priest, he fled the forest in the opposite direction. And then he vanished, most likely returning to his own plane. The priest stubbornly ascertained that it was his work, but I think that demon left, because he was bored.'

'And the second case?'

'It was more interesting.'

'I killed a possessed man,' he continued without being hurried. 'And nothing. No spectacular side effects. No balls, or afterglows, or thunders, or cyclones, not even a stench. I don't have a clue as to what happened with that demon. The man that was killed was investigated by priests, and mages, your brothers. They found nothing, and affirmed nothing. The body was burned, because decay went as usual and it was hot...'

He stopped. The sorcerers looked at each other. Their faces were stone masks.

'There is then, as I understand,' Harlan Tzara finally said, 'one and only one method to fight a demon. Kill, and destroy the energumen, the possessed man. I underline – a man. He needs to be killed immediately, without waiting and deliberation. Chopped with a sword with full force. And that's all. That's the witcher's method? The witcher's craft.'

'This is going badly for you, Tzara. You don't know how to do it. To insult someone properly, it's insufficient to have just have a strong wish to insult, with enthusiasm and eagerness. Technique is also necessary.'

'Stop, stop,' Pinety yet again stopped the fight. 'We just want to know the facts. You said that you killed the human - those were your own words. Your witchers' code seemingly forbids killing a

man. You killed a man possessed by a demon, an energumen. After the fact, that is killing a human, let me cite you - you did not observe any spectacular effects. How then can you be sure that it wasn't...'

'Enough,' interrupted Geralt. 'Enough of this, Guincamp, these little allusions don't lead to anything. You want facts? Here they are. I killed him, because it was what was needed. I killed to save the lives of others. And this edict I got from the law. It was granted in a hurry, although in high-sounding words. The state of a higher necessity, of circumstance excluding the lawlessness of the act, the sacrificing of one good for the other, for a real and direct danger. True - it was real and direct. I regret that you could not see the possessed in action, what he had done, what he was able to do. I don't know too much about the philosophical and metaphysical aspects of demons, but the physical aspects are really spectacular. It can surprise, believe me.'

'We do,' confirmed Pinety, again exchanging look with Tzara. 'We of course believe you. Because we have seen this and that.'

'I don't doubt it,' the witcher winced. 'And I didn't back in Oxenfurt, at your lectures. It was obvious that you knew what you were saying. The theoretical basis was useful, with the wolf and the man. I knew the nature of things. Both these cases had an identical background. How did you said it? A method? A technique? Well it was a magical method and the technique was magical too. Some witch summoned the demon with a spell, forced it out of its plane, in an obvious intent to use it for their magical goals. It's how demonic magic works.'

'Goetia.'

'It's what goetia is about: summoning demons, use them, and then free them. So goes the theory. But in practice it happens that instead freeing the demon after using it, a wizard magically locks him in the body of some carrier. In the body of a wolf, for

example. Or a human body. Because the wizard, taking the example from Idarran and Alzur like to experiment. Observe what will a demon in an alien body do when it is released. Because the wizard, just like Alzur, is a sick deviant, who takes joy from the murder done by the demon. It happened before, has it not?’

‘Various things have happened,’ Harlan Tzara said slowly. ‘It's stupid to generalize, and even lower to rebuke. Do I need to remind you of witchers that were not afraid to rob? Did not have anything against hiring themselves as hitmen? Should I remind you of the psychopaths, bearing medallions with the head of cat that also enjoyed murdering everything in sight?’

‘Gentlemen,’ Pinety lifted his hand, stopping the witcher readying to answer. ‘This is not a session of the city council, so stop pointing out flaws and pathologies. It's wiser to think that nobody is perfect, everyone has their faults, and pathology is not something alien even for celestial beings. Reportedly. Let's focus on our problem, which needs solving.’

‘Goetia,’ Pinety started after long pause, ‘is forbidden, because it's madly dangerous. Summoning a demon doesn't unfortunately need neither knowledge nor the highest magical ability. It's enough to possess a necromantic grimoire and there is quite a lot available on the black market. Without knowledge and ability it's however hard to control the demon. A home-bred goet can talk about luck when summoning a demon that will just free itself and escape. Many end up torn to pieces. Summoning demons and any other creatures from the elemental and para-elemental planes is thus forbidden and put under threat of severe punishment. There is a system of control that guarantees that the prohibition is observed. There is however a place that is not under its surveillance.’

‘Castle Rissberg. Of course.’

‘Of course. You can't control Rissberg. The system of control over goetia was created here. As a result of the experiments

carried out here. Thanks to tests done here that are still being perfected. Other research is done here too, other experiments. With a broad set of characters. We investigate various things and phenomena, witcher. We do many things here. Not all of them legal or moral. The end justifies the means. That is the inscription you could put over the gate.'

'But under it,' added Tzara, 'should be another "What's created at Rissberg, stays at Rissberg". Experiments here are supervised. Everything is monitored.'

'Obviously not everything,' said Geralt wryly. 'Because something escaped.'

'Something did escape,' Pinety impressed with his calm. 'We have eighteen masters here, at the castle. And over half a hundred apprentices and adepts. The majority of those latter are only waiting for formalities to get their masters titles. We fear... We have some basis to suspect that someone from this numerous group has taken up goetia.'

'And you don't know who this is?'

'We don't know,' Harlan Tzara did not even twitch his eyelid, but the witcher knew that he was lying.

'In May and at the beginning of June,' the wizard did not wait for further questions, 'there were three mass murders around the castle. Around here in the Foothills, the closest twelve and furthest twenty miles from Rissberg. Every time it was forest villages, the homes of lumberjacks, and other forest workers. In the villages every single occupant was murdered, not a single survivor. Autopsies made us sure that the crimes were perpetrated by a demon. Or more precisely - energumen, a demon's carrier. A demon that was summoned here, at the castle.'

'We have a problem, Geralt of Rivia. We have to solve it. And we are counting that you will help us.'

The transfer of matter is sophisticated, finessed and subtle, therefore it's absolutely advised that before teleportation is attempted one should defecate and empty their bladder.

Geoffrey Monck,

Theory and practice of using teleportation portals

Chapter Ten

Roach, as usually, snorted and was getting sulky in reaction to the sight of just the saddle-cloth, in her snorted protest, fear could be heard. She did not like it when the witcher wrapped her head. She didn't like what happened soon after the wrapping even more. Geralt did not wonder about his mare behaving like that. He didn't like it himself. Snorting didn't befit him of course, but he didn't restrain from showing disfavor in other ways.

'It truly amazes,' Harlan Tzara showed surprise the umpteenth time, 'your aversion to portals.'

The witcher did not start a discussion. Tzara did not expect that he would.

'We've been transferring you,' he continued, 'for over a week, and each time you look like a convict being lead to the gallows. Regular people, those I can understand, for them the transfer of matter is still frightful and inconceivable. I thought however, that you - a witcher - should be more accustomed to magic. We are not in the times of the first portals of Geoffrey Monck! Today teleportation is common and absolutely safe. Teleports are safe. And teleports opened by me are guaranteed to be safe.'

The witcher sighed. He had seen many times the effects of safe teleports, he'd also participated in segregating the remains of safe teleport users. He knew therefore that claims of portals safety were to be put on the same shelf as those: "my dog doesn't bite", "my son is a good boy", "this sauerkraut stew is fresh", "I will give your money back the day after tomorrow on the outside", "I spent the night at my friend's place", "I have only the good of the fatherland in heart" and "you will answer just a few questions and we will release you".

There was however neither a choice nor an alternative. According to the plan thought out in Rissberg, the witcher was to patrol a daily chosen region in the Foothills, and villages, colonies, hamlets and abodes located there - places that Pinety and Tzara feared the next attack of the energumen would strike. The villages were spread all over the Foothills, some of them quite far from others. Geralt was forced to agree that without teleporting magic, effective patrols were impossible.

To keep it a secret, Tzara and Pinety constructed their portals at the end of the Rissberg complex, in a huge, empty hall, in need of repair, which smelled of mustiness, cobwebs stuck to his face, and dried mouse droppings crumbled under his boots. After the spell was activated on wall a covered with water stains and the remains of some goo, a fiery and shining contour of door - or rather gate – appeared, beyond which billowed an opaque opalescent shine. Geralt was forced to cover the mare's head to enter into the shiny portal - and then it became unpleasant. There was a flash in front of his eyes, and one ceased to see, hear or feel anything - anything but cold. Inside the black void, among the silence, the lack of forms, time and cold was the only thing that could be felt, all other senses were shut off by the teleport. Luckily only for a split second. A split second passed, the real world flashed before his eyes, and his horse snorted with fear and beat its hooves on the hard soil of reality.

'That the horse is shying is understandable,' Tzara said once again. 'But your fear however, witcher, is purely irrational.'

Fear is never irrational, Geralt stopped himself from correcting. Neglecting psychic aberrations. That is one of the first things taught to young witchers. It's good to be afraid. We feel fear, so there is something to be afraid of, so be careful. You don't have to defeat fear. It's sufficient to not yield to it. And it's worth to learn from it.

‘Where to today?’ asked Tzara, opening the lacquerware box in which he held his wand. ‘Which region?’

‘Dry Rocks.’

‘Try to get to Little Sycamore before sundown. We will get you from there, I or Pinety. Ready?’

‘For anything.’

Tzara waved his hand and wand in the air, like he was conducting an orchestra, Geralt even thought that he heard some music. The sorcerer chanted the spell melodically, it was a long one, sounding like a recited poem. On the wall fiery lines flashed, and merged into a rectangular contour. The witcher cursed under his breath, calmed his pulsing medallion, nudged the mare with his heels and made it go into the milky void

Blackness, silence, lack of form, lack of time. Cold. And suddenly a flash and shock, The booming of hoofs on hard soil.

The crimes of which the wizards suspected of the energumen, carrier of the demon, were committed around Rissberg, upon the unpopulated terrains called the Tukajan Foothills, a hill range covered with an ancient forest, separating Temeria and Brugge. The name came from as some said from a legendary hero named Tukaj, or like others said - from something completely different. As there were no other hills in region, it became wide spread to say just the Foothills, and such a name could be seen on many maps.

The Foothills spread for around a hundred miles in length and about twenty to thirty miles in breadth. Particularly in the western part it was intensely used in forestry. Widely spread woodcutting was carried out, and industries related to it were growing. Wasteland villages and hamlets occupied by people

that worked in this industries formed, temporary or permanent, managed well, or bad, bigger, or smaller or quite small. Presently, the wizards estimated, there were about fifty of such localities.

In three of them there were massacres that had left no survivors.

Dry Rocks, a complex of low limestone hills encircled by thick forests, was the westernmost part of the Foothills, on the western border of the patrols. Geralt had been here before, he recognized the terrain. On a clearing adjacent to the forest was built a lime-kiln, a huge furnace used to calcify rocks. The final product of such calcifying was calx. Pinety, when they were here before explained what is it used for, but Geralt had listened carelessly and forgotten. Calx - of whatever - was beyond his sphere of interests. But around the furnace arose a colony of men, for whom said calx was the basis of their existence. And he was hired to assure their safety. And it was the only important thing.

The coalmen recognized him, one of them greeted him with a wave of his hat. He reciprocated the greeting. *I do what's mine*, he thought. *I do what I should do. I do that for what I'm paid.*

He directed Roach towards the forest. He had about an hour of travel on the forest road. It was about a mile before the next village. Called Dunnock's Clearing.

During a single day the witcher traveled from seven to ten miles - depending on the region this meant visiting from a few to several villages, and making it to a set place from where he was teleported back to the castle before sundown by one of the mages. The next day the ritual was repeated, however other regions of the Foothills were patrolled. Geralt chose regions at

random, avoiding routine and a clear scheme that could be easily deciphered. Despite this, the task proved quite monotonous. Monotony however did not disturb the witcher, as he was used to it in his profession, in most cases only patience, persistence and consistency guaranteed a successful monster hunt. Up to this moment - it was not without significance - no one was willing to pay for his patience, persistence and consistency as generously as the Rissberg sorcerers. There was no place for complaints, one should just do his job.

Even when not believing in the success of the enterprise very much.

‘Just after I arrived at Rissberg,’ he pointed out to the wizards, ‘you showed me to Ortolan, and all the higher ranking wizards. Even assuming that the one guilty of practicing goetia and the massacres was not among them, the rumor about a witcher in the castle must have spread. Your perpetrator, if he exists, will instantly understand what’s going on, and will go under cover. And stop any actions. Or he will wait for me to leave and then he will begin it again.’

‘We will stage your leaving,’ responded Pinety. ‘Your further stay in the castle will be secret. Have no fear, there is magic to make sure that what is supposed to be a secret will stay that way. We are able, we guarantee, to wield such magic.’

‘Does patrolling everyday make any sense, in your opinion?’

‘It does. Do your job, witcher. And don't worry about anything else.’

Geralt solemnly promised to himself that he would indeed not worry. And he did not fully believe the wizards. He had his suspicions.

But he did not want to show them.

In Dunnock's Clearing was the sound of briskly tapped axes, and clamored saws, it smelled of fresh wood and resin. The one fanatically deforesting here was a lumberjack named Dunnock with a large family. The older members of the family worked the axes and saws, the younger were cutting of branches and the youngest were carrying away brushwood. Dunnock saw Geralt, put his axe in a trunk, and wiped his forehead.'

'Greetings,' Geralt came nearer. 'How are you? Everything in order?'

Dunnock looked at him grimly for a long while

'It's bad,' he finally said.

'Because?'

Dunnock was silent for a long while.

'A saw was stolen,' he snarled at last. 'A saw! So how it is, eh? Why are you, Mister, riding from one clearing to other? And why is Torquil traversing the forest? You are seemingly patrolling, eh? And saws are stolen!'

'I will take care of that,' Geralt lied smoothly. 'I will take care of this case. Farewell.'

Dunnock spat.

In the next clearing - this time Hoopoe's, everything was in order, no one threatened Hoopoe, and it seemed that nothing was stolen from him. Geralt did not even stop Roach. He was heading to the next village. Called Salt Works.

Moving between the various villages was facilitated by forest roads, ploughed with cart wheels. Geralt met carts quite often, both full of forest products, and empty, travelling to get their load. People on foot could be met too, the traffic was surprisingly high. Even in a deep forest it was seldom totally desolate. Above the ferns showed from time to time like the back of a narwhal among the sea waves, was the bottom of a woman gathering berries and other fruits in the undergrowth on all fours. Among the trees waling with a stiff walk was something that looked by its posture and face like a zombie, but turned out however to be an old man looking for mushrooms. Sometimes something broke in the brushwood among wild shrieks - these were children, offspring of the lumberjacks and coalmen, armed with bows made of sticks and twine. It was surprising how much destruction they could bring with such crude equipment. It terrified him to think what would happen when the children would grow up and get professional equipment.

The village of Salt Works was also calm, nothing disturbed the work, nor threatened the workers. Its name - originally - was taken from the potash made here, a resource prized in the glass and soap industries. Potash, as the wizards explained to Geralt, was obtained from the ashes of charcoal, which was made in the region. Geralt had already visited -and planned to visit this day too – the villages of the coalmen. The nearest was called Oaks, and the road to it actually lead through a group of old, a few-hundred years, oaks. Even in the noon, even in full sun, and without clouds in the sky under the oaks it was always gloomy. It was near the oaks when Geralt met constable Torquil and his unit for the first time.

When they rode from behind the oaks at a gallop and encircled him from all sides, in green masking clothes, with longbows on

their backs, Geralt instantly took them for Foresters, members of the famous voluntary paramilitary formation, calling themselves the Guardian of the Woods, who had taken to hunting nonhumans, particularly elves and dryads, and murdering them in various grisly manners. It happened that travelers were accused by the Foresters of helping nonhumans, or trading with them, both of them a reason to lynch, and it was hard to prove innocence. This meeting in the oaks promised to be drastically violent - Geralt was then relieved, when the green men turned out to be law enforcement officers on duty. The leader, a swarthy guy with a piercing look, presented himself as a constable in service of a bailiff from Gors Velen, and bluntly and harshly demanded Geralt to identify himself, and once he knew it, demanded to see the witcher's medallion. The medallion with its toothed wolf proved not only satisfactory proof, but it also caused the admiration of the constable. His esteem as it seemed covered also Geralt. The constable dismounted his horse, and asking the witcher for the same, invited him for a talk.

'I am Frans Torquil,' the constable had thrown away the appearance of a blunt disciplinarian, and proved to be a man of calm and precision. 'You are Geralt of Rivia, witcher. The same Geralt of Rivia that a month ago in Ansegis saved a woman and child from death by killing a man-eating monster.'

Geralt pursed his lips. He'd tried to forget about Ansegis, about the monster with the plate, and the man that was killed because of him. He fought with it for a long time, and finally convinced himself that he had done everything that was possible, that he saved two, and the monster would kill no more. Now everything came rushing back.

Frans Torquil seemed to miss the cloud that covered witcher's forehead after his words. Or if he saw it, he did not care.

'It turns out, witcher - that we both are travelling through this thicket for the same reason. Some bad things have begun to

happen since the spring in the Tukajan Foothills, some very nasty things happened here. And it's time to put an end to it. After the massacre at Arches I advised the wizards of Rissberg to hire a witcher. They listened it seems, although they don't like to listen.'

The constable took off his hat, and shook the needles and seeds off of it. His head-wear was identical to that which Dandelion wore, although of a worse grade of felt. And instead of an egret feather it had the flight feather of a pheasant.

'I've guarded law and order for a long time here, in the Foothills,' he continued looking Geralt in the eyes. 'Not boasting, I've caught many criminals, and with many I've decorated dry branches. But what been happening here recently... It needs someone like you. Someone that knows a bit about magic, and has knowledge of monsters, someone who will not be afraid to face neither a wraith nor a dragon. And it's good too that we will together guard and defend people. I, for my mediocre pay, and you for the wizard's money. I'm curious, do they pay much?'

The five hundred novigradian crowns, sent to a bank account in advance, Geralt had no intention to speak of. That's how much they pay for my service and my time, the wizards of Rissberg. Fifteen days of my time. And after this fifteen days elapse, independently of what would happen, another payment for the same amount. Generous. More than satisfying.

'Yeah, they surely pay well,' Frans Torquil understood quickly that he would not hear an answer. 'They can afford it. And I will tell you only this: No money is too much here. Because it's a nasty affair, witcher. Nasty, dark and unnatural. The evil which rages here came from Rissberg, I'll bet my head. It's sure that the wizards mucked something up with their magic. Because their magic is like a bag of vipers: no matter how well it's tied, eventually something venomous will get out of it.'

The constable stared at Geralt, and this one stare was enough for him to understand that the witcher would not reveal anything about his deal with the wizards.

‘They acquainted you with the details? Told you what happened in Yews, Arches and in Rogowizna?’

‘Kind of.’

‘Kind of,’ repeated Torquil. ‘Three days after Belleteyn, in village of Yews, nine lumberjacks were killed. In the middle of May, in a village of saw-men, twelve killed. Beginning of June, in Rogowizna a colony of smokers. Fifteen victims. This is the current state as of today, witcher. Because it's not over. I'll bet my head it's not over.’

Yews, Arches, Rogowizna. Three mass crimes. So - not an accident during work. Not a demon that got free and escaped, one that a mediocre goet was not able to control. Someone three times enslaved a demon in a carrier and send him to murder.

‘I've seen much,’ the muscles on the constable jaws played strongly. ‘Many battlefields, many dead people. Assaults, sacking, bandit raids, blood feuds, even a wedding from which six dead were carried away, including the bridegroom. But cutting tendons to later cut the lamed one's throats? Scalping? Biting throats open with teeth? Tearing alive people asunder, and dragging their bowels out? And finally making pyramids from the cut off heads? With what we dealing with here? The wizards have not told you this? They did not explain why they need a witcher?’

Why would wizards of Rissberg need a witcher? So much so, that he had to be forced into cooperation by blackmail? With every demon and every carrier, the wizards could easily deal themselves, and effortlessly at that. *Fulmen sphaericus*, *Sagitta aurea*, just two spells on the shelf that could be used to treat an energumen from a hundred paces, and it's doubtful that he

would live through such a treatment. But no, the wizards prefer a witcher. Why? The answer is simple - a wizard had become an energumen, confrater, a colleague. One among their colleagues summons demons and lets them enter him and runs to murder. He'd done it three times already. But it's awkward for wizards to hit a colleague with a globe of lightning or puncture him with a golden arrowhead. To treat a colleague, a witcher is needed.'

He neither could nor wanted to tell all this to Torquil. He neither could nor wanted to tell, what he told the wizards at Rissberg. And how they reacted with disdain. With well-deserved banality.

'You still do it. You still toy with, how you call it, goetia. You summon those creatures, pull them out of their planes, from behind closed doors. With the same old song: we will control them, we will rule over them, make them obedient, take them to work. With always the same justification: we will know their secrets, we will force them to reveal secrets and arcana, thanks to which we will multiply the power of our own magic, we will heal and cure, we will eliminate illnesses and natural disasters, we will make the world a better place, and people will be happy. And without a change it turns out to be a lie, that it's only your own power and rule you care about.'

Tzara, it was obvious, was in a hurry to reply, but Pinety held him back.

'And as to creatures from behind closed doors,' continued Geralt. 'The ones that we call demons for convenience - you surely know exactly what we, witchers, know. What we came to know long ago and have written down in witcher protocols and chronicles. Demons will never, ever reveal to you any secrets, nor arcana. They will never be put to work. They let you summon them and come to our world with one goal. To murder. Because they like it. And you know it. But you let them do so.'

‘Let's shift from theory,’ said Pinety after a long while of silence, ‘to practice. I think that the witchers' protocols and chronicles also contain something about that. And we want from you witcher is not a moral treatise in the least, but a rather practical solution.’

‘I 'm glad to make your acquaintance,’ Frans Torquil shook Geralt's hand. ‘And now to work, back to patrol. To guard, and protect people. That's our job.’

‘That it is.’

The already mounted constable leaned down.

‘I bet,’ he said softly, ‘that you already know what I'm going to tell you. But I will say it anyway. Beware, witcher. Take care. You don't want to say anything, but I know this and that. Wizards surely hired you to repair something they broke themselves, to clean up the foul things with which they fouled. But if something goes awry they will look for a scapegoat. And you look like one.’

The sky above the forest began to darken, a sudden wind rustled in the treetops. Distant thunder hummed.

‘If not thunder then downpours,’ said Frans Torquil, when they met the next time. ‘Every second day it thunders and rains. And as a result all traces, when you look for them, are destroyed by rain. Convenient, isn't it? Almost like it was ordered. This also smells of wizardry, Rissberg in particular. They say that magicians can control weather. Force magical winds to blow, while natural wind they force to blow in any direction they want it to. Scatter clouds, create rain and hail, and a thunderstorm

too. When they want it. Too cover the traces for example. What do you say, Geralt?’

‘Wizards, it's true, can do much,’ he responded. ‘They always were able to control the weather, since the First Landing, which they say was only due to Jan Bekker's spells, did not end in catastrophe. But blaming mages for all bad luck and failures is I think too much. You talk about natural phenomena, Frans. We just have such a season. A season of storms.’

He hurried his mare. The sun was already low over the western horizon, and he wanted to patrol a few more villages. The nearest was a colony of coalmen, located in a clearing called Rogowizna. When he went there for the first time, Pinety was with him.

The terrain of the massacre, to the witcher's amazement, instead of being a grim deserted place which everyone gave a wide berth to, was a place of intense labor, full of people. Coalmen - they called themselves smokers - were working on building a new charcoal pile, a construction used to make charcoal. The charcoal pile was a round pile of wood, not some chaotic pile, but a pile that was constructed evenly and with care. When Geralt and Pinety rode into the clearing they met the coalmen covering this pile with moss and carefully spilling dirt over it. The second pile, constructed earlier was already working, that is smoking. The whole clearing was full of acrid smoke, and a sharp smell assaulted the nose.

‘How long,’ the witcher coughed. ‘How long ago, you said...’

‘Precisely a month ago.’

‘And people are working here like nothing happened?’

‘There is a huge demand,’ explained Pinety, ‘for charcoal. Only charcoal allows when burned to achieve a temperature high enough to smelt metals. Blast furnaces near Dorian and Gors Velen could not work without charcoal, and metallurgy is the most important and most rapidly developing branch of industry. Thanks to the demand, the coalmen are well paid, and economy, witcher, is like nature -it can't stand a vacuum. The murdered smokers were buried there - you see the barrow? Fresh sand is still yellow. And new ones have taken their place. The pile smokes, life continues.’

They dismounted. The smokers did not pay them any attention; they were too occupied. If someone was interested, it was the women and children, a few of which were running among the shacks.

‘Yes, indeed,’ Pinety guessed the question, before witcher asked it. ‘Among the buried in the barrow there were children. Three. Three women. And nine men and boys. Follow me.’

They went among the piles of drying wood.

‘Few men were killed instantly, their heads were smashed. The rest were overwhelmed and immobilized, tendons in their feet cut with a sharp device. Many, including the children had additionally broken arms. The overpowered were murdered. Throats were torn asunder, bellies were ripped, chests opened. Skin was torn from their backs, there was scalping. To one of the women...’

‘Enough,’ the witcher looked at the black stains of blood, still visible on the birch trunks. ‘Enough, Pinety.’

‘I think it would be worth it to know with whom... and with what we are dealing.’

‘I already know.’

‘So the last detail then. The body count didn't match. All those killed had their heads cut off. And placed in a pyramid here, exactly in this place. There were fifteen heads, and thirteen bodies. Two bodies have vanished.’

‘Two other villages were treated,’ continued the sorcerer after a short pause, ‘to a very similar scheme, Yews, and Arches. In Yews there were nine killed, and in Arches, twelve. I'll take you there tomorrow. Today we will go to New Tar Kiln, its close. You will see how pine tar and birch tar are made. When you next smear something with tar you will know how it's made.’

‘I have a question.’

‘I'm listening.’

‘You truly had to resort to blackmail? You did not believe I would come to Rissberg of my own free will?’

‘Opinions were mixed.’

‘Putting me in jail in Kerack, to free me, but still threaten me with court - whose idea was it? Who thought it out? Coral, am I right?’

Pinety looked at him. He kept looking for a long time.

‘You are,’ he said eventually. ‘It was her idea. And her plan. Put you in, free you, and threaten. And in the end make the justice abandon process. It was done instantly after you left. Your record at Kerack is as clear as a tear. Any other questions? No? Then let's go to New Tar Kiln, we will look at tar. Then I will open a teleport and we will go back to Rissberg. In the afternoon I'd like to visit my river with my fly fishing rod. Mayflies are swarming, trout will be feeding. Have you ever hooked a fish, witcher? Are you into angling?’

‘I fish when I have taste for fish. I always carry rope with me.’

Pinety was silent for a long time.

‘Rope,’ he said with a weird voice. ‘A piece of twine, weighted with a piece of lead. With multiple hooks. That you put worms onto?’

‘Yes, why?’

‘Nothing. I shouldn't have asked.’

He was heading toward Pine Copse, yet another village of coalmen, when the forest suddenly fell silent. The jays went mute, like a cut with a knife the shrieks of a magpie stopped, suddenly a woodpecker stopped tapping. The forest froze in horror.

Geralt hurried his mare into gallop.

Death is our eternal companion, it is always to our left, at an arm's length. [...] Death is the only wise adviser that we have. Whenever you feel, as you always do, that everything is going wrong and you're about to be annihilated, turn to your death and ask if that is so. Your death will tell you that you're wrong; that nothing really matters outside its touch. Your death will tell you, "I haven't touched you yet."

Carlos Castaneda, *Journey to Ixtlan*

Chapter Eleven

The charcoal pile at Pine Copse was built in a neighboring clearing, coalmen used wood waste left by the clearing of the forest. Production had started recently here, from the top of the pile, like from a volcano crater, emerged a pillar of smoke, yellowish and smelling strongly. The smell of smoke did not cover the smell of death hanging over the clearing.

Geralt jumped down from his horse. And took out his sword.

The first body, headless and without both feet he saw right next to the pile, blood stained dirt covering the pile. A bit further lay three further bodies, massacred beyond recognition. Blood soaked into the receptive forest sand, leaving blackening stains.

Closer to the clearing center and the fire pit encircled by stones lay two other bodies - a man and woman. The man had his throat torn, ripped so much that the vertebrae could be seen. The woman lay with the upper part of her body in the fire, in ashes, coated with porridge from an overturned cauldron.

A bit further, near pile of wood, lay a child, a boy, perhaps five years old. He was torn in halves. Someone - or rather something – had grabbed him by both legs and torn him asunder.

He saw the next body, this one with a ripped belly and the intestines pulled out. For the full length - that is about a fathom of large intestine plus more than three fathoms of small intestine. The intestines ran in a straight pale blue-pink line spread towards shack made from pine branches, and vanished inside.

Inside, on a primitive pallet lay on his belly, a lean man. It was obvious on sight that he didn't fit in. His rich clothes were

covered with blood, completely soaked. But the witcher didn't see any gushing, squirting nor leaking from any major blood vessels.

He recognized him despite his face being covered with drying blood. It was the long haired, lean and slightly effeminate dandy, Sorel Degerlund, he had been present during the audience with Ortolan. He had also then worn a braided cape and an embroidered doublet, like the other wizards, he sat among the others behind the table and looked at the witcher with badly hidden antipathy. And now he was lying, unconscious, totally covered with blood, and around his wrist was wound human intestine. Pulled from the belly of the dead body lying not even ten paces away.

The witcher swallowed saliva. *Kill him*, he thought, *while he's unconscious? That's what Pinety and Tzara expect? Kill the energumen? Eliminate the goet, toying with the summoning of demons.*

He was woken from his reverie by a moan. Sorel Degerlund was returning to consciousness. He lifted his head, moaned, and fell back on the pallet. He lifted himself, and looked around with a misty look. He saw the witcher, and opened his mouth. He looked at his stomach covered with blood. Lifted his hand. And saw what he was holding. And began to scream.

Geralt looked at his sword, at Dandelion's recent purchase with the gold-plated cross guard. He stared from time to time at the sorcerer's thin neck. And at a vain bulging there.

Sorel Degerlund threw the intestine from his hand. He stopped screaming, and started moaning and shivering. He stood up, first in a crouch, then upright. He run out of the shack, screamed and began running away. The witcher grabbed his collar, stopped him in place and thrust him to his knees.

'What... happened,' mumbled Degerlund, still shivering. 'What happ... what happened here?'

'I think you know what.'

Wizard swallowed audibly.

'How did I... How did I get here? Nothing... I remember nothing... I remember nothing. Nothing!'

'Yeah, like I believe you.'

'An invocation..., ' Degerlund grabbed his face. 'I invoked. He appeared. In a pentagram, in the circle... And he entered. Entered into me.'

'It was not first time, right?'

Degerlund cried. A bit theatrically, Gerald could not resist such an impression. He regretted not surprising the energumen, before the demon abandoned him. Regret was not very rational, he knew how dangerous a confrontation with a demon could be, he should be glad that he had avoided it. But he wasn't. Because know he didn't know what to do.

Why me, he thought. Why not Frans Torquil with his unit. The Constable would not have any doubts nor scruples. A wizard covered with blood and with intestines in his hand would instantly earn a noose around his neck, and would dangle from the first branch found in no time. Torquil would not be stopped by hesitation or doubts. Torquil would not think about a fact that an effeminate and lean looking wizard would in no way be able to kill so cruelly so many people, and in a time so short that the bloodied cloth did not dry or became stiff. That he would not be able to tear child asunder with his bare hands. No - Torquil would have no dilemmas.

But I do.

Pinety and Tzara were sure that I would not.

'Don't kill me...' moaned Degerlund. 'Don't kill me, witcher... I will never again... Never again...'

'Shut up.'

'I swear, that I'll never...'

'Shut up. Are you conscious enough to use magic? To call the wizards from Rissberg?'

'I have a sigil... I can... I can teleport to Rissberg.'

'Not alone. With me. No tricks. Don't stand, stay on your knees.'

'I have to stand up. And you... If the teleportation is to succeed you have to stand close to me. Very close.'

'What? What are you waiting for, take the amulet out already.'

'It's not an amulet. I said - it's a sigil.'

Degerlund undid his bloodied doublet and shirt. On his chest he had a tattoo, two circles crossing. The circles were spotted with dots of varying size. It looked a bit like a scheme of the planetary orbits that Geralt had once seen at the university in Oxenfurt.

The sorcerer pronounced a melodic incantation. The circles began to shine with a blue light and the dots a red one. They started to spin.

'Now. Stand close.'

'Close enough?'

'Still closer. Simply hug me.'

'What?'

'Hug me, embrace me.'

Degerlund's voice changed. His eyes, full of tears a scant moment before, began to shine wryly, and his lips twisted in a smirk.

‘Yes, yes, that's good. Strongly and tenderly. Like I was your Yennefer.’

Geralt understood what's going on. But he failed to push Degerlund away, or hit him on the head with pommel of his sword, or slash his neck with his blade. He just didn't manage to.

His eyes flashed with an opalescent shine.

In split second he was drowned in a black void. In bitter cold, in silence, with a lack of form and lack of time.

Their landing was hard, like floor made of stone plates had jumped to meet them. The impact separated them. Geralt did not even manage to get a good look. He smelt an intense stench, the stink of filth mixed with musk. Huge and strong arms caught him by the armpits and neck, thick fingers closed effortlessly over biceps, thumbs hard as iron painfully pushed at his nerves, at his arm plexus.

He went numb, and dropped his sword from a powerless hand.

In front of him he saw a hunchback with a nasty face covered in ulcers, with his skull covered in tufts of stiff hair. The hunchback stood his bandy legs wide apart and was aiming a huge crossbow at him, or rather an arbalest with two steel prods, placed one above the other. Both four-sided arrow-heads were at least two inches broad and sharp as razors.

Sorel Degerlund stood in front of him.

‘As you surely noticed,’ he said, ‘we are not at Rissberg. You’ve ended up at my retreat and hermitage. A place in which I do my experiments along with my master, experiments that are not known at Rissberg. I am, as you likely know Sorel Albert Amador Degerlund, magister magicus. I'm the one, although

you don't know it yet, the one that will bring you pain and death.'

The fake fear, and played panic had vanished like they were blown by the wind, vanished to all appearances. Everything there, at the coalmen clearing was make-believe. In front of Geralt, who drooped in the paralyzing grip of gnarled hands, there stood an absolutely different Sorel Degerlund. A Sorel Degerlund triumphing, full of pride and arrogance. A Sorel Degerlund grinning with a malicious sneer. A sneer that brought forth thoughts of centipedes crawling through the slits below doors. About dug up graves. About white worms wiggling in carrion. About a fat horsefly moving its legs in a bowl of soup.

The sorcerer approached. In his hand he was carrying a steel syringe with a long needle.

'I've cheated you like a child, there on the clearing,' he said through clenched teeth. 'You proved to be naive like a child. Witcher Geralt of Rivia! Although your instinct was right you did not kill, because you were not sure. Because you are a good witcher and a good man Tell me, witcher, who are the good people? Those people that fate left without chance or advantage of being bad. Or those that had that chance, but were too stupid to use it. It's not important to which group you belong. You let yourself be outwitted, you fell into a trap and I guarantee that you will not leave it alive.'

He lifted the syringe. Geralt felt a prick, and instantly after a burning pain. The pain was piercing and darkened his sight, tensing his whole body, the pain was so awful that he was barely able to stop himself from screaming. His heart began to race, which was a particularly bad experience as his normal heart rate was a fourth of that of normal humans. His vision worsened, the world around him began to spin, smear and flow.

He was dragged. The shine of magical balls danced over crude walls and ceilings. One of the walls was covered in bloodstains, full of hanging weapons, he saw broad curved scimitars, great

sickles, guisarmes, axes and morning stars. All of them having traces of blood. *That's what was used in Yews, Arches and Rogowizna*, he thought consciously. *Those were the tools used to massacre the coalmen in Pine Copse.*

He went completely limp, ceased to feel anything, he no longer felt the crushing pressure of the arms holding him.

'Buueh-hhhrrr-eeeehhh-bueeeeh! Bueeh-heeh!'

He didn't realise at first that what he heard was joyous cackle. Those that were dragging him were obviously amused by his situation.

The hunchback with crossbow walking in front was whistling.

Geralt was near to fainting.

He was brutally seated in an armchair with a high support. He at last could see those that had dragged him here, all this time crushing his armpits with huge arms.

He remembered the huge ogre-dwarf Mikita, Pyral Pratt's bodyguard. Those two showed some semblance, they could be close family. They were of similar a height, they stank similar, just like Mikita they had no neck, similarly their tusks, like boar's stuck out from under lower lips. Mikita was however bearded and bald, those two had no beards, and their monkey heads where covered in a black bristle, and the top of their egg-like heads were decorated by something that looked like shaggy oakum. Their eyes where small and bloody, ears were huge, pointed and horribly hairy.

Their clothes were stained with blood. And their breath stank like they had been feeding exclusively on garlic, shit and dead fish for many days.

'Bueeeeh! Bueeh-heeh-heeh!'

'Bue, Bang, enough laughing, get to work, both of you. Pashtor, leave. But be near.'

Both giants left, clapping their huge feet. The hunchback called Pashtor hurried after them.

In the witcher's field of view Sorel Degerlund appeared. Changed, washed, with his hair brushed and effeminate. He pulled up a chair and sat opposite to witcher, having behind his back a table full of books and grimoires. He stared at the witcher, smiling unpleasantly. At the same time he toyed with a medallion on a golden chain that he was winding around his finger.

'I've treated you,' he said without emotion, 'with an extract of venom from a white scorpion. Nasty, isn't it? You can't move your hands, nor legs, or even a finger. You can't blink, nor swallow. Shortly uncontrollable movements of eyeballs and distorted vision will begin. Then you will fill your muscles spasm, really strong spasms, they probably will rip apart your intercostal ligaments. You will not be able to control the gnashing of your teeth, a few of them will be shattered, that's for sure. There will be salivation, and then problems with breathing. If I do not give you antidote you will suffocate. But don't worry. I will give it to you. You will live. For now. But I think that soon you will regret that. I will explain what is going on. We have time. But for now I'd like to look at you going blue.'

'I observed you,' he continued after a while, 'then, on the last day of June, there at the audience. You showed off your arrogance. In front of us, people that you can't hold a candle to. You were amused and excited by this play with fire. I decided then that I would show you that playing with fire causes burns, and intruding upon mages and magic has equally painful consequences. You will come to know it soon.'

Geralt wanted to move, but couldn't. His limbs, and whole body were limp and senseless. In his fingers and toes he felt an unpleasant tingle, his face was completely numb, his lips felt

like they were laced up. His vision had grown worse and worse, his sight was obscured by some murky slime that also glued his eyelids together.

Degerlund put one leg over the other, and waved the medallion. There was a sign on it, an emblem, in blue enamel. Geralt was unable to recognize it. His sight was worsening – the wizard was not lying, his sight problems were becoming stronger.

‘The thing is,’ continued Degerlund without enthusiasm, ‘that I plan to climb high in the sorcerer's hierarchy. In those plans I rely on Ortolan, known to you from your visit at Rissberg and unforgettable audience.’

Geralt had feeling that his was tongue swelling to fill his whole mouth. He feared that this was not only a feeling. White scorpion venom was deadly. He himself had never before come into contact with it, he didn't know what reaction a witcher's organism will be. He was seriously afraid, fighting with the toxin destroying him. The situation did not look good. Help, it seemed, was not to be expected.

‘A few years ago,’ Sorel Degerlund continued, ‘I became the assistant to Ortolan, for this position I was designated by the Chapter and approved by the Rissberg research team. I was to - just like my predecessors - spy on Ortolan, and sabotage his more threatening ideas. This position I owed not only to my talent, but also my beauty and personal charm. The Chapter assigned to Ortolan such assistants as he liked.’

‘You may be unaware of it, but in the time of Ortolan's youth among wizards misogyny was common, and there was a fashion for manly friendship, which often changed into something more, sometimes much more. And the young pupil or adept, it happened, had no choice, he had to listen to the elders in this matter. Some of them didn't like this much, but they were standing it as a part of the trade. And some of them came to like it. And among them was, as you surely guessed Ortolan. A boy that was befitted by his bird nickname, after

experiences with his teacher he became as poets say an enthusiast and adherent of noble manly friendships and noble manly love. In prose this thing is - as you know - called shorter and more earthy.'

A large black cat with his tail bristling like a brush brushed against the wizard's thigh, purring loudly. Degerlund picked up the cat, stroked it and waved the medallion in front of it. The cat casually patted the medallion with its paw. Then it turned away to announce that it's bored with this game, and began licking the fur on his chest.

'As you surely noticed,' continued the sorcerer, 'I'm extraordinary beautiful, women sometimes call me ephebe. Women I like, but in principle I have and never had anything against pederasty. On one condition that is - it has to further my career.'

'My manly affection with Ortolan did not need much sacrifice, the old man is long past the age in which he can, and age the in which he want to. But I made an effort to make people think differently. For people to think that he lost his mind for me. That there is nothing in this world that Ortolan would not do for his lover. That I know his ciphers, that I have access to his books and secret notes. That he gifts artifacts and amulets to me, and that he never showed anyone. And that he teaches me forbidden spells. Including goetia. And if the great people of Rissberg ignored me, now they respected me, I've grown in their eyes. They believed that I do what they dreamed about doing. And that I'm successful at that.'

'Do you know what transhumanism is? What is speciation? Radiative speciation? Introgression? No? You have nothing to be ashamed of. I don't know either. But everyone thinks that I do. That under Ortolan's eye and auspices I've research on perfecting humanity. Make the condition of man better, eliminate illnesses and disabilities, and eliminate ageing. Blah, blah, blah. That's the goal and task of magic. To go the way of

the great masters of old, Malaspina, Alzur and Idarran. Master of hybridizing, mutation and genetic modifications.'

Announcing his arrival with meowing, the black cat showed up again. He jumped onto the sorcerer's knees, stretched and purred. Degerlund began stroking it rhythmically. The cat purred yet louder, showing claws the size of a tiger's.

'What is hybridizing you surely know, as it is another name for crossbreeding. A process of obtaining a crossbreed, hybrid, or bastard - name it as you wish. At Rissberg this is an active subject, they've made a lot of wonders, scares and monsters. A few have found a broad practical use, like the para-zeugl that cleaning up dumps, the para-woodpecker that destroys vermin in trees, or the gambusia devouring malaric mosquito's larvae. Or the vigilosaur, a guardian lizard, of which you boasted about killing at the audience. But they think about them as unimportant, just a side effect. What really interests them is a hybrid between human and beast. That is forbidden, but Rissberg doesn't care. And the Chapter pretends that it doesn't see it. Or which what is more probable, it exists in sweet and dumb ignorance.'

'Malaspina, Alzur and Idarran, that's documented, took for their object creatures normal and small and made them into giants, like those centipedes, spiders, koshcheys and gods knows what else. What's there to stop us from taking a weak, common man and making him into a titan, somebody strong, able to work twenty hours a day, one that is immune to illnesses, who lives in full health to a hundred years old? It's known that they wanted to do it, supposedly they did it, supposedly with success. But the secret of their hybrids they took to their graves. Even Ortolan, who dedicated his whole life to studying their work wasn't able to achieve much. Bue and Bang, who dragged you here - have you looked at them? They are hybrids, magical crossbreeds of ogres and trolls. Surely crossbowman Pashtor? No. He is - to say - in his image and likeness, fully a natural effect of the crossing of an ugly woman with an even

uglier man. But Bue and Bang, they are straight out of Ortolan's test tubes. You will ask: why, the devil, create such nasty beasts, why the hell create something like that. Well quite recently I didn't know that myself. Until I saw how they were disposing of lumberjacks and coalmen. Bue can with single tug tear head from shoulders. Bang tears children like they were chicken. And when you give them sharp devices, whoa! Then can make slaughter without equals. Ortolan, if you asked him, would tell you that hybridizing is a way to eliminating genetic illnesses, mumbles about heightened immunity for infectious diseases, such old-man's ramblings. But I know better. And you surely do too. Such creatures like Bue and Bang, like this thing that you tore Idarran's plate off of, exist for only one purpose: to kill. And that's good, as I needed tools for murder. I was not certain of my own abilities in this matter. As it proved later - unnecessarily.'

'But the sorcerers of Rissberg cross, mutate, and genetically modify, from dawn to dusk. And they have had many achievements, they've made such hybrids that take your breath away. All of them are in their opinion useful hybrids, supposedly making human existence easier and more pleasant. Truly, they are but a step from creating a woman with a flat back, so you could fuck her from behind and have a place to put down a glass of champagne and play cards.'

'But let's just get back ad rem, that is, my career in science. Having no successes I've had to create the appearance of such. It was easy.'

'You know, that there are worlds different than ours, access to which was cut off by the Conjunction of the Spheres? Universes called elemental and para-elemental planes. Occupied by creatures we call demons. The achievements of Alzur *et consortes* were explained by the assumption that they gained access to those planes and creatures. That they were able to summon these creatures, and make them their servants. That they took secrets and knowledge from those

creatures. I personally think that it's tall tale, but everyone believes so. And what can you do when belief is so strong? To be thought about as being close to discovering the old master's mysteries I had to make Rissberg believe that I can summon demons. Ortolan, who really practiced goetia a long time ago, would not teach me this art. He even allowed himself an insulting low appraisal of my magical talent, and advised me to remember my place. Well, for the good of my career I will remember. For now.'

The black cat, bored with stroking, jumped down. It stared at the witcher with a cold look of its golden, wide opened eyes. And went away with its tail standing up.

Geralt breathed with ever growing effort, he felt a shiver shaking his whole body, a shiver that he could not control. The situation was not good, and only two circumstances made it possible to hope for better. First - he still lived, and while there's life, there's hope as his teacher at Kaer Morhen, Vesemir used to say.

The second circumstance was the bloated ego of Degerlund. The wizard it seemed, fell in love with his own words in early youth, and this was apparently the love of his life.

'While I could not become a goet,' the sorcerer said, twisting the medallion, 'I had to pretend to be one. To make appearances. It's known that a demon summoned by a goet often gets free and spreads destruction. So I spread. A few times. I slaughtered a few villages. And they believed that it was a demon.'

'You would be surprised how naive they are. Once I cut off the captured peasant head and I stitched in its place the head of a great goat with biodegradable catgut, masking the stitch with gypsum and paint. And then I showed it to my learned colleagues, as a theoretical, effect of an extraordinarily complicated experiment in the domain of creating people with beast heads. The experiment was only partially successful, as

said effect did not live. They believed, mind you. I had grown in their eyes still higher! And they still expect that I would make something that would live. I assure them in this belief and every now and then stitching some head to a headless body.'

'But I digress. What was I talking about? Oh, yes, slaughtering villages. As I expected, the masters of Rissberg took it for acts of demons or energumens possessed by them. But I made a mistake - I overdid myself. No one would think twice about one village of lumberjacks, but we slaughtered a few. It was mostly Bue and Bang that did the job, but I also contributed.'

'In the first colony, Yews, or something like that I performed badly. When I saw, what Bue and Bang were doing I vomited, puked all over my cloak. It was beyond redemption. A cloak of good weave, decorated with silver mink, it cost me almost a hundred crowns. But later things went more smoothly. First - I clothed properly, in a working style. Secondly I came to like this. It turned out that it's quite pleasant to chop off somebody's leg and watch as he bleeds out from the stump. Or take someone's eye out. Or rip from a torn belly a handful of steaming guts... I will be short. Together with today it has been almost half a hundred people of both sexes and varied age.'

'Rissberg decided that they must stop me. But how? They still believed in my power as a goet, and were afraid of my demons. And they were afraid to anger Ortolan who was in love with me. The solution was supposed to be you. A witcher.'

Geralt's breath was shallow. He was growing more optimistic. His sight was improving fast, his shivering had ceased. He was immune to most of known toxins, white scorpion's venom which was deadly to normal people, turned out luckily to not be an exception. The symptoms, at the beginning which were quite severe, subsided and vanished as time passed, as it turned out a witcher's organism was able to neutralize the toxin quite fast. Degerlund was unaware of it, or in his arrogance had ignored it.

‘I came to know, that they want to send you after me. I’ll admit, I was afraid, I’d heard this and that about witchers, and you in particular. So I ran to Ortolan, save me my beloved master, I begged him. My beloved master scorned me at first, that it’s not nice to kill lumberjacks, and that I should stop it. But then he told me how to deceive you and trap you. How to catch you using the sigil that he himself tattooed on my manly chest few years ago. He forbid me however to kill you. He needs your eyes. To be more precise: he needs *tapetum lucidum*, the layer of tissue on the inside of your eyeballs, which amplifies and reflects the light directed at the photoreceptors, thanks to that, like a cat, you see in the darkness and in the night. The newest of Ortolan’s *idée fixe* is equipping the whole humanity with cat’s sight. In preparations for such a noble goal he plans to implant your *tapetum lucidum* into his mutation, and the *tapetum* has to come from a live donor.’

‘Ortolan, an ethical and merciful mage, after removing your eyeballs, in his limitless kindness plans to let you live. He thinks that it’s better to be blind than dead, and he is unwilling to cause pain to your lover, Yennefer of Vengerberg, whom he has a great and strange, in his case, liking. And at that Ortolan is close to achieving a regenerative formulation. In a few years you could show up and he could restore your sight. Are you glad? No? And rightly so. What? What do you want to say? I’m listening, speak.’

Geralt pretended to move his lips with effort. He didn’t have to pretend all that much. Degerlund stood from his chair, and leaned closer.

‘I don’t understand,’ he smirked. ‘I don’t care what you want to say. On the other hand I have few things to tell to you. Know that I have a gift for clairvoyance. I see, quite clearly, that when Ortolan sets you free, blind, Bue and Bang will be waiting. And you will end up in my laboratory, for good this time. I will vivisection you. Mainly for fun, but I’m also curious as to your internal organs. When I’m finished, let me use a butcher’s

terminology, I will cut your meat. I will send your remains to Rissberg as a warning, piece by piece. Let them see what happens to my enemies.'

Geralt gathered all his force. It was not much.

'If it comes to Yennefer,' the wizard leaned even closer, the witcher felt his minty breath, 'then in opposition to Ortolan, the thought of bringing her pain causes me immeasurable joy. I will cut off the piece that she prizes the most in you and send it to her in Vengerb...'

Geralt made a Sign with his fingers, and touched the wizard's face. Sorel Degerlund choked, felt back onto chair. He snorted. His eyes rolled, head dropping to his shoulder, the medallion dropped from his fingers.

Geralt got up, or tried to get up. The only thing that he achieved was falling from the chair onto the floor, his head just in front of Degerlund's shoes. Just in front of his nose was the medallion dropped by the wizard. On a golden oval in blue enameled was a dolphin nageant. The coat of arms of Kerack. He had no time to be surprised, or think to about it. Degerlund began wheezing loudly, it could be seen that he would awake in short time. The Sign worked, but barely and shortly. The witcher was too weakened by the venom.

He stood up holding the table, knocking books and scrolls off.

Pashtor rapidly entered the room. Geralt didn't even try any Signs. He took a grimoire bound in leather and brass from the table and hit the hunchback in the throat. Pashtor sat on the floor and with a swing the witcher hit him again, and would have repeat it, but the tome slipped from his numb fingers. He took a carafe and shattered it on Pashtor's forehead. The hunchback, although soaked in blood and red wine did not yield. He attacked Geralt without even getting the crystal dust out of his eyelids.

‘Bue!’ he shouted catching the witcher by his knees, ‘Bang! To me! To...’

Geralt grabbed the next grimoire off the table, a heavy one, with a binding incrustated with fragments of human skull. He hit the hunchback hard, bone fragments flew.

Degerlund wheezed, tried to rise his hand. Geralt understood that he was trying to cast a spell. The sound of clapping feet getting near alerted him that Bue and Bang were getting near. Pashtor slowly stood up, felt around, searched for his crossbow.

Geralt saw his sword on a table, and grabbed it. He staggered, barely standing. He caught Degerlund by the collar and put the blade on his throat.

‘Your sigil!’ he shouted into his ear. ‘Teleport us away!’

Bue and Bang armed with falchions, collided in the doorway, and became tangled. Not one of them thought to let the other get through. The doorway was creaking.

‘Teleport us!’ Geralt caught Degerlund by his hair, pulled his head back. ‘Now! Or I will cut your throat!’

Bue and Bang finally fell out of the door frame. Pashtor found his crossbow and lifted it.

Degerlund, with shaking hands undid his shirt, shouted the spell, but before the darkness embraced them he got out of the witcher's hold and pushed him away. Geralt caught a lacy sleeve and tried to pull, but at this time portal worked and all senses including touch vanished. He felt a strong force pulling him in, shaking and twisting like in vortex. The cold paralyzed. For a split second. One of longest and nastiest seconds of his life.

He bumped into the ground hard. On his back.

He opened his eyes. Around him there was absolute, impenetrable darkness. *I gone blind*, he thought. *I've lost my sight?*

He hadn't. It was simply a dark night. His - how it was called by Degerlund - *tapetum lucidum* activated, absorbing all light that there was to absorb in those conditions. After a while he saw the contours of some trees and bushes.

And above his head, when clouds scattered, he saw stars.

Interlude

Next day

One had to admit – the builders from Findetann knew their job, and were not lazy. Although that day Shevlov saw them at work a few times, he observed them putting up the next rammer with interest. Three bound logs formed a trestle, on top of which hanged a wheel. Through this wheel a rope was threaded, and a huge iron-clad block called a beetle by professionals was mounted on this rope. Shouting rhythmically the builders pulled at the rope, lifting the beetle high, to the very top, and then instantly released. The beetle hit with impetus on the pole that was put into the hole, driving it deep into the earth. Three, at most four hits were enough to make sure that the pole was solidly mounted. The builders rapidly disassembled the trestle, put all the logs on the cart, while one of them went up a ladder and put an enameled plate with the coat of arms of Redania on it - a silver eagle on red field.

Thanks to Shevlov and his free company - and thanks to the rammers and people working with them – the province of Riverside belonging to the Kingdom of Redania enlarged its area. Quite largely at that.

The master of the builders approached, wiping his forehead with his cap. He was in a sweat, although he did not do anything except throwing "fuck"s around. Shevlov knew what would be the master's question, because it was always the same question.

'Where do we put next one? Sir?'

'I'll show you,' - Shevlov turned his horse. 'Follow me.'

The teamsters lashed the oxes, the builder's vehicles started moving slowly over the ridge of the hill, through soil slightly softened by the storm on the previous day. Shortly they arrived at a pole with a black plate with three lilies over it. The pole was

already lying down, thrown into the bushes, Shevlov's company managed to take care of it. *That's how progress wins, thought Shevlov, that's how technology triumphs. A manually placed Temerian pole can be pulled out and laid in no time. A Redanian pole driven down with a rammer is not so easy to pull out.*

He waved his hands, giving directions to the builders. Some furlongs to the south. Even beyond the village.

The occupants of the village - if this name was even deserved by the few houses and shacks - were forced to gather in a central square by Shevlov riders who were circling around and pushing at the crowd with their horses. Escayrac, as always hot-tempered, did not spare his whip. Others were circling around the houses. Dogs were barking, women were howling, and children cried.

Three riders galloped to Shevlov. Lean as a board Yan Malkin called Burn. Prospero Basti better known as Sperry. And Aileach Mor-Dhu called Spintop on his grey mare.

'They are gathered, as you ordered,' said Spintop, putting her bobcat cap on back of her head. 'The whole village.'

'Keep them quiet.'

The gathered went silent, but not without the help of whips and sticks. Shevlov approached.

'What is this hellhole called?'

'Freedom.'

'Again Freedom? Not a single bit of fantasy in you simpletons. Lead the builders further, Sperry. Show them where to put the pole, or they will yet again put it in the wrong place.'

Sperry whistled, made a circuit on his horse. Shevlov approached the gathered crowd. Spintop and Burn stood at his sides.

‘Inhabitants of Freedom!’ He stood in his stirrups. ‘Hear what I say! On the will and order of the gracefully ruling king Visimir I announce that this land up to the border poles belongs to the Kingdom of Redania, and his grace king Visimir is your monarch and lord! You owe him respect, obedience and taxes. And you are behind schedule with the rent! On the king's orders you must pay it immediately. Into the chest of the bailiff present here.’

‘How is that?’ shouted someone from the crowd. ‘Why should we pay? We have already paid!’

‘We were stripped of money already!’

‘Temerian customs officers stripped you. Illegally, because here it's Redania, not Temeria. Look at where the poles are.’

‘But yesterday,’ howled one of the colonists, ‘it was Temeria here. So how can it be? We paid like we were told to...’

‘You don't have right!’

‘Which one,’ shouted Shevlov, ‘said that? I have the king's order! We are the king's soldiers! I say - who wants to stay here has to pay the tax to the last coin. Those opposing will be banished! You paid Temeria? Then you are Temerians it seems! Then go away, there beyond the border! But only carrying what you can grab with your hands, because the animals and farms belong to Redania!’

‘Robbery! This is robbery and outrage!’ shouted a huge man with rich hair, stepping in front of the crowd. ‘And you are not the king's soldier but bandits! You don't have the ri...’

Escayrac approached and hit the shouting man with his cowhide whip. The shouting man fell. Others were calmed

using spear shafts. Shevlov's company could manage the peasants. They had been shifting the border for a week and had pacified many villages.

'Someone is approaching in a hurry!' - Spintop indicated with her whip. 'Isn't that Fysh?'

'Yes, that's him in person,' Shevlov covered his eyes. 'Order the freak taken from the cart and delivered. And you yourself, take a few of our boys, make a round in the region. There are peasants hiding at the clearings, they need to be made aware to whom they should pay the rent. And if someone resists - you know what to do.'

Spintop smiled like a wolf, flashed her teeth. Shevlov felt compassion towards the settlers that he would visit. But he didn't care for their fate.

He looked at the sun. *We need to hurry*, he thought. *It would be good to have few more Temerian poles brought down before the noon. And ours placed.*

'Hey, you Burn, follow me. We will meet our guests.'

There were two guests. One of them had a straw hat, a well-defined jaw, and his whole face black from a few days of stubble. The second was of strong of build, a giant even.

'Fysh.'

'Sergeant.'

Shevlov snorted. Javil Fysh - not without a reason - alluded to their old acquaintance, from the time of their service in the regular army. Shevlov didn't like the memories of those times. He did not want to remember, neither Fysh, nor the service, nor the shitty non-commissioned officer pay.

‘Your free company,’ Fysh nodded at the village, from where shouts and crying could still be heard, ‘at work, I see? Punitive expedition? Will you burn?’

‘It's my business what I'll do.’

I won't, he thought with regret, because he like to burn villages, the company also liked it. But it was not ordered. His orders were to correct the border, tax the peasants. Drive the opposing ones away, but do not touch the property. It will serve new settlers that will be assembled here. From the north where there is overcrowding even on fallows.

‘I captured your freak, and have her in custody,’ he announced ‘As ordered. Bound. It was not easy, if I knew it, it would have cost you more. But we agreed on five hundred, so five hundred it is.’

Fysh gestured, the giant approached, gave Shevlov two purses. On his forearm he had a tattoo of a viper coiled into letter S around a dagger's blade. Shevlov knew this tattoo.

A rider from the company showed up, with a prisoner. The freak had over her head a bag stretching to her knees, bound with a rope in such way that her hands were bound too. From under the bag stuck out legs, lean as sticks.

‘What is it,’ indicated Fysh. ‘My dear sergeant. Five hundred novigradian crowns, a big price for a cat in the bag.’

‘The bag is free,’ replied Shevlov coldly. ‘Just as this good advice is. Do not unbind the bag and look inside.’

‘Why?’

‘It's risky. She bites. And can put a spell on you too.’

The giant pulled the prisoner onto his saddle bow. Calm up until this moment, the freak began struggling, kicking, and howling

from the bag. It didn't do her much good, as the bag was successful at binding her.

'How do I know,' asked Fysh, 'that it's for who I paid for? And not some random girl? Maybe even from this village?'

'You say that I lie?'

'Not in the least, no,' Fysh mitigated himself, looking at Burn stroking handle of his axe hanging on side of his saddle. 'I believe you Shevlov. I know that your word isn't smoke. We know each other, don't we? In good the old times...'

'I'm in a hurry, Fysh. Duty calls.'

'Farewell, sergeant.'

'I'm curious,' said Burn, looking at the group leaving. 'I'm curious for what they need her for. The freak. You didn't ask.'

'I didn't ask,' he confirmed coldly. 'Because you don't ask about such things.'

He felt sorry for the freak a bit. He didn't care much for her fate. But he guessed that it would be miserable.

In a world where death is the hunter, there is no time for regrets or doubts. There is only time for decisions. It doesn't matter what the decisions are. Nothing could be more or less serious than anything else. In a world where death is the hunter, there are no small or big decisions. There are only the decisions that a warrior makes in the face of his inevitable death.

Carlos Castaneda, *The Wheel of Time*

Chapter Twelve

On crossroads there stood a signpost, a pole with boards nailed to it, indicating the four directions of the world.

Dawn found him where he had fallen, thrown by the portal, on grass wet with dew, in a bush near a swamp or lake full of birds, which with quacking and gagging woke him up sharply from a deep and exhausting sleep. At night he had drunk a witcher's elixir, that he had providently always had on him, in a silver tube, that was hidden in a pouch sewn into his belt. The elixir, called Golden Oriole, was thought of as a panacea particularly efficient in fighting all kinds of poisonings, infections, and the effects of many toxins and venoms. Geralt saved himself with Golden Oriole more times than he remembered, however drinking the elixir never had effects like now. For a full hour after ingesting the elixir he fought with cramps and a strong gag reflex, fully aware that he can't let himself vomit. In effect although the fight was won, he had fallen into a deep asleep from exhaustion. This sleep probably brought on by a mix of scorpion venom, the elixir, and the journey through portal.

As to the journey, he was not sure what had happened, how and why the portal opened by Degerlund had thrown him here - in a swampy wasteland. He doubted that this was the effect of a purposeful wizard's action. A simple teleport malfunction was more probable, something that he was afraid would happen for over a week now. That which he heard of many times, and even witnessed a few times - when portal instead of transporting its user where it was supposed to go, threw them into a completely different place, an absolutely random one.

When he came to his senses, he held his sword in his right hand, and in clasped in his left hand, a piece of cloth, which in the morning he identified as being a sleeve of a shirt. The cloth was cut cleanly – as if with a knife. It had no traces of blood, so the teleport hadn't cut the hand, just the wizard's shirt. Geralt wished that it hadn't been only the shirt.

The worst portal malfunction, that had forever discouraged him from teleportation, Geralt had witnessed at the beginning of his witcher career. Among upstarts, rich nobles, and golden youth it was then fashionable to teleport from one place to another, and some wizards provided such entertainment for an enormous sum of gold. One day – the witcher had been at the place – a fan of teleportation had showed up from a portal cut precisely in half vertically. He looked like an open double bass case. And then everything had fallen and flowed out of him. The fashion for teleports noticeably dropped after this accident.

In comparison to something like that, he thought, landing in a wetland is simply luxury.

He wasn't yet fully restored, he still felt vertigo, and nausea. There was however no time for rest, He knew that portals left traces, and sorcerers had their ways to find where a portal was going. On the other hand, if this was - as he suspected – a defect portal, tracing its end point was almost impossible. But still, staying too long near the landing place was not prudent.

He started into a brisk march, to warm himself and liven up. *It all began with swords, he thought, splashing through puddles. How did Dandelion put it? A band of unfortunate chances and unlucky incidents? At first I lost my swords. Barely three weeks pass, and I lose my mount. Roach was left at Pine Copse, unless she has been found and appropriated by someone, will be eaten by wolves. Swords, horse. What now? It's scary to even think of that.*

After an hour of his journey through the wetland he made it to drier lands, and after another hour he arrived at a beaten road. And after half an hour on the road he came to a crossroads.

On crossroads there stood signpost, a pole with boards nailed to it, indicating the four directions of the world. All of the boards were covered with bird shit and full of holes left by bolts. Every passer-by it seemed felt obliged to shoot at the signpost with his crossbow. Therefore to read the signs, it was necessary to get closer.

The witcher got closer. And deciphered the directions. The board pointing east - as deduced by the sun's position - was labeled Chippira, the opposite direction was Tegmond. The third board pointed to Findetann, and the fourth no one knows where as the label was smeared with tar. Despite this Geralt knew roughly where he was.

The teleport had thrown him out in between two rivers, or rather two branches of the Pontar river. The southern branch, because of its size had even been given a name - it was listed on many maps as Embla. And the country - a rather small one - lying between the branches was named Emblonia. That what it used to be named. It quite long ago ceased to be. The Kingdom of Emblonia ceased to exist about a half century ago. And there were reasons for that.

In the majority of kingdoms, duchies, and other forms of authority and social communities in lands known to Geralt, things were going rather smoothly. The system was from time to time limping, but it nonetheless functioned. In the vast majority of communities the ruling class ruled, instead of just stealing, interrupted only by alternation between hazard and debauchery. The social elites were only in a small percent comprised of people who thought that hygiene was a prostitute's name, and gonorrhoea was a bird from the family of larks. Farmers and workers only in a small part lived thinking

only of today and today's vodka, totally unable to grasp with their vestigial minds such abstract ideas as tomorrow and tomorrow's vodka. The priests in their majority weren't tricking people out of their money, nor corrupting minors. Psychopaths, weirdos and idiots didn't strive for positions in government and administration, but were occupied by destroying their own family lives. Village fools sat in villages, behind barns, and not trying to act as tribunes. This was so in majority of countries.

But the kingdom of Emblonia was not in majority. It was a minority in each aforementioned aspect. And many more.

So it fell into decline. And eventually vanished. Its powerful neighbors, Temeria and Redania made sure it happened. Emblonia although a politically unbelievable creation, was not without its merits. It lay in the valley of the Pontar, which deposited silt carried by floods for centuries. And from the silt was formed alluvial soils - an extraordinarily fertile and agriculturally efficient soils. Under the rule of Emblonian kings they quickly became overgrown with flood-meadows, in which one could sew little and gather less. Temeria and Redania at the same time experienced a significant increase in population, and agriculture became vital. Emblonian alluvial soils tempted. So the two separated by a river kingdoms, without much ceremony simply divided Emblonia between them, and erased its name from maps. The part annexed by Temeria was called Pontaria, and the one that came to Redania was called Riverside. Hordes of farmers were brought to the silts. Under the supervision of efficient managers, and as a result of varied crop rotation and amelioration, the area, although small, soon became an agricultural Cornucopia.

Soon conflicts arose. The better harvest the pontarian silts had, the more violent the conflicts became. A treaty setting a border between Temeria and Redania included certain points that could be interpreted, and the maps attached to the treaty were useless, as cartographers had botched the job. And the river itself added to the problem, after longer periods of rain it could

change and shift its bed to two or even three miles away. And in such a way the Cornucopia became a bone of contention. The plans of dynastic marriages and alliances had to be abandoned, diplomatic notes began, then customs wars and trade retorsions. Border conflicts had grown in force, bloodshed seemed unavoidable. And finally it came to that. And then it came to bloodshed regularly.

In his journeys in search of work, Geralt usually avoided territories, in which armed conflicts were often, because it was hard to find jobs in such places. Getting to know once or twice regular soldiers, mercenaries and marauders, farmers were convinced that the werewolves roaming the region, strigas, trolls under the bridge or barrow wights are a generally small problem, and a small threat, and that they didn't want to spend money on witchers. That there are more important things, for example rebuilding a hovel burned down by soldiers, and buying new hens to replace the ones that were stolen and eaten by soldiers. For this reason Geralt barely knew Emblonia - or, according to newer maps, Pontaria and Riverside. In particular he had not a clue as to which of the indicated places was nearest, and which direction to go from the crossroads to leave the wasteland and get to any civilization as soon as possible.

Geralt chose Findetann, which was to the north. In this general direction was Novigrad, where he had to go, if he was to recover his swords before the fifteenth of July.

After an hour of brisk march he ran straight into that, which he wanted to avoid

In the proximity of the clearing there were farmer's buildings, a thatched hut and a few shacks. The fact that something was going on there was announced by the loud bark of a dog, and the mad sounds of birds. A child's shout and a woman's cries. Cursing.

He approached, cursing in his mind his bad luck and his doubts.

There were feathers floating everywhere, one of the armed soldiers was tying a fowl to his saddle. A second was hitting a farmer lying on the ground with a whip. Another was struggling with a woman in torn clothes with a child clasped to her.

He came nearer, without ceremony nor words and caught the lifted hand with the whip and twisted it. The soldier howled. Geralt pushed him towards the shack's wall. Having caught him by the collar he pulled the other soldier away from the woman and threw him at the fence.

'Go away,' he announced shortly. 'Now!'

He quickly drew his sword out of its scabbard to make sure he was treated in the proper way for the circumstances. And to give a strong reminder of the consequences of behaving improperly.

One of the soldiers laughed loudly. The second followed him, drawing his sword.

'Who do you attack, tramp. Are you looking for death?'

'Go away, I said!'

The soldier binding the fowl turned away from his horse. And turned out to be woman. Quite pretty, even despite the evil half opened eyes.

'You do not value your life?' it turned out that she could twist her lips in even less nice way 'And maybe you are retarded? Maybe you can't count? I'll help you. You are only one, and there are three of us. It means that there are more of us. It means that you should turn your back and get the fuck out in giant leaps, as fast as your legs can go. For as long as you have them.'

Go Away! I will not repeat myself.'

'Oh! Three is a piece of cake for you. And twelve?'

Hoofs beat all around. The witcher took a look. Nine mounted and armed. With spears pointed at him.

'You scum! Drop your sword!'

He didn't listen, he jump away to the shack's wall to have any form of protection for his back.

'What's happening, Spintop?'

'The settler was resisting,' snorted the woman called Spintop. 'He said that he would not pay as he had already paid, blah blah blah. We began to teach the simpleton a bit of reason, and suddenly this grey haired showed up, like from under the earth. A knight, it turns out, a defender of the poor and oppressed. Alone, yet he jumped at us.'

'So jumpy?' laughed one of the riders, pushing at Geralt with his horse and spear. 'Let's see how he will jump when we jab him a few times.'

'Drop your sword,' ordered a rider in a beret with feathers, looking like a commander. 'Drop your sword to the ground!'

'Should we kill him, Shevlov?'

'Leave him, Sperry.'

Shevlov looked at the witcher from height of his saddle.

'You will not drop your sword, will you?' he appraised. 'You're such a hero? Such a die-hard? You eat oysters with their shells on? And wash them down with turpentine? You kneel to no one? And you do nothing but stand in defense of the victims? Are you so sensitive to wrongs? Let's check. Burn, Ligenza, Floquet!'

The soldiers understood their commander immediately, it seems they were experienced in the matter, and had some exercises for such a procedure. They dismounted. One of them put a knife to the farmer's neck, the other caught the woman by her hair, a third caught the child. The child started screaming.

'Drop your sword,' said Shevlov. 'Now! Or else... Ligenza! Cut the farmer's throat.'

Gerald dropped his sword. They instantly jumped at him, pushing him against the boards. And threatened him with blades.

'Aha!' - Shevlov dismounted. 'It worked!'

'You're in trouble, defender of peasants,' he added dryly. 'You've interfered with and diverted the king's service. And I have a patent that enables me to put you under arrest and in court.'

'Arrest,' smirked the one called Ligenza. 'And make more work for ourselves? Let's put a noose around his neck and the branch. And that's that!'

'Or cut him to pieces, here and now.'

'And I,' said suddenly one of riders, 'have seen him before. He's a witcher.'

'A who?'

'A witcher. A warlock that kills monsters for money.'

'A warlock? Yuck! Kill him before he casts his spell.'

'Shut up Escayrac. Tell more, Trent. Where have you seen him, and upon what occasion?'

'It was in Maribor. It was at the mayor's, who hired that one here to kill some monster. I can't remember what monster exactly. But I remembered him, by his white hair.'

'Huh! If he attacked us, then someone had to have hired him!'

'Witcher's are for monsters. They defend people only from monsters'.

'Aha!' Spintop shove her bobcat cap to the back of her head. 'I said it! A Defender! He saw Ligenza beating the farmer with a whip, and Floquet preparing to rape the woman.'

'And he qualified you accordingly,' snorted Shevlov. 'As monsters! You were lucky then. I was kidding. Because the matter, as I see it, is simple. When I served in the military I heard quite different things. They were being hired for all things, espionage, body-guarding, assassination even. They were called The Cats. The one here Trent saw in Maribor, in Temeria. It means that he is a Temerian mercenary, hired to get us, due to the border poles. I was warned at Findetann against Temerian mercenaries, and they promised a reward for any mercenary caught. So we will get him bound to Findetann, give him to the commandant, and get our gold. Go on, bind him. Why are you standing? Are you afraid? He will not resist. He knows what we would do to the farmers if he does anything.'

'And who the fuck will touch him? He's a warlock!'

'Pthu!, damn him.'

'Chickens,' shouted Spintop, getting a leather strap from her saddlebag. 'Hare's skins! I will do it, if no one else has the balls.'

Geralt let himself be bound. He decided to submit. For now.

From the forest road came two carts pulled by oxen, loaded with poles and elements of some wooden constructions.

‘Let someone go to the carpenter and bailiff,’ pointed Shevlov. ‘Order them to get back. We have placed enough poles, it's done for today. We will make camp here. Look through the buildings and see if you can find some fodder for the horses. And something for us to eat.’

Ligenza picked up and examined Geralt's sword, Dandelion's purchase. Shevlov took it from him. He weighed it, took a swing, spun.

‘You were lucky,’ he said, ‘that we came here in force. He would have cut you to pieces, Spintop and Floquet. There are legends about witcher swords. The best steel, many times folded and forged, folded and forged. And additionally enchanted with special spells. Due to this they are of unheard strength, flexibility and sharpness. A witcher's blade cuts through plate armor and chain mails like through silk shirts, and cuts through every other blade like cake.’

‘It can't be,’ said Sperry. His mustache, like many others dripped with the cream they found in the house and drank to the bottom. ‘It can't be like cake.’

‘I don't believe it either,’ said Spintop.

‘It's hard,’ added Burn, ‘to believe something like that.’

‘Yeah?’ Shevlov stood in a fencing position. ‘So let one of you stand here, we will check. Will there be any volunteers? Eh? Why it's so silent?’

‘Alright,’ Escayrac stepped forward and unsheathed his sword. ‘I'll stand. Why not. We will see, if... Let's bind blades Shevlov.’

‘Let's bind. One, two... Three!’

The swords collided with a crash. The shattering metal moaned pitifully. Spintop almost shat when a broken shard flew near her temple.

'Fuck!' said Shevlov, looking in disbelief at the blade, broken off a few inches from the gold-plated cross guard.

'And not a dent on mine!' Escayrac lifted his sword. 'Heh, heh ,heh! Not a dent. Not a mark even!'

Spintop laughed girlishly, Ligenza bleated like a goat. The rest laughed.

'A witcher's sword?' snorted Sperry. 'Cuts like cake? You are fucking cake yourself.'

'This is... ' Shevlov pursed his lips. 'This is some fucking shit. This is rubbish. And you...'

He threw the broken shards of the sword away, stared at Geralt and pointed at him with an accusatory gesture.

'You are a cheater. A fraud and a cheater. You act like a witcher, and you bear such trash... You carry such fucking rubbish in place of a proper blade? And how many people, I'm curious, have you scammed of their money? How many poor people have you cheated from their gold, you fraud? Oh, you will confess all the sins in Findetann, the bailiff there will surely convince you to do so!'

He sighed, spat and beat his foot on the ground.

'On your horses! Let's get out of here!'

They rode away, laughing, singing and whistling. The settler with his family looked at them grimly, Geralt saw that their mouth moved slightly. It was easy to guess what fate and what accidents they wish on Shevlov and his company.

The settler in his boldest dreams could not expect that his wishes would be fulfilled. And that it would be so soon.

They got to the crossroads. A road to the west, leading through a ravine, was grooved by wheels and hooves, that was the direction - it could be seen - in which the carpenter's carts had gone. It was also the direction taken by the company. Geralt was dragged behind Spintop's horse, bound to her saddle with a leather strap.

Shevlov's horse riding in front whinnied and reared.

On the slope of the ravine something flashed suddenly, ignited and became a milky opalescent sphere. The sphere vanished, and in its place appeared a weird group. A few figures hugging each other, entangled.

'What devilry is this?' cursed Burn as Shevlov approached, who was calming down his horse 'What is it?'

The group separated. Into four figures. A lean, long-haired and slightly effeminate man. Two long-armed giants on bandy legs. And a hunchback midget with huge crossbow with two steel prods.

'Buueh-hhhhrrr-eeeehhh-bueeeeh! Bueeh-heeh!'

'To arms!' shouted Shevlov. 'To arms, company!'

The string of the huge crossbow clanked, and just a moment after the second one did too. Shevlov was stricken in the head and died on the spot. Burn, before he fell from his saddle was gazing into his belly through which a bolt had gone through.

'Attack!' The company like a single entity simultaneously unsheathed their swords. 'Attack!'

Geralt was not inclined to wait for the result of the battle without action. He arranged his fingers into the Igni sign, and burned through the leather strap binding his hands. He caught Spintop by her belt, and threw her from the saddle, and then he mounted her horse.

Something flashed blindingly, the horses started to whinny, shy and beat the air with their front legs. A few riders fell off, the trampled ones shouted. Spintop's grey mare also shied, before the witcher managed to calm her. Spintop got to her feet, jumped and caught the bridle. He pushed her away with a blow of his fist and made the mare gallop.

Leaning over his mount neck he did not see how Degerlund, with consecutive magical thunderbolts scared the horses, and blinded the riders. How the riders were struck by the roaring Bue and Bang, one of them armed with an axe, the other with a broad scimitar. He did not see blood spattering and he didn't hear the shouts of the murdered.

He didn't see how Escayrac died, and a few moments after him Sperry cut to pieces like fish by Bang. He didn't see Bue felling Floquet with his horse, and then pulling him from under this horse. The shriek of Floquet, like the sound of a slaughtered rooster, he did hear for a long time.

Up until the moment when he turned from the road and entered a forest.

If you want to prepare Mahakam potato soup, do it this way: if during summer gather chanterelles, if in fall yellow knights. And if it's winter or early spring take a large handful of dried mushrooms. In a small pot pour water, keep mushrooms in it for a full night, in the morning add salt, put half an onion in and boil. Sift out, but do not waste the decoction, pour it into another vessel, but be careful to avoid sand that is surely deposited on bottom of the pot. Boil potatoes, dice them. Take a rich piece of fat bacon, cut and fry. Cut onions into slices, strongly fry them in fat obtained from bacon, almost to burning. Take a huge pot, and put everything in, remembering the cut mushrooms. Pour the mushroom decoction and add water as appropriate, pour sour-floor leaven up to taste - how to prepare such leaven is described elsewhere. Boil, add pepper, salt and marjoram according to your liking. Decorate with melted pork fat. It's a question of taste to whiten with sour cream, but take into account: It's against dwarven tradition, it's the human way to whiten potato soup with cream.

Eleonora Rhundurin-Pigott, Mahakamian perfect cook, exact knowledge of the ways of boiling and preparing dishes from meat, fish and vegetables, and also flavouring various sauces, baking cakes, preparing jams, making cold meats, preserves, wines, vodkas, and various advantageous culinary secrets, necessary to every good and provident housewife.

Chapter Thirteen

Like almost every post station this one was situated at the crossroads on a crossing of two highways. A shingle covered roof with a penthouse supported with poles, a stable adjoining the building, a wood shack, all of above in a group of birches with white boles. It was empty. It had no guests, nor travellers it seemed.

The bone-tired grey mare stumbled, moving stiffly and wobbly, with her head lowered almost to the ground. Geralt lead her, and gave the reins to the stable boy. The stable boy looked to be forty years old, and was strongly hunched under the weight of these years. He stroked the mare's neck. He gave Geralt a stare from head to heels, and spat just in front of him. Geralt nodded and sighed. He was not surprised. He knew that he was guilty, that he had overdone it with the gallop, and in hard terrain at that. He wanted to be far from Sorel Degerlund and his goons. He knew that this was a poor excuse, and he himself did not hold people that brought their horses to such a condition in good esteem.

The stable boy moved away, pulling the mare along and mumbling something under his breath, it was not difficult to guess what exactly that was, and what he thinks. Geralt sighed, and pushed open the door and entered the station.

Inside it smelled nice, the Witcher realized that he had fasted for a day and night.

‘We have no horses,’ the Postmaster got ahead of his question, showing up from behind the bar. ‘And the nearest courier will show up in two days.’

‘I'd eat something,’ Geralt looked up at the rafters and ridges of the high ceiling. ‘I'll pay.’

‘But we have nothing.’

‘Whoa, whoa, Master Postmaster,’ a voice from a corner of the room could be heard, ‘is that the proper way to treat a traveller so?’

Behind the table in the corner, a dwarf was sitting. Fair haired and fair bearded, clothed in an embroidered claret-coloured jacket decorated with brass buttons on the front and on the sleeves. His cheeks were florid, and his nose was big. Geralt sometimes saw at the market atypical potatoes with a slight pinkish tint to the bulb. The dwarf’s nose was similar in colour. And in size.

‘You offered potato soup to me,’ the dwarf gave the postmaster a harsh look from under his bushy brows. ‘You will no tell me that your wife prepared just a single bowl of this soup, will you? I bet any money that there is enough for the newcomer too. Sit traveller, Will you drink beer?’

‘With pleasure, thank you,’ Geralt sat down, took a golden coin out of a hidden pocket in his belt. ‘But let it be me to have the pleasure to entertain you nice master. Against erroneous appearances I’m not a tramp nor hobo. I’m a Witcher. Doing my job, that’s way my clothes are rough and I look neglected. Hopefully you’ll be so nice to forgive. Two beers, Postmaster.’

The beer ended up at the table immediately.

‘My wife will presently bring the potato soup,’ grunted the postmaster. ‘And please don’t keep that against me. I must have food constantly ready. If there were some people of power traveling, king’s couriers or postal service... If I had not had enough and there was nothing to serve...’

‘Alright, alright...’ Geralt lifted his tankard. He was acquainted with many dwarves, he knew how to drink and how to make toasts.

‘For the success of a just cause!’

‘And the motherfuckers’ doom!’ finished the dwarf, clinking his tankard on Geralt’s. ‘It’s nice to drink with someone who knows customs and protocol. I’m Addario Bach. In principle it is Addarion, but everyone calls me Addario.’

‘Geralt of Rivia.’

‘Witcher Geralt of Rivia,’ Addario Bach wiped the froth from his moustache. ‘I’ve heard your name. You’ve been to places, no wonder you know the customs. And I, you see, came here from Cidaris by courier’s coach, or a stage-coach as they call it in the South. And I’m waiting for a change, a coach from Dorian to Redania, to Tretogor. Well, here is the soup. Let’s check how it is. The best potato soup, you should know, is prepared by our women in Mahakam. You can taste such like it in no other place. On a thick leaven of dark bread and rye flour, with mushrooms, and with well fried onions...’

The station’s potato soup proved to be excellent, mushrooms and well fried onion was not lacking, and if something was missing in comparison with the Mahakamian version Geralt didn’t know it, as Addario Bach ate quickly, in silence and without comments.

Suddenly the postmaster looked through the window, his reaction made Geralt look too.

In front of the station appeared two horses, both in a condition probably even worse than the one that Geralt captured. And there were three riders. Of mixed gender. The Witcher carefully looked around the room.

The door squeaked. Into the station walked Spintop. And after her Ligenza and Trent.

‘Horses...’ the postmaster stopped when he saw a sword in Spintop’s hand.

'You guessed it,' she finished. 'It is exactly horses that we need. Three of them. So move and get them immediately from the stable.'

'Horses are not ...'

The postmaster didn't get to finish this time either. Spintop jumped at him and flashed her blade in front of his eyes. Geralt stood up.

'Hey!'

All three turned in his direction.

'It is you,' said Spintop through clenched teeth. 'You bloody tramp.'

On her cheek was a large bruise, in the place where he had hit her.

'It's all because of you,' she spat. 'Shevlov, Burn, Sperry... All cut down, the whole company. And you, you son of a bitch, pulled me down from my horse, which you stole and cowardly ran away. And I will get even with you right now.'

She was short, and of a rather petite build. The Witcher was not deceived. He knew, because he had experienced it, that life was like a post office - even very nasty things can be delivered in inconspicuous packages.

'This is a post station!' shouted the postmaster from behind the bar. 'It is under the king's protection!'

'Did you hear?' asked Geralt calmly. 'It's a post station. Get away from here.'

'You, you grey-haired scamp are still bad at math,' Spintop hissed. 'Do you again need help with counting? You are one and there are three of us. It means there is more of us.'

‘There is three of you,’ he stared at them, ‘and I’m only one. But there is not more of you. This is a kind of mathematical paradox, and an exception from the rule.’

‘This means?’

‘This means you should get the fuck out, quickly. As long as you are still able to.’

He saw a flash in her eye, he instantly knew that she belonged to those few that can in a fight strike at a place completely different than that one at which they stare. Spintop must have only trained this trick rather recently as Geralt effortlessly avoided a murderous cut. He outmanoeuvred her with a short half-turn, cut her knee out from under her with a kick that threw her into the bar. She hit the boards with a loud thump.

Ligenza and Trent must have seen Spintop in action earlier, because her failure just made them freeze with mouths open. For a long enough time that the Witcher managed to get hold of a broom that he had spotted earlier in the corner. Trent was hit first in face with the birch branches, then in the head with the handle. Geralt pushed the broom under his leg and kicked in the bend of the knee.

Ligenza calmed down, unsheathed his sword, and jumped, cutting from the ear. Geralt dodged the blow with a half-turn, then twisted in a full turn, stretched his elbow, and let the impetus carry his elbow into Ligenza’s windpipe, wheezing, he fell down on his knees. Before he fell Geralt took the sword out of his hand and threw it vertically up. Sword went into the rafters and stayed there.

Spintop attacked low, Geralt barely had time to dodge. He hit her in the hand that held the sword, caught by her arm, turned around, hit her legs with the broom handle and threw her into the bar. There was thump.

Trent jumped at him, Geralt hit him with the broom in the face, once, twice, three times, very quickly. Then with the handle on one temple, then the second and with a swing in the side of his neck. Then he put the handle behind his legs, came near, caught his hand, bent it back, took the sword from it, and threw it up. The sword went into the rafters and stayed there. Trent took a step back, stumbled on bench, and fell down. Geralt decided that there was no need to hurt him further.

Ligenza stood on his feet, but stood still, with his hands down, and he stared up, at the swords stack in the rafters, high beyond reach. Spintop attacked. She spun the blade, feinted, cut with a swing. The style was good in tavern brawls, in a crowd and bad lighting. The witcher was not disturbed by any lighting, or lack of thereof, and he knew who to stall well. Spintop's blade cut the air, and her feint turned her in such a way that the witcher found himself behind her back. She shouted, when he put the broom handle under her arm, and twisted her elbow joint. He took the sword from her fingers, and he thrust her away.

'I was thinking that,' he looked at the blade, 'I'd keep this one. As a payment for the effort put in. But I changed my mind. I will not carry a bandit's weapon.'

He threw the sword up. The blade went into the rafters and shook. Spintop, pale as paper, flashed her teeth from behind her curved lips. She hunched and with a quick move took a dagger out of her boot.

'This is,' he appraised looking her in the eye, 'a very stupid idea.'

On the road, hooves beat, horses snorted, weapons clinked. In front of the station there was suddenly a lot of riders.

'If I was in your shoes,' Geralt said to the three. 'I'd sit on a bench in the corner. And pretend that I'm not here.'

The pushed doors thundered, spurs rattled, and into the room entered soldiers in fox caps and short black jackets with silver braids. They were led by a moustached man with a scarlet scarf.

‘The Royal service!’ he announced, putting his fist on a mace that he held behind his belt. ‘Master Corporal Kovacs, second squadron of the first banner, of the armed forces of the gracefully ruling, King Foltest, lord of Temeria, Pontaria and Mahakam. In pursuit of a Redanian band.’

In the corner on the bench a very focused Spintop, Trent and Ligenza looked at the tips of their shoes.

‘The border was crossed by a wanton group of Redanian plunderers, mercenary scum and robbers,’ continued corporal Kovacs. ‘These rogues felled border poles, burned, sacked, tortured and murdered royal subjects. In skirmish with royal soldiers they were beaten and now they raise their heads, they hide in forests, they wait for an opportunity to cross the border. Such may have shown up in the region. I warn that aiding them, providing them with information or any kind of support will be treated as an act of treason, and punished with the noose.’

‘Have there been seen any strangers here? Newcomers? That means, suspects. And I tell you that for indicating a bandit there is reward. One hundred orens. Postmaster?’

The Postmaster shrugged, hunched, mumbled something, and began cleaning the bar leaning very low over it.

The Corporal looked around, and his clanking spurs approached Geralt.

‘You are... Whoa! I know you, it seems I saw you. In Maribor. I recognize you by the white hair. You are a witcher, aren't you? A Hunter and killer of various monsters? Right?’

‘Exactly that.’

‘Then I have nothing against you, and your profession is a noble one,’ said the corporal, the looked at Addario Bach. ‘The Master dwarf is above suspicion too, among the bandits there were no dwarves. But too keep things in order I'll ask: What do you do at the station?’

‘I came by a coach from Cidaris and I'm waiting for a change. The time passes slowly so I sit here with Master Witcher, we talk and we make beer into urine.’

‘A change then,’ repeated the corporal. ‘I understand. And you two? Who are you? Yes, I'm speaking to you!’

Trent opened his mouth. And blinked. And mumbled something.

‘What? What? Stand up! Who are you?’

‘Leave him officer,’ said Addario Bach. ‘He's my servant, hired by me. He is a fool, a complete idiot. It runs in his family. By great luck his younger siblings are normal. His mother understood finally that while pregnant she should not drink water from a puddle in front of the infectious diseases ward.’

Trent opened his mouth even wider, nodded his head and moaned. Ligenza made a move as if to stand up. The dwarf put a hand on his shoulder.

‘Sit, boy. And be silent, be silent. I know the theory of evolution, I know from what creature humans descended you don't have to remind me of this all the time. Forgive him too, commandant. He is also my servant.’

‘Alright...’ the corporal still looked around suspiciously.

‘Servants that is it. If you say so... And who is she? The young girl in a man's clothes? Hey! Stand up, I want to take a look at you. Who are you? Answer when you are asked!’

‘Heh, heh, Master Commandant,’ laughed the dwarf. ‘She? She's a harlot, a scarlet woman that is. I hired her in Cidaris to

fuck her. With some ass a journey is easier on the soul, every philosopher will confirm it.'

'Oh yeah,' the corporal smirked. 'And I had not recognized her at a glance. It's obvious. She's a half-elf.'

'Your dick is half,' snarled Spintop. 'A half of what is considered standard.'

'Silence, silence,' Addario Bach mitigated her. 'Don't be mad colonel. It just happened that I've got such a quarrelsome whore.'

Into the room ran a soldier to give a report. Corporal Kovacs straightened up.

'The band was spotted!' he announced. 'We must go in pursuit on the double! Forgive the inconvenience. Men!'

He left and the soldiers followed. After a while, hoof beats could be heard.

'Forgive me,' Addario Bach said to Spintop, Trent and Ligenza after a moment of silence, 'this show, forgive my spontaneous words, and simple-minded gestures. In fact, I don't know you, I don't care about you, and I rather don't like you, but I don't like hangings even more. The sight of hanged men with dangling feet depresses me greatly. Thus mine dwarven frivolities.'

'To those dwarven frivolities you owe your lives,' added Geralt. 'It would be fitting to thank the dwarf. I saw you there at the farmer's abode, I know what kind of birds you are. I would not wave a finger in your defence, and I would not be able, or willing to make such a show like the Master dwarf here. And you would be hanging, all three of you. So go away. I would advise you to choose a direction opposite to that chosen by the corporal and his riders.'

'No way,' he cut off, seeing their eyes going up in the direction of the swords stuck into the rafters. 'You will not get those. You will be less tempted by sacking and extortion. Go!'

'I was nervous,' sighed Addario Bach, after the door closed behind the three. 'Damn it, my hands are still shaking. Aren't yours?'

'No,' Geralt smiled at the memories. 'I'm slightly... deficient in that regard.'

'Some have it good,' the dwarf grinned. 'They even get nice deficiencies. Another beer?'

'No, thank you.' Geralt shook his head. 'Time to go. I find myself - how to express it - in a situation in which haste is advisable. And it is rather unwise to stay too long in one place.'

'Yeah I saw that. And I don't ask questions. But you know what, witcher? I somehow lost all will to stay at this station and wait two whole days for a coach. First - boredom would kill me. Second - this girl you overwhelmed with a broom gave me a weird stare while leaving. It seems that she is not one to be clapped on the ass and called a whore without punishment. She might return. And I prefer to not be here when that happens. So maybe we will go on our way together?'

'Gladly,' Geralt smiled again. 'With a good companion travel is easier on the soul, every philosopher will attest that. Only if the direction is good for both of us. I need to get to Novigrad. I have to be there before the fifteenth of July. Necessarily before the fifteenth.'

He had to be in Novigrad at the latest on the fifteenth of July. He made it a point when the wizards hired him, buying two weeks of his time. *No problem*, Tzara and Pinety said looking at him with superiority. *No problem, witcher. You will be in Novigrad before you can look around. We will teleport you straight into the main street.*

‘Before the fifteenth, eh?’ the dwarf tugged at his beard. ‘Today is the ninth. It's not much time, as it is quite a travel. But there may be way for you to make it.’

He stood up, took from a peg and put on a pointy hat with a broad rim. He threw a bag over his shoulder.

‘I will explain on the road. We should set off to the trail, Geralt of Rivia. Because that direction is best for me.’

They marched briskly, maybe even too much so. Dwarves, although in need and for comfort could use any vehicle or mount any animal, decidedly preferred marching, they were unbested walkers. A dwarf could walk thirty miles a day, a distance travelled by a man on horse, and at that carrying a load that a human wouldn't be even able to lift. It was beyond human abilities to keep up in a march with a dwarf without any load. Witchers too. Geralt forgot that, and after some time he was forced to ask Addario to slow down.

They marched through forest roads, and sometimes through wasteland. Addario knew the way, his orientation in this terrain was fine. In Cidaris, he explained, lives his family, so numerous as to make family parties common, those being weddings, christenings, funerals or wakes. According to dwarven custom the only excuse for not showing up was being dead, and a confirmed death certificate was needed, living family members could not avoid parties. Thus Addario knew the road to Cidaris and back perfectly.

‘Our goal,’ he explained, marching, ‘is the village of Windley, lying on the shore of the Pontar. In Windley there is a wharf, barges and boats moor there frequently. If we are lucky we will find a vessel. I need to get to Tretogor so I will get off at Crane Islet, you will have to stay on deck longer and after three or four days you will be in Novigrad. Believe me this is the fastest way.’

'I believe you. Slow down Addario, please. Do you work in a profession related to walking? Are you a chapman?'

'I'm a miner. In a copper mine.'

'Sure. Every dwarf is a miner. And works in a mine in Mahakam. And stays at the front with a pickaxe.'

'You fall victim to stereotypes. You will say that every dwarf curses foully. And after few a drinks jumps at every man with an axe.'

'No, I will not say that.'

'My mine is not in Mahakam, but in Copper, near Tretogor. And I don't stand there and extract, but play the horn in a miners' concert band.'

'Curious.'

'Curious,' the dwarf laughed, 'is something completely different. One of our best pieces is called "March of the Witchers". It goes like this: Tara-rara boom, boom, oomta-oomta, rim-tim-tim, paparara-tara-rara, tara-rara, boom, boom, boom...'

'How the hell you came up with title? Have you ever seen marching witchers? Where? When?'

'To be honest,' Addario saddened a bit, 'that is a slightly re-arranged "Parade of the Strongmen". But all miners' bands play some "Strongmen Parades", "Athletes Entries" or "Marches of Old Companions". We wanted to be original. Tara-rara boom boom!'

'Slow down or I will pass out!'

In the middle of the forest it was lonely. Not so in mid-forest meadows and clearings. They were full of work. Hay was mowed, and put into stacks. The dwarf greeted the rippers with merry shouts, and they responded. Or not.

‘This reminds me,’ Addario pointed at the workers, ‘of another march played by our band. It is titled "Hayman king". It's frequently played, particularly in the summer time. Also sung. We have a poet in the group, he wrote nice rhymes, its possible even a Capella. It goes like this:

*Men are mowing the grasses
Women carry the hay
They look into the sky
And are afraid of the rain*

*On hillock we stand
From rain we protect
Our dicks we wave
To make the clouds go away*

‘And *da capo!* It's good for marching, isn't it?’

‘Slow down, Addario!’

‘It's impossible to slow down! It's a marching song! March with the rhythm and the tempo!’

On a hill they could see the whitened remnants of wall, a ruin of a building and the characteristic of a tower could also be seen. From this tower Geralt was able to recognize the ruins as a temple - he could not recall to which deity but he hard things about it. A long time ago priests lived here. It was said that when nobody could stand their rapacity, debauchery and licentiousness any longer the villagers exiled the priests and drove them into deep forests where they tried to convert the forest leprechauns. With poor results reportedly.

‘The Old Hermitage,’ Addario said. ‘We are on the proper track, and our timing is good. By the evening we will be in Forest Dam.’

The stream along which they walked uphill murmured on stones and rapids, here it spilled out broadly creating a large pond. A wooden dam crossing the stream helped in that. There was some work going on at the dam, a group of people busied themselves there.

‘We are in Forest Dam,’ Addario said. ‘The construction that you see down there is just the splash dam. It enables the wood from the cutting to float. The river - as you can see is not fit for floating on itself, it's too shallow. The water is dammed up, the wood is gather and then the dam is opened. A huge wave is created which enables floating. This way the raw materials for charcoal are transported. And charcoal...’

‘Is necessary to smelt iron,’ finished Geralt. ‘And smelting is the most important and most prospective branch of industry. I know. Recently a certain wizard explained this to me. The wizard was well versed in charcoal and smelting.’

‘Not a strange thing, that,’ snorted the dwarf. ‘The Chapter of Wizards holds a majority of shares in the industrial center near Gors Velen, and a few steel mills and smelters are owned by them exclusively. Wizards get large profits from smelting. From other branches too. Maybe they even deserve it, after all they were the ones to develop the technology. But they could end the hypocrisy and admit that magic is not charity, not society-serving philanthropy, but for industry and generating a profit. Come, there is a small inn here, we will rest. And probably we will have to stay the night too as sun is setting.’

The inn did not deserve the name, but there was nothing strange in that. It served woodcutters and lightermen, who did not care where they drink as long as there was something to drink. A shack with thatch full of holes, a roof supported on poles, a few tables and benches made of barely planed boards, a stone fireplace; more luxuries local society neither needed

nor expected. All that counted was the barrels standing behind the wall, from which the bartender poured beer, and sometimes the sausages which could be, for a charge baked over coals by the ale-wife, if she was in a proper mood.

Geralt and Addario also didn't have heightened needs, particularly taking into account that the beer was fresh, from a recently opened barrel, and a few compliments convinced the ale-wife to roast them a pan of blood sausages with onions. After a whole day of travel through the deep forest Geralt thought this blood sausage nearly equal with a leg of calf with vegetables, boar's shoulder, turbot in ink and other masterpieces of the chef of the Natura Rerum.

But, frankly saying, he did miss it.

'I'm curious,' Addario called the ale-wife with a gesture and ordered another round of beer. 'If you know the fate of this prophet?'

Before them where they sat behind the table, they looked at the moss-covered stone standing near an old oak. Letters carved in the overgrown surface of the monolith informed them that in this exact place, on a day of the Birke holiday of the year 1133 post Resurrection, the Prophet Lebioda preached a sermon to his students, and the obelisk was founded to honor this event and erected in 1200 by Spirydon Apps, master of passmanterie from Rinde, a shop in the Small Market, quality high, prices low, we invite you.

'Do you know,' Addario scraped the rest of the blood sausage from the pan. 'The history of this Lebioda, called a prophet? I mean the true history.'

'I don't know any.' The witcher cleaned his pan with a piece of bread. 'Neither true, nor made-up. I was not interested.'

'So listen. The thing happened about a hundred years ago, it seems not so long ago after the day carved in this stone. Now,

as you surely know, dragons are seldom seen, unless in wild mountains among wastelands. But then they showed up more often and could be troublesome. They learned that pastures full of cattle are great eating houses, where you can eat to full satiety and without effort. Luckily for farmers, even large reptile feasted only once or twice per quarter, but it ate so much that he could threaten breeding, particularly when he became fond of a certain area. One huge dragon took a liking to a certain village in Kaedwen. He flew into the village, ate a few sheep, two or three cows, as a dessert he caught some fish from the ponds. To finish things he breathed fire, setting a barn or haystack on fire and flew off.' The dwarf took a pull of his beer and belched.

'The landowners tried to scare off the dragon, tried traps and various tricks, nothing worked. Fate decided that near Ban Ard came Lebioda, already famous, titled prophet, with his hordes of followers. The farmers asked for his help and to much surprise he didn't refuse. When the dragon came, Lebioda went to the pasture and began doing exorcisms over him. The dragon at first roasted him with flame, like a duck. And then just swallowed him. Simply swallowed. And flew off to the mountains.'

'Is that the end?'

'No. Listen further. The prophet's pupils cried, despaired. And then they hired trackers. Ours, dwarves that is, well versed in dragon lore. Those trackers went after that dragon for a month. Standard procedure; they followed piles of shit left by the dragon. And the pupils knelt before every heap and, crying intensely, searched for the remains of their master. At last they completed their work, or they thought so, because what they gathered was chaotic mixture of not too clean human, bovine and sheep bones. All of this lies now in sarcophagus somewhere in Novigrad. As a miraculous relic.'

‘Admit it Addario. You made up this story. Or at least added some colour to it.’

‘Why do you suspect so?’

‘Because I know a certain poet well. This poet, when he has to choose between a true story and an attractive story, will always choose the second, spicing it up further. All accusations in this matter he rebukes stating that even if something is not true, it doesn't have to be a lie.’

‘I can guess the poet. Dandelion, obviously. And history has its laws.’

‘History,’ the witcher smiled. ‘Is a relation, mostly mendacious, of events mostly irrelevant, given by historians, mostly idiots.’

‘And this time, I too recognize the author of the quote,’ grinned Addario Bach. ‘Vysogota of Corvo. Philosopher and ethicist. Also historian. And when it comes to the prophet Lebioda... Well, as I said, history is history. But I've heard that priests sometimes take the prophet's remains out of sarcophagus and present them to believers for adoration. If I was there I would refrain from kissing.’

‘Refrain I will.’ Promised Geralt. ‘Since we are already talking about Novigrad...’

‘Easy.’ The dwarf anticipated his question. ‘You'll manage. We will rise early in the morning, and will soon be in Windley. We will catch some craft and you will be in Novigrad on time.’

I hope so, thought the witcher, I hope so.

Humans and beasts are different species, but foxes are between humans and beasts. The dead and the living walk different roads, but foxes are between the dead and the living. Transcendents and monsters travel different paths, but foxes are between transcendents and monsters. The paths of light and darkness never converge: fox-spirits stand somewhere between the two. Immortals and demons go different ways; fox-spirits stand somewhere between the two.

Ji Yun, scholar from times of Qing dynasty

Chapter Fourteen

Night brought a storm.

Having rested well in the attic of a barn, they started their journey at the crack of dawn, during a cold but sunny morning. Keeping to the chosen path, they crossed the oak and hornbeam forests, marches and wet meadows. After hours of forced march, they came upon buildings.

‘Windley.’ Indicated Addario Bach. ‘This is the wharf I was talking about.’

They got to the river; an invigorating wind swept around them. They entered a wooden jetty. The river formed here a broad backwater, huge as a lake; it was hard to discern the current that was a bit further out. From the banks to the very water hung the branches of willows, osiers and alders. Everywhere swam, emitting various sounds, a horde of water birds: ducks, teals, pintails, loons and grebes. Fitting into the scenery and not scaring all of this feathery crowd, was a small vessel floating gracefully through the waters. With a single mast, and a single large sail in back and few small triangular ones in front.

‘It's rightly said,’ said Addario looking out over the show. ‘That these are the three most beautiful sights in the world; a ship under full sails, a horse in gallop and, you know, a naked woman in bed.’

‘A naked woman in dance.’ The witcher smiled slightly. ‘In dance. Addario.’

‘Alright, so be it.’ Agreed the dwarf. ‘Naked in dance. And this craft, you must admit, is far from ugly on the water.’

‘It's not a craft, it's a vessel.’

'It's a sloop,' corrected a large man in orange jacket, approaching. 'A sloop my dear sirs. It's easy to infer from the sails. A large mainsail, a staysail and two jibs. Classic.'

The craft – or sloop - came to the jetty near enough so they could admire the figurehead on its fore. The sculpture instead of presenting a busty woman, siren, dragon or sea serpent showed a bald old man with a crooked nose.

'Damn,' muttered Addario under his breath. 'The Prophet is following us or what?'

'Sixty-four feet long,' a short man with voice full of pride described further. 'Total surface area of the sails three thousand three hundred feet. This is my dear sirs is "Prophet Lebioda", a modern Kovir-type sloop, built in the Novigrad shipyard, commissioned not a year ago.'

'You know as we can see' Addario Bach snorted 'this sloop. You know a lot about it.'

'I know everything, for I'm the owner. You see the banner its flying? There is a glove on it. That is the coat of my enterprise. Sirs will excuse me: I'm Kevenard van Vliet, businessman working in the white-leather branch.'

'We're happy to make your acquaintance', the dwarf shook the artisan's right hand while giving him a watchful stare. 'And we congratulate the craft, because it's beautiful and fast. It's even a bit weird that it's here in Windley, in a backwater, far from the main course of the Pontar. It's also strange that the craft is on the water, and you, the owner on land. Does it mean trouble?'

'Why, no. No trouble at all,' disclaimed the owner, Geralt judged too fast and too eagerly. 'We just get supplies here, that's all. And to this wasteland, well not will but dire need brought us. Because if you come to the rescue you don't watch the road. And this is a rescue expedition.'

‘Master van Vliet,’ one of the approaching thugs interrupted, under whose boots jetty trembled. ‘Don’t go into detail, I’m sure they are not interested in matters here. And they should not be.’

There were five thugs that approached from the village. The one that talked, wearing a straw hat, was distinguished because of his strongly sketched out jaw, dark with a few days old stubble, and propounded chin. a chin that had a crack that made it look like a miniature ass. He was accompanied by a big ruffian, a true giant, however not in the least bit dumb judging by his face or his stare. The third who was short and tanned was a true sailor in every inch and detail down to his wool cap and earring. Two other evidently mates were carrying boxes with supplies.

‘I don’t think that these gentlemen,’ continued one with the chin, ‘whomever they are, must know anything about us, what we are doing here, and other private things of ours. These gentlemen surely understand that our private matters are none of anyone’s business, and particularly not ones met randomly and quite unknown.’

‘Well, maybe not completely unknown,’ interjected the giant. ‘It’s true that I don’t know Master dwarf, but your white hair gives you away sir. Geralt of Rivia, I think? A Witcher? Or am I mistaken?’

I’m becoming famous, thought Geralt putting his hands over his chest. Too famous. Maybe I should dye my hair? Or shave myself bald, like Harlan Tzara?

‘A witcher!’ Kevenard van Vliet pronounced with visible shock. ‘A real witcher! What a luck! Dear gentlemen! He’s a gift from heaven.’

‘The famous Geralt of Rivia!’ repeated the giant. ‘We are lucky to have had met him, now in our situation. He will help us get out...’

‘You talk too much, Cobbin,’ the man with the chin stopped him.
‘Too much and too fast.’

‘What are you saying, Master Fysh?’ the businessman snorted.
‘Can't you see what occasion has shown up? Help from
someone like the witcher...’

‘Master van Vliet! Leave it to me. I have more experience with
guys like this one here.’

Silence fell in which the man with the chin gave an inspecting
look to the witcher.

‘Geralt of Rivia,’ he said at last. ‘Slayer of monsters and
supernatural creatures. A slayer, I would say, that is legendary.
I would if I believed in all these legends. And where are your
famous witcher swords? I somehow can't see them.’

‘Not surprising,’ riposted Geralt, ‘that you can't see them.
Because they are invisible. Why, you haven't heard the legends
about witchers swords? Passersby can't see them. They show
up when I say a spell. When there is need. If there is need.
Because I can give a beating even without swords.’

‘I'll take your word for it. I'm Javil Fysh. I chair an enterprise in
Novigrad, providing various services. This is my partner, Peter
Cobbin. This is Boxcray, the captain of "Prophet Lebioda". And
already known to you is Kevenard van Vliet, owner of this ship.’

‘I see, witcher,’ continued Javil Fysh, ‘that you are standing on
a jetty in the only village in radius of about twenty miles. To get
to civilized roads you would need to march long through
forests. I think that you would rather get away on something
that floats. And "Prophet" happens to be sailing to Novigrad.
And can take up passengers. You and your dwarf. Agreed?’

‘Continue, Master Fysh. I'm listening carefully.’

‘Our little ship is as you can see no river tub, you have to pay
for a ride, and it's not cheap. Don't interrupt. Would you be

willing to take us under care of your invisible swords? We can estimate the price of your witcher services that is escorting and guarding during the ride, from here to Novigrad by road and compare it to the price of the ride. How much are your witcher services then?’

‘With searching or without?’

‘What?’

‘In your proposition,’ said Geralt calmly, ‘there are hidden loopholes and catches. If I have to look for them myself, it will cost more. It will be cheaper if you would decide on truthfulness.’

‘Your lack of trust,’ responded Fysh coldly, ‘raises some suspicions. Because only cheaters see quibbling everywhere. As they say: a guilty person never behaves naturally. We want to hire you as a guard. It's a rather simple task, and devoid of all subtleties. What loopholes can there be?’

‘Guarding is a lie,’ Geralt did not lower his eyes. ‘Made up on the spot and as plain as a pikestaff.’

‘You think so?’

‘I think so. Because Master van Vliet let loose a word about rescue mission, and you, Master Fysh cut him off abruptly. Then your coworker tells about situation in need of getting out of. If we are to collaborate then please tell me without subterfuge - what is this expedition, and who is to be rescued. Why it's so secret. What you need to get out of?’

‘We will explain this.’ van Vliet said before Fysh. ‘We will explain it all, Master Witcher.’

‘But on board,’ Captain Boxcray interrupted hoarsely up until this moment silent. ‘There is no point in further dallying at this quay. The wind is good. Let us sail away, dear sirs.’

*

Having caught wind in its sails the "Prophet Lebioda" sailed fast through the broadly stretched waters of the bay, keeping course on the main water trail, maneuvering among small islands. Ropes cracked, the boom creaked, and the flag-staff merrily fluttered its banner with the glove.

Kevenard van Vliet kept his promise. As soon as the sloop departed from the quay at Windley, he gathered all interested parties at the bow and began explanations.

'The expedition taken up by us,' he began, staring time after time at sullen Fysh, 'has a goal of rescuing a child. Xymena de Sepulveda, only daughter of Briana de Sepulveda. You must have heard this name before. Tanneries of furs, workshops both wet and tanning ones, also furrier workshops. A huge yearly production, great money. If you see any lady in beautiful and expensive fur this surely will be a product of these workshops.'

'So it was her daughter that was kidnapped. For ransom?'

'That's just it. No. You won't believe, but... A monster took the girl. A Vulpess. A she-fox. A Changeling that is.'

'You are right,' said witcher coldly, 'I don't believe you. Changelings, or vixens or more precisely vulpess kidnap only elven children.'

'That's right, exactly right, to the letter' groaned Fysh. 'Because, although it's hard to believe the biggest furrier workshop in Novigrad is managed by a non-human. Breainne Diarbhail ap Muigh, a pure blood elf. Widow of Jacob de Sepulveda, after whom she got all the wealth. The family was unable to overturn the will, nor recognize the marriage as invalid, although it's against custom and godly laws...'

'To the point,' interrupted Geralt. 'To the point, please. You tell me that this furrier, a pure blood elf ordered you to recover her lost child?'

‘Are you trying to fool us?’ Fysh winced. ‘You want to catch us in a lie? You know very well that elves, when their children are kidnapped by vixen never try to get them back. They count them as lost and forget about them. They believe they were destined to be vixen.’

‘Briana de Sepulveda,’ interrupted Kevenard van Vliet, ‘was pretending at the beginning too. She despaired, but in an elven manner, secretly. On the outside a stone face, dry eyes... *Va'esse deireádh aep eigan, va'esse eigh faidh'ar*, she repeated, which translates to...’

‘Something ends, something begins.’

‘Exactly. But it's nothing, just foolish elven talk, nothing ends, what and why is supposed to end? Briana has lived among humans for a very long time, according to our laws and customs, she is only non-human by blood, and by heart she's almost human. Elven beliefs and superstition are strong, that's true, Briana may be calm to show off to other elves, but she secretly misses her daughter, that's obvious. She would give all to get her only girl back, vixen or no... You are right, Witcher, she has not asked anything, she had not sought help. Despite this we decided to help, being unable to bear such despair. The whole merchant guild raised funds and paid for this expedition. I gave "Prophet" and my own attendance, just like Master Parlaghy, whom you will meet shortly. But because we are businessmen not adventurers, we asked for the help of Master Javil Fysh, known to us as a man of wit, not afraid of risk, experienced in tough situations, famous for his knowledge and experience...’

‘Known for his experience, Master Fysh,’ Geralt looked at the mentioned man, ‘failed to inform you that this rescue expedition is futile, and is upfront doomed to fail. I see two explanations: Master Fysh doesn't have a clue in what situation he has put you. Second, and more probable: Master Fysh took some gold

in advance, enough to drag you astray for a bit and then go back with nothing.'

'You are too quick in your accusations!' Kevenard van Vliet stopped Fysh who was starting to give a vile reply with a gesture. 'You are also quick to foretell failure. And we, merchants, always thinking positively...'

'And that is a good thing. But in this case it will not help.'

'Because?'

The child that was kidnapped by the vulpess,' explained Geralt calmly, 'is beyond recovery. And the problem is not in finding the child, although vixens lead a very secret life. And it's not because the vulpess will not give up the child willingly, and she's not an opponent to treat lightly both in human and animal forms. The thing is that the kidnapped child ceases to be a child. In the kidnapped girls there occurs a change. They transform and become vulpess themselves. Vulpess don't breed. They continue their kind by kidnapping and transforming elven children.'

'Their foxkind,' Fysh finally got to voice, 'should perish. All these werewolves should perish. Vixens, it's true, rarely bother humans. They kidnap only elven puppies, and they harm only elves, which is good in itself, because the larger harm to non-humans the better advantage it is for true humans. But vixens are monsters, and monsters need to be killed, make them die, and eradicate their whole clan. That's your trade, witcher, it's a thing you contribute to. I hope that you will not have it against us, that we contribute to monster's doom. But this discussion is futile it seems. You wanted explanations, you got them. You know why you were hired and from who... from what you are to defend us.'

'Your explanations,' Geralt calmly appraised, 'are as cloudy, no offense, as urine from an infected bladder. And the nobleness

of your cause is as doubtful as the virginity of a maid in the morning after a village fest. But that is your business. My business is to inform you that the only way to defend from an vulpess is to keep far from it. Master van Vliet?’

‘Yes?’

‘Go home. The expedition is without any merit, it's time to realize that, and abandon it. That's what advice I can give you as a witcher. The advice is free.’

‘But you are not leaving, right?’ stuttered van Vliet, whitening a little. ‘Master Witcher? Will you stay with us? And if... And if something happens will you guard us? Agree, please... For Gods' sake, please...’

‘Oh, he'll agree, Definitely.’ Snorted Fysh. ‘Cause who else will get him to Novigrad, get him out of this swampy shithole? Don't panic, Master van Vliet. You've nothing to fear.’

‘Yeah, nothing!’ shouted the businessman. ‘You're good. You got us in a bad fix, and now you act the hero? I want to get to Novigrad in full health! Someone has to guard us, now when we are in trouble... When we are threatened by...’

‘Nothing threatens us. Don't panic like a woman. Go under the deck, like your companion Parlaghy. Have some rum, you will get your courage back instantly.’

Kevenard van Vliet reddened, then whitened, then he found Geralt with his gaze.

‘Enough of being evasive.’ He said emphatically but calmly. ‘The whole truth this time, witcher. The young vulpess – We have her. She's in the hold. Master Parlaghy is watching her.’

Geralt shook his head.

‘Unbelievable. You took the Briana's daughter from the vulpess? Young Xymena?’

Fysh spat overboard. Van Vliet scratched his head.

‘Not... ah... Xymena as it turns out,’ he stuttered at last. ‘Another fox child... ahh... Came into our possession. One stolen by, and then from, a different vulpess. Master Fysh bought her. As an investment... From soldiers who stole the girl from the vulpess by a trick. We at first thought that this was Xymena, only changed... But Xymena was seven and fair, this one is around twelve and dark-haired.’

‘Although it's not the proper one,’ Fysh anticipated the witcher's question, ‘we took her. Why should elven spawn grow up to be something even worse? And in Novigrad we could sell her to an exotic game collector, she is an oddity after all, savage, half-vixen, raised by a vulpess in the middle of a forest... A menagerie will surely pay well...’

Witcher turned his back to him.

‘Captain! Make for the shore.’

‘Whoa, whoa!’ Fysh snarled. ‘Stay the course Boxcray! You don't give the orders around here, witcher.’

‘Master van Vliet,’ Geralt ignored him. ‘I address your common sense. The girl should be freed at once, set down ashore. You're doomed otherwise. Vulpess don't abandon their cubs. This one's on your trail already guaranteed. Only way to stop her is to release the girl.’

‘Don't listen to him,’ said Fysh. ‘Don't let him scare you. We are on the river, In deep water. What can some fox do to us?’

‘And we have a witcher to guard us,’ Peter Cobbin added mockingly. ‘Armed with invisible swords! The famous Geralt of Rivia surely will not be afraid of a random vixen.’

‘I don't know, I don't know,’ mumbled the businessman, gazing at Fysh, and then Geralt and Boxcray. ‘Master Geralt? In

Novigrad I will not spare any expense, I will pay for your labor with coin... If only you would defend us.'

'There's just one way I can protect you. Captain, to shore. We're putting the girl on land.'

'Don't even dare!' Fysh whitened. 'One step towards the hold and you'll regret it. Cobbin! Stop him!'

Peter Cobbin wanted to catch Geralt by the collar, but failed to do so, because silent and calm until this moment Addario Bach went into action. The dwarf kicked Cobbin forcefully in the bend of the knee. Cobbin fell onto his knees. Addario jumped nearer, hit him with a swing on his kidney, and then on the side of Cobbin's head. The giant fell onto the deck.

'He's large – so what? What'd that get him?.' The dwarf gave everyone around a stare. 'Just a louder thud when he dropped.'

Fysh had his hand on the handle of his knife, but let it loose when Addario looked at him. Van Vliet stood with his mouth wide open, just like captain Boxcray and the rest of the crew. Peter Cobbin moaned and lifted his forehead from the boards of deck.

'Lay where you lay,' the dwarf advised him. 'You can't impress me neither with your size, nor with the tattoo from Sturefors. I've hurt bigger than you, and denizens of heavier prisons. Don't try to get up. Geralt - do your job.'

'Just so it's clear as crystal to youse,' he addressed the rest, 'the witcher and I're, savin' yer miserable lives. Captain, to shore please. And lower the dinghy.'

The Witcher descended the steps leading under the deck, pulled open one door then another. And froze. Behind him Addario Bach swore. Fysh also swore. Van Vliet moaned.

Lying on a bed was a lean girl with glassy eyes. She was half naked, from waist down completely naked, with her legs

obscenely spread. Her neck was twisted in very unnatural way. And still more obscene.

‘Master Parlaghy...’ van Vliet forced out of himself. ‘What have you done?’

The man sitting over the girl looked at them. He moved his head like he didn't saw them, like he was searching for a place from which voice of the businessman came.

‘Master Parlaghy!’

‘She shouted...’ the man mumbled, shaking his double chin and reeking of alcohol. ‘She started shouting...’

‘Master Parlaghy...’

‘I wanted to make her stop... I just wanted to stop her screaming...’

‘You’ve killed her.’ Fysh stated obvious. ‘You bloody killed her!’

Van Vliet caught his head with both hands.

‘What now? Gods... what now?’

‘Now?’ the dwarf explained to him matter-of-factly. ‘Now we’re fucked.’

‘There is no reason to fear.’ - Fysh hit the railing with his fist. ‘We’re on the river, in deep water. Far from the banks. Even if the vulpess is following us, and we have no reason to think she is, she can’t touch us here.’

‘Master Witcher?’ Van Vliet fearfully stared at Geralt. ‘What say you?’

‘The vupess is following us,’ Geralt patiently repeated. ‘No doubt about it. If something is doubtful, it's Master Fysh's knowledge, and I would like him to keep his silence accordingly. Here’s how I see it: If we had let the young cub

loose and left her on the shore there was slim chance that vulpess would leave us be. But after what happened, happened. Now our only hope is escape. It's a miracle that the vulpess didn't get us earlier, truly it proves right that fools are lucky. But we can no longer tempt fate. Set all sails, captain. Every single one you have.'

'S'pose we could,' Boxcray appraised slowly, 'add a topsail. Wind is good...'

'And when...' Van Vliet interrupted. 'Master Witcher? Will you defend us?'

'Honestly Master van Vliet. I'd rather leave you to your fate. Together with this Parlaghy, whose very memory makes my guts twist and turn. Who is drinking himself into oblivion over the dead body of the child he just murdered.'

'I'm leaning that way myself,' threw in Addario Bach. 'For, paraphrasing Master Fysh's words about non-humans: the bigger the harm to idiots, the bigger is the advantage of the wise.'

'I would leave Parlaghy and you to the vulpess's mercy. But my code forbids it. A Witcher's code does not allow me to act according to my will. I can't forsake those threatened with death.'

'A Witcher's nobility!' Snorted Fysh. 'Like you never heard of your exploits! But I support the idea to run fast. Rise all the rags, Boxcray, let's get to the fairway and run as fast as possible!'

The captain gave the orders and the deck hands got busy with the rigging. Boxcray went to the bow, and after a while of thinking Geralt and the dwarf joined him. Van Vliet, Fysh and Cobbin were arguing on the aft deck.

'Master Boxcray?'

‘Eh?’

‘How is it that the ship got this name? And this rather uncommon figurehead? Was it done to get funding from priests?’

‘The sloop was built as the "Melusina", the captain shrugged. ‘With a figurehead matching the name and pleasing the eyes. And then both were changed. Some said it was funding. Others said that Novigradian priests accused Master van Vliet of heresy and blasphemy every now and then so he wanted to kiss arse.... He wanted to be on their good side.’

"Prophet Lebioda" broke the waves with its bow.

‘Geralt?’

‘What it is, Addario?’

‘This vixen... That is vulpess... From what I have heard she can shapeshift. She can show up like woman, but she can also take form of a vixen. Is it like a werewolf?’

‘It's different. Werewolves, werebears, wererats and so on are therianthropes, humans able to transform into animals. Vulpesses are anterions. Beasts, or beings able to take the form of a human.’

‘And their powers? I’ve heard unbelievable stories... An vulpess is reportedly able to...’

‘I hope,’ interrupted the witcher, ‘to get to Novigrad, before the vulpess will show what she is capable of.’

‘And if...’

‘It would be better if there were no "ifs".’

The wind broke, the sails fluttered.

‘The sky grows dark,’ indicated Addario Bach. ‘And I think I've heard distant thunder.’

The dwarf's hearing wasn't off. It took but a short while, and there again was thunder. Everyone heard this time.

‘Storm is coming!’ Boxcray shouted. ‘On in deep water it will turn us upside down. We have to run, to hide, find cover from the wind! To sails, boys!’

He pushed the helmsman aside and took the helm himself.

‘Brace yourselves, brace yourselves everyone!’

The sky over the right bank became a deep dark blue.

Suddenly the wind blew, tugged at the forest on a riverside cliff, stirring it to a boil. Larger trees were violently rocking, while smaller were bent in half by the force pushing at them. There was a cloud of leaves and whole branches flying, some of them big ones. There was blinding lightning and almost the same instant there was piercing boom of thunder. After this one, almost instantly there was a second. And then the third.

In the next moment, signaled earlier by growing noise, the intense rain started. They ceased to see anything from beyond the wall of water. "Prophet Lebioda" rocked and danced on the waves, every now and then getting significantly slanted. And it was cracking at that. For Geralt it seemed that every single board was cracking. Every single board came alive, it seemed, with its own life, and moved independently from any other. There was worry that the sloop would just fall apart. The Witcher was telling himself again and again that it's impossible, that construction of the ship enables travel over still more disturbed waters, that they were on a river not the ocean. He repeated this to himself, spat out water, and clung on to the ropes.

It was hard to tell how long this carried on. But finally the rocking ceased, the wind ceased tugging, and the thunderstorm rocking the water eased, at first, changing into rain and then into a light drizzle. They saw then that Boxcray's maneuver had

worked. They managed to hide behind an isle covered with a forest, where they were not being tossed so much by the wind. The thunderclouds, it seemed, were getting further, and the storm calmed.

Mist rose from the waters.

From Boxcray's cap, completely soaked, dripped water, flowing over his face. Despite this the captain did not remove his cap. He probably never did.

'Devils by the dozen!' He wiped droplets from his nose. 'Where's the squall driven us? Some offshoot? An oxbow o' sorts? The water near still.'

'Current may be weak, but it's carrying us.' Fysh spat into the water and looked at the spittle. He no longer had his straw hat, it must have been carried away by the thunderstorm.

'Current may be weak, but it's carrying us,' he repeated. 'Seems we're in an inlet between two isles. Keep her steady, Boxcray. It'll carry us to the main river before it's done.'

'Fairway,' the captain leaned over the compass, 'lies to the north, I reckon. Meaning we ought to take the right fork. Not left, but right.'

'Where do you see a fork?' asked Fysh. 'But one route ahead. Stay the course.'

'I seen two branches moments ago, I swear it,' Boxcray argued. 'Might be the damned rain was still in me eyes? Or 'twere the fog. No matter. We'll let the current carry us. Thing is...'

'What now?'

'The compass. Way it's pointing don't make sense. No, no, it's fine. Must've been skewed by the water in the glass from my cap. Sail on.'

‘Yes, let's sail.’

The fog was getting alternately thinner and thicker, then the wind died completely and it was suddenly very warm.

‘The water,’ said Boxcray. ‘Can you smell it? It's different somehow. Where exactly are we?’

The mist lifted, they saw then the thickly overgrown banks, littered with rotten tree trunks. Instead of pines, firs and yews growing on the island there were forked water birches, and tall, cone-like at the base cypresses. The cypresses' trunk were grown over by trumpet vines, their vividly red flowers were the only strong accent among the rotten green of the swamp plants. The water was covered by duckweed and full of wrack, which "Prophet" was splitting with its bow and then pulled behind it like a train. The water was murky, and had an unpleasant, somewhat rotten smell. From the bottom large bubbles were rising. Boxcray was still holding the helm himself.

‘There could be shoals here,’ he said, suddenly disturbed. ‘Come now! Let someone get the plummet on the bow!’

They sailed, carried by the weak flow, still among the swampy views. And the rotten stench. The deck hand on bow was constantly shouting depth readings.

‘Master Witcher,’ Boxcray leaned over his compass, knocking at the glass, ‘Take a gander.’

‘At what?’;

‘thought the glass had fogged up... But unless the needle gone completely awry, we're sailing westward. Meaning we're going back. Back where we came from.’

‘Impossible. The current. It's carrying us. The river...’

He stopped.

Over the water hung a huge, partially uprooted tree. On one of branches stood a woman, in a long, tight dress. She stood there motionless staring at them.

‘Turn,’ said the witcher in a low voice. ‘Turn, Captain. Toward the other bank. Away from the tree.’

The woman vanished. And over the branch ran a great fox, which ran away and hid in a thicket. The animal seemed all black, but for the white on the tip of its tail.

‘Gone. Vanished. But she’s has found us.’ Addario Bach also noticed. ‘The vulpess has found us.’

‘Blast it! You think she’ll find a way to...’

‘Shut up. Both of you. Don’t panic.’

They sailed. From the dried trees the pelicans were staring at them.

Interlude

A hundred and twenty-seven years later

‘There, behind the hillock,’ the merchant indicated with his lash, ‘that’s Ivalo, young lady. Half a furlong, no more, you will be there in no time. I have to take the left fork for Maribor at the crossroads, so it is time to part ways. Be in good health, let the gods guide you and guard you.’

‘Let them guard you too, good master.’ Nimue jumped off the cart, took her bundle, and the rest of her baggage and then curtsied ungracefully. ‘I’m very grateful that then, in the forest... Very grateful...’

She swallowed remembering the dark forest, into which she was led by the road. Great scary trees with twisted branches, forming a ceiling high above the empty road. A road that she suddenly traveled alone, all alone. Remembering the terror which she felt then, and a wish to turn back and escape. Back to her home. To drop this stupid idea of a lone quest through the world. To forget this idea.

‘For gods’ sake, don’t thank me, there is nothing to thank me for.’ The merchant laughed. ‘To help on the road is a humane thing. Farewell. Happy travels!’

She stood a while at the crossroads, looking at the stone pillar, polished by the rains and winds to a smooth slipperiness. It has stood here for a very long time. Who knows, maybe even over a hundred years? Maybe this pillar remembers The Year of the Comet? The Armies of the Northern kings, proceeding to Brenna, for the battle with Nilfgaard?

Like every single day she repeated the route, known by heart. Like a magic formula. Like a spell.

Vyrva, Guado, Sibell, Brugge, Casterfurt, Mortara, Ivalo, Dorian, Anchor, Gors Velen.

The town of Ivalo could be known from afar. By its noise and stench.

The forest ended by the crossroads, further, up to the very buildings was a clearing beset with cut stumps, reaching, far, far away - to the very horizon. Everywhere there was smoke, in rows stood iron barrels, retorts used to kiln the charcoal. It smelled of resin. The closer it was to town the louder the noise got, a strange metallic sound that made the ground tremble palpably under feet.

Nimue entered the town, and sighed from awe. The source of the noise and tremors was from the strangest machine she had ever seen. A huge, round copper boiler with a huge wheel, whose rotations propelled piston shining with tar. The machine hissed, smoked, snorted with hot water and puffed with vapor, and then it emitted a whistle. A whistle so frightful and terrible that Nimue squealed. She got hold of herself quickly, she even approached and looked with interest at the belts, which helped the hellish machine to drive a saw like a lumber mill, which was cutting boles in unbelievable haste. She would have observed longer, but her ears started to ache because of the noise and the grinding of saws.

She crossed the bridge, the river flowing underneath was murky and stank terribly, carrying woodchips, bark and froth. The town of Ivalo, which she had just entered smelled like a huge outhouse, an outhouse in which someone was roasting spoilt meat at that. Nimue, who spent last week among meadows and forest was getting short of breath. The town of Ivalo, an end to a leg of her journey was supposed to be a place to rest awhile. She now knew that she would not stay

here any longer than there was need to. And that she would not remember Ivalo kindly.

At the market - as usual - she sold a basket of mushrooms, and healing roots. It went smoothly, she came to know what was needed, and to whom to sell her wares. While trading she acted the fool, which made selling fast, as merchants tried to outdo themselves in cheating her. She earned little, but fast. And tempo was of importance.

The only source of clean water around was a well in a small square, and Nimue had to wait in quite long queue. Buying food for further travel went more smoothly. Allured by the smell, she also bought a few filled patties. The filling seemed suspicious at closer inspection. She sat by the creamery, to eat the patties while they were still edible without too much of a danger to her health. It didn't seem that they would stay so much longer.

On the opposite site was an inn call "Under Green ..." which was missing the lower board of the sign making it a mystery and intellectual challenge of the name. Nimue after a while got completely lost in trials of guessing what could be green except for a frog or lettuce. She was brought out of her reverie by a loud discussion, which was held by frequent visitors.

"'Prophet Lebioda", I tell you.' perorated one of them. 'That brig of legend. A ghost ship, that was lost more than a hundred years ago without any clue, with the whole crew. Every time it later appeared on the river something bad happened. It appeared with wraiths on board, as saw by many. It was told that it would show up until it's wreck will be found. And it was finally found.'

'Where?'

'At the Mouth, on oxbow, among swamps, that were dried. It was overgrown by swamp plants. And moss. When they

scraped algae and moss off they saw the sign "Prophet Lebioda".'

'What about treasure? Did they find treasure? There was supposed to be treasure in the hold. Were they found?'

'It's unknown. Priests, they tell, claimed the ship. As a relic.'

'Oh, what bullshit,' belched another patron. 'You believe in tall tales, like a child. Some old barge was found and they all go instantly: ghost ship, treasure, relics. All of this is I assure you total bullshit, tall tales, foolish gossip, women's lies. Hey, you there! Girl! Who are you! Whose are you?'

'I'm my own,' Nimue had practiced how to respond.

'Pull your hair back, show us your ear! Because you look the elven brood. And we don't want any elven mongrels here!'

'Leave me alone, I don't trouble you. And I'm going on soon.'

'Huh! And where?'

'To Dorian.' Nimue learned to always just tell the next stop, and never ever reveal the final goal of her travel, because it just made everyone around laugh.

'Whoa! That's a lot of road to cover.'

'So I'm taking off. And I will tell you that there was no treasure on the "Prophet Lebioda", the legend doesn't say anything about it. Then ship was lost and became a ghost ship because it was cursed, and its captain didn't want to listen to good advice. The Witcher, who was there advised him to keep away from the side branches, until he could lift the curse. I've read about it.'

'You have milk under your nose,' the first patron decided, 'and you're so smart? You should sweep the room girl, take care of pots, and wash underpants, that's it! A great reader, you see!'

'A Witcher!' snorted the third. 'Fairy tales, only fairy tales.'

'If you are such a know-all,' interjected another, 'then you should also know about our Jay's Forest. Don't you? Then we will tell you: In Jay's Forest something evil sleeps. And it awakes every few years, and then woe to anyone crossing the forest. And your road, if you truly go to Dorian is just exactly through this forest.'

'So is there any forest left? You have felled everything around, naked clearing was left.'

'Look what a know-all, loudmouthed greenhorn. The forest is there to fell it, isn't it? What we felled, we felled, what was left is left. And even lumberjacks avoid Jay's Forest such is the terror there. You will see yourself. You will wet your pants from fear.'

'Then I'd better go.'

Buckhole, Guado, Sibell, Brugge, Casterfurt, Mortara, Ivalo, Dorian, Anchor, Gors Velen.

I'm Nimue verch Wledyr aep Gwyn.

I go to Gors Velen. To Aretuza, the sorceresses school on the Isle of Thanedd.

We could do many things once. We could create illusions of magical isles, show to thousands of people dragons dancing in the sky. We could bring forth illusions of numerous armies approaching town walls, and every citizen saw that army in the same way to the very minor details of equipment, and the signs on the banners. But only those incomparable ancient vixens who paid for their magical powers with their lives could do this. Since those times abilities of our kind severely degraded - most likely as a result of living among humans.

Victor Pelevin, *The Sacred Book of the Werewolf*

Chapter Fifteen

‘Good work, Boxcray! Lovely bloody mess you’ve sailed us into!’ Javil Fysh shouted angrily. ‘The Pontar’s bogs! The devil’s own cesspool! Oh the foul things I’ve heard! Men and ships perish here! Where’s the fucking river? Where’s the fairway? Why...’

‘Shut your damned gob!’ the captain shouted. ‘Where’s the fairway, where’s the fairway! Up your thrice-plowed arse, that’s where! Think yourself wise, that it? Go on then, here’s your chance! Another fork! Which way, oh wise one? Left, followin’ the current? Or will ye have me turn right?’

Fysh snorted and turned his back to the captain. Boxcray took the helm and directed the sloop into the left branch.

The deck hand with the plummet shouted. After a while, much louder, shouted Kevenard van Vliet.

‘Riverward, Boxcray!’ bellowed Peter Cobbin. ‘Hard astarboard. Away from the bank! Away from the bank!’

‘What is it?’

‘Snakes! Don't you see? Vipers! Bank’s infested with ‘em!’

Addario Bach cursed.

The left bank was full of snakes. Reptiles were wriggling among the reeds and algae, crawled over half submerged boles, hanged, hissing from branches above the water. Geralt recognized moccasins, rattlesnakes, jararacas, boomslangs, chain vipers, leaf vipers, puff adders, black mambas and some that he did not know.

The whole crew of the "Prophet" ran in panic from the port board. Kevenard van Vliet came running to the aft and crouched, shivering behind the witcher's back. Boxcray spun

the wheel, and the sloop began to change course. Geralt put a hand on his shoulder.

‘No.’ he said. ‘Stay the course. No closer to the other bank.’

‘But the snakes...’ Boxcray indicated a branch that they were going near to, fully loaded with hissing reptiles. ‘They’ll drop aboard...’

‘There aren’t nearly that many! Keep her steady. Far off the other bank.’

Shrouds of the main mast caught on the overhanging branch, a few snakes twisted around the ropes, a few of them, including two mambas fell on board. They lifted and hissed attacking the crowd at the starboard. Fysh and Cobbin run to the bow, the deck hands shouted and run to the aft. One of them jumped into the water, vanished in it, before he could shout. On the surface blood frothed.

‘Ilyocoris!’ The Witcher pointed at the wave and the vanishing dark shape. ‘And unlike the snakes it's real.’

‘I hate reptiles,’ Kevenard van Vliet cried shivering behind the witcher. ‘I hate snakes...’

‘There’s just a handful. Never were any more. But they were enough to build the illusion.’

The deck hands were shouting, rubbing their eyes. The snakes vanished. Both the ones on deck, and the ones on the river bank. There was no trace of them.

‘What was,’ moaned Peter Cobbin. ‘What was that?’

‘Illusion,’ repeated Geralt. ‘The vulpess got us.’

‘What?’

‘The vulpess. She’s creating illusions trying to disorient us. Wonder when she started. The storm seemed real. But there were two branches, the captain saw. The vulpess hid one of the

branches and falsified the compass indications. She also created the illusion of snakes.'

'Witcher's tales!' snorted Fysh. 'Elven superstitions! Old wives' tales! So what? Every fox can do such things? Hides branches, cheat compasses? Show snakes where there are not any? Nonsense! I say that this is from those waters. We were poisoned by vapours, venomous swamp gases and miasmas. This is what caused those phantoms.'

'Those are illusions created by the vulpess.'

'You take us for fools?' Shouted Cobbin. 'Illusions? What illusions? Those were the most real vipers. You have all seen them, haven't you? You heard their hiss? I even smelled their stench.'

'That was an illusion. The snakes were not real.'

"Prophet" once again caught an overhanging branch.

'This is an illusion, right?' said one of the deck hands extending his arm. 'A hallucination? This snake is not real?'

'No! Stop!'

A huge arieta, hanging from a branch hissed bloodcurdlingly and struck in a flash, once and then once again.

The deck hand shouted excruciatingly, stumbled, fell down, trembled in fits, rhythmically hitting deck with the back of his head. Froth came from his mouth, blood started dripping from his eyes. He was dead before they managed to run to him. The witcher covered the body with a cloth.

'Damn it,' he said. 'Be careful! Not everything's unreal!'

'Look out!' shouted a sailor from the bow. 'Look out! Maelstrom in front of us! Maelstrom!'

The oxbow once again split into branches. The left fork, the one on which they were being carried seethed with a terrible

whirlpool. The rotating ring of foam rose and fell like boiling soup. In the whirlpool appearing and disappearing where logs, branches and even a whole tree with a forked crown. Sailors ran about making noise, others cried out. Boxcray stood quietly. Turning the wheel, he sent the sloop to the right, into the quiet channel.

‘Uh,’ he wiped his forehead. ‘We’re clear. And nary a moment too soon! Would have been in dire straits if that maelstrom’d caught us. Oh, t’would’ve tossed us...’

‘Maelstroms! Ilyocoris! Vipers! Her illusions! They’ve worked! They’ve brought us to this foul place that’s swallowed countless men and ships before us!’

‘Others’ve perished here,’ Addario Bach said, pointing to the side. ‘True. There’s one of the dead.’

Rotten and destroyed, it’s sides overgrown with algae, entwined with vines and moss stuck on the right side which was sunk in the swamp sat a shipwreck. They watched it as the weak current carried “The Prophet” by it.

Boxcray nudged Geralt with his elbow.

‘Master Witcher,’ he said quietly, ‘the compass is acting barmy. The needle shows that we have shifted course again - east to south. If this ain’t the she-fox’s trickery, then this is foul news indeed. The swamp’s uncharted, but not a salt don’t know that it stretches far to the south the fairway. Means the river’s carrying us into the very depth of the swamps.’

‘We are drifting,’ said Addario Bach. ‘There is no wind. The current is flowing away from the river.’

‘Not necessarily,’ Geralt shook his head. ‘I’ve heard about these oxbows. They change the direction of the waters flow. Depending on high tide or low tide. And don’t forget about the vulpess. It may also be an illusion.’

The banks were still covered with a dense ticket of swamp cypress, and there were also large truck, overgrown swamp plants. There were a lot of dead trees. From their lifeless trunks and branches hung thick garlands of Tillandsia, shining silver in the sun. From one of the branches was appeared a heron, swimming by studying the "Prophet" with fixed eyes.

The lookout shouted.

This time she was seen by all. Again she was standing on a branch hanging over the water, straight and motionless. Boxcray, without coercing, turned the wheel, sending the sloop to the left bank. The fox barked suddenly, loud and shrill. She barked again as "The Prophet" sailed past.

As they sailed past the branch, in a flash she disappeared into the depth as a huge fox.

'It's a warning,' said the witcher when the hubbub on board had died down. 'Prevention and a challenge. But also, a requirement.'

'That we release the girl,' Addario Bach stated. 'Of course. But we can no let her go, because she's dead.'

Kevenard van Vliet moaned, clutching a bottle of whiskey. Wet, dirty and frightened, he no longer looked like a merchant who could afford his own ship. He looked like a petty thief caught stealing plums.

'What do we do?' He moaned. 'What do we do?'

'I know,' Javil Fysh suddenly announced. 'Tie the dead girl to a barrel and throw it over board. The vixen will tear her hair out mourning her cub. We'll gain time.'

'Shame on you, Master Fysh,' the tanner's voice suddenly becoming rigid. 'A terrible thing to do with her remains. It's not human.'

‘And was she a human? She was an elf, and half animal besides. I’m telling you, the barrel – it’s a good idea...’

‘An idea,’ Addario Bach drawled, ‘worthy of a madman or a complete idiot. Thinkin’ ye might be the latter. We show the fox wench we’ve killed the lass, we flaunt it, we’re done for.’

‘We didn’t kill that cub,’ Peter Cobbin intervened before Fysh crimson with anger could react. ‘Parlaghy did. He’s guilty. We’re clean.’

‘Indeed,’ confirmed Fysh, addressing not van Vliet or the witcher, but to Boxcray and the sailors. ‘Parlaghy’s the guilty one! Let the fox elfess have her vengeance on him. We’ll put him in the dinghy with the corpse, set them adrift. It’ll give us time to...’

‘Not on my watch.’

‘Nor on my ship!’ Kevenard van Vliet turned pale. ‘Master Parlaghy might indeed bear the guilt, but to throw him overboard, sentence him to death? No, not that.’

‘It’s his death, or ours!’ Fysh squealed. ‘What would you have us do? Witcher! Can we count on you should the vulpess come aboard?’

‘Yes, Fysh. I’ll defend even you.’

There was silence.

“The Prophet Lebioda” drifted among the fetid water, dragging algae behind them. From the branches watched pelicans and herons.

The lookout gave a warning cry. A moment later everyone was shouting. Looking at the rotten shipwreck, overgrown with vines and mud. The one that they had seen an hour ago.

‘We’re sailin’ in circles.’ Confirmed the dwarf. ‘River must wind round on itself. Vulpess has got us caught in her trap.’

‘Only one way out,’ Geralt indicated the left branch with the maelstrom and it’s boiling water. ‘Sail through that.’

‘Through that geyser?’ Fysh roared. ‘Have you gone completely mad? It’ll smash us to splinters!’

‘Aye,’ confirmed Boxcray. ‘It will. Or turn us keel upwards and bury us in the bog. We’ll finish like that wreck. Look at the tree limbs whirl in that cataract. Can’t you see it’s might? It’d be our doom.’

‘An illusion, most likely. Another of the vulpess’s tricks.’

‘Likely? You think? A witcher, and you can’t tell?’

‘I’d recognise a weaker mirage. These are exceptionally powerful. Seems to me...’

‘It seems? And if you’re wrong?’

‘We have no choice,’ barked Boxcray. ‘Either through the whirlpool, or around in circles till...’

‘Till we die,’ added Addario Bach. ‘Till we all fuckin’ die.’

Whirling among the maelstrom was a tree that popped in and out of the water, it’s branches stretching like the splayed hands of a drowning man. The funnel was boiling seething, the foam swelled and frothed. “The Prophet” shook and jerked, the whirlpool sucked a it. The tree carried by the water smashed into the boards, spraying foam. The sloop began to sway and rotate faster and faster.

Everyone about shouted.

Suddenly all was quiet. The water calmed and became smooth like glass. "The Prophet Lebioda" gradually drifted among the overgrown marshy shore.

'Spot on Geralt,' Addario Bach cleared his throat. 'T'was an illusion.'

Boxcray stared at the witcher. He was silent. Finally, he took his cap off. His skull, it turned out, was as bald as an egg.

'I've spent me whole life sailin' rivers...' he croaked finally. 'Me wife begged it of me. On the river, she said, you'll be safer. Safer than at sea. "I won't worry meself sick each time ye set off on a voyage"'

He placed his cap back on, shook his head, and tightened the grip in the wheel.

'Is it over?' Kevenard van Vliet asked. 'Are we safe now?'

No one answered his question.

The water was thick with duckweed and algae. Among the shore grew cypresses, sticking out of the shallow were their pneumatophores, breathing roots, some of which stood seven feet in height. On a grassy island basked turtles, while frogs croaked.

This time they heard her before they saw her. A loud, sharp bark, like a yelled threat or warning. She appeared on the shore in the guise of a fox on the trunk of a fallen tree. She barked, raising her head high. Geralt caught strange notes in her voice, he realised that in addition to the threat there was still an order. But she was not ordering them.

The water under the trees suddenly started bubbling and from it emerged a monster, huge, all covered with a green and brown pattern on its scales. The monster, following the commands of the fox, swam through the water, right towards "The Prophet".

'Is it too...' Addario Bach swallowed. 'Is it an illusion?'

'Not at all,' said Geralt. 'Vodyanoi!' he shouted at Boxcray and the sailors. 'She has caught vodyanoi in her spell. Boat hooks! Grab the boat hooks!'

The vodyanoi emerged next to the ship, they saw a flat, head overgrown with seaweed, bulging fish eyes and conical teeth in a large mouth. The monster violently hit the side of the boat, once, twice. The whole of "The Prophet" trembled.

It swam from the hooks, swam, then dived for an instant with a splash and emerged at the stern, near the rudder. It grabbed the rudder and pulled hearing a crack.

'Turn the wheel!' Boxcray yelled, trying to hook the creature. 'Turn the wheel! Pull the ropes! Drive away this bastard!'

The vodyanoi gnawed and tore at the rudder, ignoring the shouts and blows from the hooks. The rudder cracked, and in the teeth of the creature was a piece of board. Whether it decided that this was enough or the spell of the fox lost its strength, it dived and disappeared.

From the shore came the bark or the vulpess.

'That her bark?' Boxcray shouted, waving his arms. 'Again? What's next? What more can she do to us? Witcher!'

'Gods...' sobbed Kevenard van Vliet. 'Forgive me for losing faith! Forgive us for killing the maiden! Gods, save us!'

Suddenly they felt on their faces a sharp gust of wind. The gaff sadly hanging before "The Prophet" cracked and the boom creaked.

'Clear sky up ahead,' shouted Fysh from the bow. 'There! Wide flat water! The river, for certain! Steer her there, Captain! There!'

The channel began to expand, a green wall of reeds loomed off to the side.

‘Success!’ exclaimed Cobbin. ‘Ha! We won! We are out of the bogs!’

‘Mark one!’ shouted a sailor. ‘Mark one!’

‘Raise the rudder!’ Boxcray growled. ‘Shallows!’

“The Prophet Lebioda” turned her nose towards the reeds.

‘What are you doing?’ Yelled Fysh. ‘Make for the river! There! There!’

‘Can’t! Too shallow! She’ll run aground. Gotta sail this branch till it joins the river. We’ve depth in this channel.’

They again heard the vulpess barking. But could not see her.

Addario Bach pulled Geralt’s sleeve.

From the ladder leading from the hold, appeared Peter Cobbin, dragging Parlaghy by the collar, who could hardly stand.

Walking behind them came a sailor, with the girl wrapped in a cloak. The remaining four sailors faced the witcher. They held axes, spears and iron hooks.

‘Now here’s how it’s gonna be, damn it.’ Cobbin croaked. ‘We wanna live. Its high time we did something to that end.’

‘Put the child down,’ Geralt hissed. ‘And hands off the merchant, Cobbin.’

‘Nay, Master Witcher.’ The seaman shook his head. ‘The stiff and the peddler are going overboard. That’ll stop the she-beast! That’ll be our chance to flee.’

‘Best stay out of this. Witcher,’ rasped a second sailor. ‘We’ve naught against you, but get in our way and we’ll have to hurt you.’

Kevenard van Vliet crouched at the side, cried and turned away. Boxcray also dutifully averted his eyes, his lips, it was clear did not support the rebellion of his crew.

‘This is how it is,’ Peter Cobbin pushed Parlaghy. ‘The merchant and the dead fox go overboard. It’s our only chance at salvation. Now step aside, witcher! C’mon lads, toss them in the dinghy!’

‘What dinghy?’ Addario Bach asked quietly. ‘Ye mean that one?’

A long way from “The Prophet”, bent on the bench of the dinghy, rowed Javil Fysh, heading towards the reeds. The oars tore at the seaweed, spraying water.

‘Fysh!’ Yelled Cobbin. ‘You rotten bastard! You plowin’ whoreson!’

Fysh turned, bent his elbow and showed them his dick, then again took up the oars. But did not row away.

In front of the eyes of the crew of “The Prophet”, the boat suddenly jumped in the water, all saw a tail thrash the water and from the water the teeth and jaws of a huge crocodile. Fysh flew overboard, swam, screaming towards the shore, to the green crowns of the cypress in the shallows. The crocodile pursued him, but it was a slow pursuit. Fysh swam to shore, collapsed on a boulder and lay there. But it was not a boulder. A giant snapping turtle opened its mouth and grabbed Fysh’s arm above the elbow. Fysh howled, darted, twitched and slashed in the mud. The crocodile popped up and grabbed him by the leg. Fysh roared.

For a moment it was not clear which of the reptiles possessed Fysh – the turtle or the crocodile. But, in the end, both left with something. The jaws of the turtle, with the left arm sticking out of it, a bloody mess with white bone. The rest of Fysh was

taken by the crocodile. A large red stain was left on the surface of the water.

Geralt took advantage of the crew's stupor. He took the dead girl from the hands of the sailor and returned to the bow. Addario Bach stood beside him, armed with a boat hook.

But neither Cobbin, nor any of the sailors tried to stop them. On the contrary, all hastily retreated to the stern. Hastily, one could say in a panic. Their faces were covered with a sudden deathly pallor. Crouching at the side, Kevenard van Vliet sobbed, burying his head between his knees and clasping his hands.

Geralt looked around.

Whether it was from Boxcray's gaping, or the damage to the rudder or he was not listening, the sloop floated under the overhanging branches and buried itself into the trunks of the fallen trees. The fox took advantage of this. She jumped onto the nose of the craft, quickly and quietly. In the guise of a fox. Earlier when they had seen her she looked black, a blue-black. She was not that colour at all. Her fur was dark, and the tip of her tail a snow white, but the shades of her fur, especially on her head, was dominated by grey, rather than the blue-black or brown of other foxes.

Before them she changed, growing into a tall woman. With a fox head. With pointed ears and an elongated muzzle. In her mouth, when she opened it, was a number of gleaming fangs.

Geralt leaned forward and lowered the girl's body onto the deck, and took a step back. The vulpess's howl was shrill, she snapped her teeth together and came towards him. Parlaghy shouted frantically, waving his arms and broke away from Cobbin and jumped overboard. He immediately sank to the bottom.

Van Vliet was crying, Cobbin and the sailors, were still pale and crowded around Boxcray. Boxcray took off his cap.

The medallion around the witcher neck twitch violently, vibrating and shaking. The vulpess leaned over the girl, uttering strange sounds, murmuring and hissing. Suddenly she raised her head and bared her fangs. With a muffled growl, a fire ignited in her eyes. Geralt did not move.

‘We did wrong,’ he said. ‘They behaved badly. But let that be as bad as things get. I can’t let you butcher these people. Won’t allow it.’

The fox stood up, lifting the girl. She looked around at everyone. The she looked directly at Geralt.

‘You stood against me,’ she said, in a barking voice, impressively, slowly pronouncing each word. ‘In their defence.’

He did not answer.

‘I hold my daughter in my arms,’ she continued. ‘That is more important than your lives. But you stood in their defence, white-hair. For that I will come for you. Later. One day when you’ve forgotten. When you will no longer expect it.’

She jumped quickly to the gunwale, and from there to a fallen tree. And disappeared into the undergrowth.

In the silence that followed all that could be heard was the sobs of van Vliet.

The wind died down, and it became humid. They pushed “The Prophet Lebioda” off of the trunks and drifted into the middle of the duct. Boxcray wiped his eyes and forehead with his cap.

There was a cry from the lookout. It was taken up by Cobbin and the other sailors. Beyond the reeds appeared thatched roofed houses. All could see drying poles. A yellow sand beach. A pier. And then, behind the trees on the headland, the wide blue sky over a river.

‘The river! The river at last!’

Everyone yelled. The sailors, Peter Cobin and van Vliet. Only Geralt and Addario Bach did not join in the chorus. Boxcray was also silent, hold the wheel.

‘What’re you doing, Boxcray?’ Yelled, Cobbin. ‘Where’re you steering her? Steer her towards the river! There! The river!’

‘Ain’t no use,’ said the Captain, despair and powerlessness in his voice. ‘We’re becalmed, the ship won’t listen to a broken rudder, and the current grows mightier and mightier. We’ll drift on where it carries us. Back into the offshoot. Back into the swamp.’

‘No!’

Cobbin cursed and jumped overboard. He swam to the shore. Following him went all the sailors jumping into the water. Geralt could not stop anyone. Addario Bach kept a tight grip on van Vliet.

‘Clear skies,’ said the dwarf. ‘A beach o’ golden sand. The river. Too bonny to be true. Meaning it ain’t.’

Suddenly it shimmered like a picture. Suddenly where there had just been fishing houses, a golden beach, and a channel leading to the river, the witcher saw a web of vines, hanging from the branches of the dead trees. The marshy shore, the bristling cypresses. Black bubbles swelled in the swamp. Algae drifted on the water. An endless labyrinth of an offshoot.

For a moment, the witcher saw the vulpess’s farewell illusion. Those in the water suddenly began to cry out and thrash in the water. One by one they disappeared below. Peter Cobbin surfaced, gasping and screaming, covered with writhing, striped, thick eels. Then he disappeared under the water and no longer appeared.

‘Geralt!’

Addario Bach picked up a boat hook that had survived the scuffle with a crocodile. He pulled the dinghy close. The dwarf the jumped into it, followed by Geralt and the still petrified van Vliet.

‘Captain!’

Boxcray waved his cap.

‘No, Witcher! I’ll not abandon me ship. Gotta guide her to port. Come hell or high water. And if I can’t then I’ll go to the bottom with her! Farewell!’

“The Prophet Lebioda” drifted quietly and majestically, entering the duct and disappeared.

Addario Bach spat into his hands, hunched over and took hold of the oars. The boat moved forward rapidly.

‘Where to?’

‘Towards that blue water we saw, past the shallows. River’s that way, I’m sure of it. We’ll row to the fairway, hail a ship. And if that doesn’t work, we’ll row all the way to Novigrad.’

‘Boxcray...’

‘He’ll be fine. If that is his destiny.’

Kevenard van Vliet whimpered. Addario rowed. The sky darkened. The heard the sound of distant long-drawn out thunder.

‘Thunderstorm approaching,’ the dwarf said. ‘Fucking shit!’

Geralt snorted. And then began to laugh. With all his heart, sincerely. And contagiously. Because in a moment, they were both laughing. Addario rowed with strong smooth strokes. The boat speed through the water like an arrow.

'You're rowing,' Geralt said, wiping tears of laughter from his face, 'like you've done this all your life. I thought that dwarves had no idea about sailing and swimming.'

'I don't lend myself to stereotypes.'

Interlude

Four days later

The auction house of the Borsodi brothers was in an area near the main street – in fact, it was in the main thoroughfare of Novigrad connecting the market with the Temple of the Eternal Fire. The Brothers at the beginning of their career had traded horses and sheep, and worked out of a shed in the country. In the forty-two years since, they had founded an auction house in an impressive three-storey building in the most prestigious area of the city. The business still remained in the hands of the family, but the auction items have become precious stones, mostly diamonds, and well as works of arts, antiques and collectibles. The auction was held once every quarter, mostly on Fridays.

Today the auction room as filled almost to capacity. Antea Derris was present, along with a good hundred people.

The noise and voices subsided. The auctioneer Abner de Navarrete took his place at the table. Abner de Navarrete, as usual, looked lovely in a black velvet coat and a gold brocade waistcoat. The nobility of his appearance and countenance might envy princes, and his posture and manners – aristocrats. It was not a secret that Abner de Navarrete really was an aristocrat, banished from his family for drunkenness, debauchery and depravity. If not for the Borsodi family, Abner de Navarrete would have been forced to beg. But Borsodi needed an auctioneer with the appearance of an aristocrat. And none of the candidates could be compared in this respect to Abner de Navarrete.

‘Good evening, ladies and gentlemen,’ said the auctioneer, his voice the same velvet as his coat. ‘Welcome to the House of

Borsodi and the quarterly auction of works of art and antiques. The subject of this auction, with which you were pleased to be found in our gallery, is a collection of unique items exclusively from private owners.'

'The vast majority of those present, I dare say, are those who are our constant visitors and customers who are familiar with the rules and actions of our House during the auction as well as our terms and conditions. All present were handed leaflets at the entrance with the rules. Therefore, I believe that all are informed about our rules and the consequences of their violation. So let us start without delay.'

'Lot number one: a jade figurine, in a group, showing a nymph and ... uh ... three fauns. It is made, according to our experts, by dwarves, and at an age of a hundred years. A starting price of two hundred crowns. I see two hundred and fifty. Is that all? Does anyone offer more? No? Sold to the master with number thirty-six.'

Working at the next table, two clerks carefully wrote down the results of the sale.

'Lot number two: "Aen N'og Mab Taedh'morce", a collection of tales of elves and poetic parables. Richly illustrated. Perfect condition. A starting price of five hundred crowns. Five hundred and fifty, Master Merchant Hofmayer. Advisor to Master Dreyfuss, six hundred. Master Hofmayer, six hundred and fifty. And is that all? Sold for six hundred and fifty crowns to Master Hofmayer of Hirunda.'

'Lot number three: an ivory instrument. Origin overseas, age unknown. The starting price of a hundred crowns. I can see a hundred and fifty. Two hundred, to the lady in the mask with the number forty-three. Two hundred and fifty, to the lady with the veil with the number eight. Will nobody give me more? Three hundred, to the chemist Forshterkrants. Three hundred and

fifty! None of the ladies will give more? Sold for three hundred and fifty crowns to the lady with the number forty-three.'

'Lot number four: "Antidotarius magnus", a unique medical treatise published by the University of Castel Graupiane in the early founding of the Academy. A starting price of eight hundred crowns. I see eight hundred and fifty. Nine, to Doctor Ohnesorg. A thousand, to dear Marty Sodergren. And is that all? Sold for a thousand crowns to Miss Sodergren.'

"Lot number five: "Liber de naturis bestiarum", white pages, bound in beech slat, richly illustrated with...'

"Lot number six: "Girl with a kitten", portrait, oil canvas. Starting price...'

'Lot number seven: A bell with a handle, brass, it's age is hard to estimate, but the thing is, of course, ancient. Along the rim of the bell an inscription in runes reads: "What are you, an idiot, call.' Starting price...'

"Lot number eight: canvas, oil painting, artist unknown. A masterpiece. Please pay attention to the unusual colours, shades and dynamics, to the game of light and shadow. The atmosphere of gloom and the noble flavour transmitted by the majestic forest. And in the centre, in a mysterious light, the main figure of the work: the dear during the rut. Starting price...'

"Lot number nine: "Imago mundi", also known as "Mundus nouus". The book is extremely rare and in the collection of the University of Oxenfurt there is only one copy, all other copies are in private hands. The binding is gilded goatskin. Ideal condition. Starting price is fifteen hundred crowns. Dear Vimme Vivaldi, one thousand six hundred. Reverend Prohazka, one thousand six hundred and fifty. One thousand seven hundred, to the lady at the end of the hall. One thousand eight hundred, Master Vivaldi. One thousand eight hundred and fifty. To the Reverend Prohazka. One thousand nine hundred and fifty,

Mast Vivaldi. Two thousand crowns, bravo, Reverend Prohazka. Two thousand and one, Master Vivaldi. Who will give more?’

‘The godless book contains theoretical fabrications! It must be burned! I want to buy it to burn it! Two thousand two hundred crowns!’

‘Two thousand five hundred!’ barked Vimme Vivaldi, striking a white well-groomed beard. ‘You’ll give more, pious firebug?’

‘Disgusting! Moneybag here triumphs over the righteous! Pagan dwarves are placed higher than people! I will complain to the authorities!’

‘The book is sold for two thousand five hundred crowns to Master Vivaldi,’ calmly announced Abner de Navarrete. ‘And a reminder to Reverend Prohazka about the existing rules and orders of the House of Borsodi.’

‘I’m leaving!’

‘Good-bye. My apologies. The uniqueness and richness of the proposals in the House of Borsodi sometimes raises emotions. Let’s continue. Lot number ten: totally unique, an incredible find of two Witcher’s swords. The House has decided not to offer them individually, but as a complete set, as tribute to the Witcher they once served. The first sword of steel obtained from a meteorite. The blade is forged and sharpened in Mahakam authenticity with stamps confirmed by our specialists.’

‘The second is a silver sword. On the handle and across the length of the blade are runes and symbols that prove its originality. The starting price of once thousand crowns per set. One thousand and fifty, to the gentleman with number seventeen. Is that all? Nobody will give more? For such rarities?’

‘This is shit, and not enough money,’ muttered Magistrate Nikefor Muus, sitting in the back row, nervously clenching his hands into fists, his fingers stained with ink. ‘I knew I should not have...’

Antea Derris’s hiss caused him to be quiet.

‘One thousand one hundred, to Count Horvath. One thousand two hundred to the gentleman with the number seventeen. One thousand five hundred to dear Nino Cianfanelli. One thousand six hundred, to the gentleman in the mask. One thousand seven hundred to the gentleman with the number seventeen. One thousand eight hundred, to Count Horvath. Two thousand to the gentleman in the mask. Two thousand one hundred, to dear Cianfanelli. Two thousand two hundred to the gentleman in the mask. Is that all? Two thousand five hundred, to Cianfanelli... Gentleman with the number seventeen...’

The man with the number seventeen was suddenly grabbed by the arms by two big men who had quietly entered the room.

‘Herzoa Fuerte, nicknamed Skewer,’ a third big man said, poking a stick he held into the man’s chest. ‘You are an assassin pursued by the law. You’re under arrest. Take him away.’

‘Three thousand!’ Yelled Herzoa Fuerte, nicknamed Skewer, waving his sign with the number seventeen, which he still held in his hand. ‘Three thousand...’

‘I’m sorry,’ Abner de Navarrete said coldly. ‘Rules. The arrest of the auction participant cancels his proposal. You have offered two thousand five hundred, dear Cianfanelli. Will anyone go higher? Two thousand six hundred, to Count Horvath. And is that all? Two thousand seven hundred to the gentleman in the mask. Three thousand, dear Canfanelli. I do not see any other offers...’

‘Four thousand.’

‘Oh, Master Molnar Giancardi. Bravo, bravo. Four thousand crowns. Can anyone give more?’

‘I want to buy this for my son,’ Nino Cianfanelli snapped. ‘And you only have one daughter. Molnar. Why do you need these swords? Oh, all right. I concede.’

‘The swords are sold,’ said de Navarrete, ‘to Molnar Giancardi for four thousand crowns. We will continue, ladies and gentlemen. Lot number eleven: a cloak of monkey fur...’

Nikefor Muus, happy and grinning like a beaver, slapped Antea Derris on the shoulder. Hard. Antea with a huge effort refrained from giving him the same in the face.

‘Let’s go,’ she hissed

‘And the money?’

‘After the auction is finished we can complete the formalities. It takes time.’

Ignoring the nagging Muus, Antea went to the door. She felt someone’s eyes on her. She looked about furtively. A female. Black-haired. Dressed in black and white. With an obsidian star about her neck.

She shivered.

Antea was right. The formalities required time. Just two days later it was possible to go to the bank. In a branch in one of the banks in Novigrad, smelling, like all banks, of money, wax, and carved mahogany paneling.

‘The amount payable is three thousand three hundred and thirty-six crowns,’ the clerk said. ‘After the levy of the bank of one percent.’

‘Borsodi takes fifteen, the bank one,’ grumbled Nikefor Muus. ‘All in interest! Thieves upon thieves! Taking my money!’

‘One minute,’ Antea stopped his rant. ‘Please settle our business, yours and mine. My commission. Four hundred crowns.’

‘But, but!’ Growled Muus, attracting the attention of other clerks and bank customers. ‘What four hundred? From Borsodi I only received three thousand with small change...’

‘According to our contract I was supposed to get ten percent of the result of the auction. Expenses – that’s your business. And only your problem.’

‘What about...’

Antea Derris gave him a look. That was enough. Between Antea and her father there were not many similarities. But Antea was able to give the exact same look as her father. Pyrral Pratt. Muus shrunk under her gaze.

‘Of the amount to be paid,’ she indicated to the clerk, ‘please issue a check for four hundred crowns. I know that the bank will charge a commission, I agree with them.’

‘And my money in cash!’ The official for the city pointed to a large leather satchel, which he had brought with him. ‘I’ll take it home and hide it well! None of the banks or thieves will take a commission!’

‘This is a significant sum,’ the clerk stood up. ‘Please wait.’

Leaving from behind the desk, the clerk for a moment, opened a door to the back room, but Antea was ready to swear that at that moment she saw a black-haired woman, dressed in black and white.

She shivered.

‘Thank you, Molnar,’ Yennefer said. ‘I will not forget this service.’

‘Thanks for what?’ Molnar Giancardi smiled. ‘What did I do, what service? The fact that a lot at an auction was bought by me? To pay the money from your personal account? Or maybe that I turned away when you cast a spell a minute ago? I looked out the window at the Mediatrix when she left, delicately swaying this way and that. The lady is too my taste, I will not deny, though I’m not fond of human females. You cast a spell on her too... to multiply the problem?’

‘No,’ said the sorceress. ‘With her, nothing will happen. She took a check, not gold.’

‘Understood. The Witcher’s swords, you’ll take them I suppose? They after all are his...’

‘Everything,’ said Yennefer, ‘is connected by destiny. I know, I know, of course. He told me. And I’m even starting to believe. No, Molnar, today I will not take away the swords. Let them remain in the safe room. Soon I will send someone on his behalf. I am leaving Novigrad today.’

‘I too. I’m going to Tretogor, and checking at the same time the local branch. Then I’ll go back, to Gors Velen.’

‘Well, thanks again. Farewell dwarf.’

‘Farewell sorceress.’

Interlude

Exactly one hundred hours

After receiving the gold

From the Giancardi bank in Novigrad

‘You’re not allowed to go up,’ the bouncer Tharp said. ‘You know it well. Get away from the stairs.’

‘Can you not see, pig?’ Nikefor Mus shook the pot-bellied money bag with a clatter. ‘Have you ever in your life seen so much gold at once? Out of the way, I’m coming through! A rich man! Slave!’

‘Let him in, Tharp!’ Febus Ravenga said. ‘I do not want the noise to worry the guests. And you will see. Once time you deceived me – the second time you will not. It would be better this time if you pay, Muus.’

‘Master Muus,’ the Official pushed past Tharp. ‘Waiter!’

‘Wines,’ he cried, lounging at the table. ‘The most expensive!’

‘The most expensive,’ the waiter had the courage to answer, ‘is sixty crowns...’

‘Bring it here, bring a pitcher immediately!’

‘Quiet,’ Ravenga said. ‘Slow down, Muus.’

‘Do not silence my mouth, griper! Crook! Upstart! Who are you to silence me? A gilded signboard, and dung stuck to his boots! Shit will always be shit! Look here! Have you ever seen so much gold at once? Have you seen?’

Nikefor Muus reached into the bag and pulled out a handful of gold coins and with a sweeping gesture, threw them on the table.

The coins sprayed out in a brown liquid. They rang with the stench of excrement.

The guests of the “Natura Rerum” jumped up, rushed to the door, coughing and covering their noses with napkins. The waiter bent over and retched. Someone shouted, someone swore. Febus Revenga did not flinch. He stood like a statue, with his arms crossed.

Muus stunned, shook his head, rubbed his bulging eyes and looked at the stinking heap on the tablecloth. Finally, he regained consciousness and reached into his bag. And pulled out a handful of dense substance.

‘You’re right, Muus,’ said Febus Revenga icily. ‘Shit will always be shit.’

The magistrate did not resist when he was dragged away, he was too stunned by what had happened. Tharp dragged him to a latrine. At a signal from Ravenga the bounce lifted the wooden lid. Seeing this, Muus came to life and began to squeal and kick. But it did not help much. Tharp dragged him to the pit and dropped him down. The young man flopped down into the liquid stool. But he did not sink. He straightened his arms and legs and supported himself on a surface of mash made up of abandoned buddles of straw, rags, sticks and the crumpled pages torn from a variety of scholars and pious books.

Febus Ravenga grabbed from the wall of the shed a wooden pitchfork.

‘Shit will always be shit,’ he said. ‘And it always ends up that shit falls.’

He leaned on the fork and pushed Muus. On his head. Muus splashed out up to the surface, coughing and spitting. Ravenga allowed him to cough a bit and take a breath, then dipped him again. This time, very deep.

Repeating this operation several times, he threw down the pitchfork.

‘Leave him there,’ he ordered. ‘Let him climb out.’

‘It won’t be easy,’ said Tharp. ‘And will take a long time.’

‘Then it will take a long time. Let’s go.’

*A mon retour, hé! je m'en desespere,
Tu mas reçu d'un baiser tout glacé.*

Pierre de Ronsard

Chapter Sixteen

Under full sail, the schooner “Pandora Pavi” out of Novigrad was a truly beautiful ship.

Beautiful and fast, thought Geralt, descending the ladder to the lively promenade. He had seen the schooner in Novigrad, made inquiries and learned that she was to sail from Novigrad two days later than the galley “Stinta” on which he had arrived. Despite this, it had reach Kerack at almost the same time. *Maybe it would have been worth the wait*, he thought. *Two extra days in Novigrad, who knows, might have been able to get more information.*

Useless doubts, he decided. Maybe, who knows, what if... What had happened had happened, nothing could change that. And there was no use pondering over this.

He glanced at the schooner, the lighthouse, the sea and the darkening storm clouds on the horizon. Then walked briskly towards the city.

Towards the villa, porters carried a sedan chair, of an elegant design with purple curtains. Apparently it was Tuesday, Wednesday or Thursday. These were the days that Lytta Neyd took patients, and patients were usually wealthy ladies of high society, to use such a litter. The porter let him in without a word. And this was good. Geralt was not in the best mood and probably would have said a word or two. Or maybe three or four.

The patio was empty, the water in the fountain gurgled softly. On the malachite table was a decanter and glasses. Geralt unceremoniously poured for himself.

When he looked up, he saw Mozaïk. Dressed in a white doctor's coat and apron. Pale. With slicked hair.

'Is that you?' she said. 'You've returned.'

'It is, and I have,' he confirmed dryly. 'There is no doubt, I've come back. And this wine is undoubtedly a little soured.'

'I am glad to see you.'

'Is Coral home? And if she is, where in the house?'

'She was a minute ago,' she shrugged her shoulders. 'I could see her between a patient's legs. No doubt, she is still there.'

'Have you really no escape, Mozaïk?' he said quietly, looking into her eyes. 'You could be a sorceress. Indeed, you have the predisposition and the inclination. Your smashing wit would not be an asset in a textile factory. Even less so in a brothel.'

'I am learning and developing,' she lowered her eyes. 'I'm not crying in a corner. Learning from her. That phase is done.'

'No, you're kidding yourself. You have more to come. And sarcasm will not protect you from it. Especially if it is artificial and poorly performed. But enough about that, I won't teach you about life. Where is Coral?'

'Here. Hello.'

The sorceress appeared like a ghost from behind a curtain. Like Mozaïk, she wore a white doctor's coat, her red hair was pinned beneath a linen cap, which under normal circumstances would have looked ridiculous. But the circumstances were not normal and laughter would have been inappropriate, he needed a moment to understand.

She walked over and silently kissed him on the cheek. Her lips were cold. And under her eyes were dark circles.

She smelled of drugs. And something else that was used for disinfection. It was nasty, repulsive, an ill smell. An odor that caused an alarm.

‘I’ll see you tomorrow,’ she said quickly. ‘Tomorrow I will tell you everything.’

‘Tomorrow.’

She looked at him, and it was viewed through a distance separating them, through the abyss of time and events. It took him a second to realise how deep the abyss had become and how alienating the events.

‘It might be better the next day. Go into the city. Meet with the poet, he is very worried about you. Now, please, go. I have to take care of a patient.’

When she was gone, he looked at Mozaïk. Perhaps, eloquently enough, because she did not hesitate with explanations.

‘In the morning we had a birth,’ she said, her voice changing a bit. ‘There were complications. She decided to use forceps. All that could go wrong, went wrong.’

‘I understand.’

‘I doubt it.’

‘Goodbye, Mozaïk.’

‘You were gone a long time,’ she raised her head. ‘Much longer than she had expected. In Rissberg I don’t know, or pretend to know. But something happened, right?’

‘Something happened.’

‘I understand.’

‘I doubt it.’

Dandelion amazed him with cleverness. He confirmed the fact that the evidence that Geralt had brought was not fully understood. And the whole not accepted.

‘Ended, huh? Carried away by the wind? It is obvious that you were needed by her and the wizards, you’ve done your job, and now you can go. And you know what? I’m glad that it has happened. I’d like to put an end to this bizarre affair, the longer it lasted the more dangerous became its consequences. You too, if you want my opinion, should be happy that you can put it out of your head and everything went smoothly. Therefore, your face should shine with a joyful smile, not this dark and gloomy grimace, which, believe me, doesn’t suit you. You look like a man with a serious hangover, who in addition has eaten something terrible, and does not remember when he broke his tooth or how he got traces of semen in his pants.’

‘Maybe,’ continued the bard, completely undeterred by the lack of reaction to his other words, ‘your depression stems from something else? Maybe because you were put out the door when you were planning on saying farewell in your own style? A kind of departure early in the morning leaving flowers on the table? Ha, ha, in love as in war, my friend, your darling entered as a true strategist. Proactive, a preventative attack. Perhaps she has read “The History of Wars” by Marshal Pelligram. Pelligram gives many examples of victories achieved by a similar foretelling.’

Geralt still did not react. Dandelion, it seemed, was not expecting a reaction. He finished his beer, and nodded to the innkeeper to bring another.

‘Taking into account the above,’ he continued, twisting the tuning pegs on his lute. ‘I’m all for sex on the first date. I recommend it for the future, in all cases. This eliminates the need for further meetings with the same person, which are sometimes tedious and time consuming. Since we are on the

subject, I praise you for the lawyer, she was really worth the effort. You will not believe...'

'I believe,' the witcher could take no more, and abruptly interrupted. 'I believe no story, so you can skip it.'

'Well, yes,' concluded the bard. 'Depression, anxiety and soul-searching, because of this, you are hot-tempered and rude. This is not just because of the woman; it seems to me. There's something else. I know, damn it. I understand. Nothing came of Novigrad? You did not get back your swords?'

Geralt breathed, but promised himself not to sigh.

'They were not returned. Was too late. There were difficulties, a lot of things happening. Caught in a storm, then the boat began to drift... The tanner became seriously ill... I won't torment you with all the details. In short, I did not get there in time. When I reached Novigrad, the auction had already passed. The conversation at the House of Borsodi was short. The sales at auction are confidential, to protect the buyers and sellers. To unauthorized persons the company won't provide any information, blah, blah, blah, goodbye. I didn't find anything. I don't know whether the swords were sold, and if so, who bought them. I don't even know if the thief brought the sword to be an exhibit at the auction. He could have ignored the advice of Pratt and found another opportunity. I know nothing.'

'Same here,' Dandelion shook his head. 'A series of unsuccessful matches. The investigation of cousin Ferrant seems to be stuck at an impasse. Cousin Ferrant, since we are talking about him, asks about you. Where you are, is there any news of you, when are you coming back, if you have time for the royal wedding, and if you have not forgotten your promise to Prince Egmond. Of course, I told him nothing, and did not say a word about your business or the auction. But I'll remind you that the feast of Lammas is approaching, just ten days remaining.'

‘I know. But maybe something will happen in the meantime? Something good, maybe? As long as the string of unsuccessful coincidences doesn’t mind some variety.’

‘I don’t deny it. What if...’

‘I think I will make a decision,’ Geralt did not let Dandelion finish. ‘I’ll participate in the royal wedding as a bodyguard, in principle, it does not require anything as Egmond and the Instigator have not found my swords, and it was part of the condition. But I will not rule out fulfilling the wish of the Prince. At least from a material consideration. The Prince boasted that the money would be considerable. And all indications are that I will need it to buy completely new swords, made by special order. And it will cost dearly. What can I say. Let’s go somewhere to eat. And drink.’

‘To Ravenga at the “Natura Rerum”?’

‘Not today. Today I want something simple, natural, uncomplicated and sincere. If you know what I mean.’

‘Of course. I understand.’ Dandelion stood. ‘Let’s go to the sea, to Palmyra. I know a place. They serve herring, vodka and fish soup which they call a cockerel. Don’t laugh! It is really called that.’

‘Let them call it what they want. Let’s go.’

The bridge over the Adalatte was blocked, on it moved a convoy of loaded carts and a group of horsemen who rode bareback on their horses. Geralt and Dandelion had to wait off to the side of the road.

From the cavalcade rode a lone rider on a bay mare. The mare shook her head and greeted Geralt by neighing.

‘Roach!’

‘Hello, Witcher,’ the rider threw back his hood, revealing his face. ‘I was looking for you. But I did not expect to meet you so quickly.’

‘Hello, Pinety.’

Pinety jumped from the saddle. Geralt noted that he was armed. It was quite strange, magicians rarely carried weapons. On a bound brass belt, the sorcerer wore an ornate sword scabbard. There was also a dirk, solid and wide.

The Witcher took Roach’s reins, stroked the horse’s nose and the back of her neck. Pinety took off his gloves and tucked them in his belt.

‘Excuse me Master Dandelion,’ he said. ‘But I would like a word with Geralt alone. What I have to say is intended only for his ears.’

‘Geralt,’ Dandelion puffed up, ‘has no secrets from me.’

‘I know. Many details of his personal life I have learned from your ballads.’

‘But...’

‘Dandelion,’ interrupted the witcher. ‘Go for a walk.’

‘Thank you,’ he said when they were alone. ‘Thank you for bringing my horse, Pinety.’

‘I noticed,’ said the wizard, ‘that you are attached to her. So when I found her at Pine Copsea...’

‘You were in Pine Copse?’

‘I was. I was summoned there by Constable Torquil.’

‘Did you see...’

‘I saw,’ Pinety interrupted. ‘We’ve all seen. I don’t understand, witcher. I don’t understand. Why didn’t you cut him down?’

There, on the spot? What you did, let me say, was not very wise.'

I know. Geralt thought, refraining from comment. I know, of course. I was too stupid to use the provided chance of fate. And what would it have hurt me, just one more corpse on my account. What does it matter to a paid killer. And why does it sicken me to be your instrument? I have always been someone else's weapon. I should have sucked it up and do what I should.

'You'd probably be surprised,' Pinety looked into his eyes, 'but we immediately rushed to your aid. Harlan and I. We assumed you were in need of help. Degerlund was captured he next day when he disposed of a random gang.'

'You caught him,' the witcher responded. 'and without delay snapped his neck? Being smarter than me, you didn't repeat my mistake.'

'We are not killers,' the magician stammered, blushing. 'We took him to Rissberg. And there was a commotion... Everyone was against us. Ortolan, surprisingly, keep a low profile, and we on his side expected the worst. But Biruta Icarti, Sandocal, even Zangenis who supported us before... We were made to listen to a speech on community, solidarity, of brotherhood and loyalty. We were told that only scum sends an assassin on their fellows, and how could we have employed a witcher against a companion. For low motives. Out of jealousy for the talent and authority of our colleague and envy for his scientific achievements and success.'

The mention of the incident in the foothill and of the forty-four corpses did not produce any reaction and the witcher again refrained from comment. Except to shrug. And to think on the notation of science that requires sacrifice. And the purpose that sanctifies the means.

‘Degerlund,’ continued Pinety, ‘stood before the commission and listened to a harsh scolding. For practicing goetia, for killing people with a demon. He behaved arrogantly, apparently counting on the intervention of Ortolan. But Ortolan seemed to have forgotten about him completely, surrendering to his latest passion: designing a formula that was incredibly effective as a universal fertilizer, which would revolutionise agriculture. Releasing that his hope was gone, Degerlund changed his tone. To whiny and plaintive. He portrayed himself as a victim. A victim to his own ambitions and magical talent, thanks to which he summoned a demon that was too powerful and was impossible to deal with. He vowed that he would cease to engage in goetia ever again. And that he would devote himself to research in the field of the improvement of the human race, transhumanism, speciation, introgression and genetic modification.’

The witcher again refrained from comment.

‘They believed him. It was promoted by Ortolan, who had suddenly appeared before the commission smelling of fertilizer fumes. He named Degerlund one of his favourite young men, but who had lapsed. There was no doubt that this young man will correct himself and that he vouched for him. He asked the commission to change its anger to mercy and not to reproach the young man. Finally, he declared Degerlund his successor and follower, and gave him his personal laboratory in the Citadel. He stated that he did not need the laboratory to work under the sky, to work on harvesting areas and gardening beds. Biruta and the others relished the idea. The Citadel, due to its inaccessibility, could successfully serve as a place of isolation. Degerlund had fallen into his own trap. He was under house arrest.’

The scandal was swept under the rug, though the witcher without comment.

‘I suspect,’ Pinety gave him a look, ‘this was also influenced by their attitude towards you, to your personality and reputation.’

Geralt raised his eyebrows.

‘Your witcher code,’ continued the wizard, ‘ostensibly prohibits the killing of humans. But it is said that you follow this code without excessive reverence. What has happened before, that at least a few people have lost their lives to your mercy. Biruta and the other masters fear you. That you’ll go back to Rissberg and finish this thing. And if needs be, them too. The Citadel, is a one hundred percent safe haven, adapted to a laboratory from an ancient dwarven mountain fortress, providing magical protection. No one can get into the Citadel, there is no such possibility. Degerlund is not only isolated but it also safe.’

Rissberg is safe, thought the witcher. Protected from the scandal by compromise. With Degerlund in isolation, there is no scandal. Not one will know that scoundrel and careerist deceived and wrapped the sorcerers of Rissberg around his finger who believe and proclaim themselves an elite Brotherhood of the Arcane. Taking advantage of the naivety and stupidity of this elite, a degenerate psychopath is able to get away with killing more than forty people.

‘At the Citadel,’ the wizard did not take his eyes off of him, ‘Degerlund will be under watch and supervision. He will no longer call any demons.’

No demon had ever existed. And you, Pinety, know it.

‘The Citadel,’ the magician looked away, towards the ships in the harbour, ‘is located in the rock of the Kremor mountain, at the foot of which lies Rissberg. Trying to break in would be tantamount to suicide. Not only because of the magical protection. Remember what you told us back then? About someone possessed who had once killed? In conditions of extreme necessity, sacrificing one for the sake of many, thus

eliminating the illegality of illegal actions? But you do realise that now the circumstances are quite different. Isolated, Degerlund does not represent a real and imminent threat. If you lay a finger on him, you will be committing an act of crime and lawlessness. If you try to kill him, you will go on trial for attempted murder. However, some of the people, I know, hope that you will try. And end up on the scaffold. Therefore, I advise: leave him. Forget about Degerlund. Assume everything is okay.'

'You are silent,' stated Pinety. 'You refrain from commenting.'

'Because there is nothing to comment on. I'm only curious about one thing. You and Tzara. Will you stay in Rissberg?'

Pinety laughed. Dry and insincere.

'Both of us, Harlan and myself, were asked to resign of our own accord, for health reasons. We are leaving Rissberg, never to return. Harlan is going to Poviss, into the service of King Rhyd. I am, however, inclined to a longer journey. The Empire of Nilfgaard. I have heard that mages are utilitarian and without much respect. But they pay them well. And since we are talking about Nilfgaard... I almost forgot. I have a parting gift for you, witcher.'

He unbuckled his belt, wrapped it around the scabbard and handed Geralt the sword.

'This is for you,' he said before the witcher could say anything. 'I received it as a gift when I turned sixteen. From a father who could not accept the fact that I had decided to go to a school of magic. He believed that such a gift would affect me enough to decide to become an owner of such weapons, he felt it as my duty to respect traditions of our ancestors and choose a military career. However, I am a disappointing son. I don't like to hunt, I prefer fishing. I did not marry the daughter of his close friend. I

did not become a soldier, and this sword was overgrown with cobwebs in my closet. I don't need it. It will better serve you.'

'But... Pinety...'

'Take it, without ceremony. I know that your things are gone, and you need a weapon.'

Geralt took the hilt covered in lizard leather and half pulled the blade from its sheath. At an inch above the guard was a stamp in the shape of a sun with sixteen rays alternately straight and wavy, symbolizing the heraldry of sunlight and warmth from the sun. At two inches above the un began a beautifully engraved stylized inscription, the famous motto of the master.

'A blade of Viroled,' confirmed the witcher. 'This time, the original.'

'What?'

'Nothing. Just admiring. I don't know if I can take it...'

'You can take it. You've already taken it. In the end, it is in your hands. Damn it, I said without ceremony. I give you the sword as a token of sympathy. For you to understand that not all wizards are your enemies. And I'm more handy with a fishing rod. Nilfgaard has beautiful clear rivers, that are full of trout and salmon.'

'Thank you. Pinety?'

'Yes?'

'Did you give me the sword just out of sympathy?'

'Of course, out of sympathy,' the magician lowered his voice. 'But it may not be the only reason. Although what do I care what happens here, for what purpose this sword is used? I am leaving the country, never to come back here. Do you see the majestic galleon at the docks? The "Euryale's" home port is Bakkaal. I sail there the day after tomorrow.'

‘You got here too early.’

‘Yes...’ the magican faltered slightly. ‘First, I would like... There is someone here I need to say goodbye to...’

‘Good luck. Thank you for the sword. And again for my horse. Goodbye, Pinety.’

‘Goodbye,’ the magician without hesitation took his offered hand. ‘Goodbye, witcher.’

He found Dandelion, of course, in the port tavern, slurping a bowl of soup.

‘I’m leaving,’ he said briefly. ‘Right now.’

‘Where?’ Dandelion froze with the spoon in his hand. ‘Already? I thought...’

‘No matter what you think. I’m going immediately. Calm your cousin the Instigator. I’ll be back before the royal wedding.’

‘And what’s that?’

‘What are you talking about?’

‘The sword, of course. Where did you get it? From the wizard, right? And the one that you got from me? Where is that?’

‘Lost. Go back to the upper town, Dandelion.’

‘And Coral?’

‘What about Coral?’

‘What should I say to her, if she asks...’

‘She won’t ask. She won’t have time for it. She will be saying goodbye to someone.’

Interlude

CONFIDENTIAL

Illustrious Reverend

Grand Master Hugues de Napeys

Head of the Chapter of Talent and Art

Novigrad

Datura ex Castle Rissberg

15th day of Jul. 1245 post Resurrection

Re:

Master Albert Sorel Amador Degerlund

Honorable Archmagister!

No doubt the Chapter has heard rumours about the incidents that took place in the summer around Temeria on the western borders, the consequences of the incidents as expected, was the death of about forty people – more precise information is not available – mostly unskilled forest workers. These incidents are linked, unfortunately, with Albert Sorel Amador Degerlund, a member of the research group out of Castle Rissberg.

The Rissberg research group expressed condolence to the families of the victims of the incidents, although the victim's standing on the social hierarchy is extremely low, they abused alcohol and were leading extremely immoral lives, and probably did not keep family ties.

I would like to remind the Capital that Master Degerlund is a disciple and follower of Archmagister Ortolan, an outstanding scientist, a specialist in the field of genetics, and having

achieved, almost invaluable achievements in the fields of transhumanism, introgression and speciation. This research that Master Degerlund leads could be critical to the development and evolution of the human race. It is known that the human race is inferior to other species in relation to a number of physical, mental and psychological opportunities. Master Degerlund's experiments based on the hybridization and merging of the gene pool, are intended to initially bring the human race to the level of other races, and in the long term – by means of speculation – ensure dominance over them, and their complete submission. It is hardly necessary to explain this issue is of paramount importance. It would be impractical because of a few minor incidents to slow down or block the progress of the above-mentioned research. As for Master Degerlund, the Rissberg research group takes full responsibility for the maintenance of his health services. Master Degerlund's has previously been diagnosed with narcissistic inclinations, a lack of empathy and light emotional disorders. In the period prior to the committing of these acts imputed to him, his condition worsened until the appearance of symptoms of bipolar disorder. It can be argued that at the time of the actions attributed to him, Master Degerlund was not in control of his emotional reactions and had no way to distinguish good from evil. It can be assumed that Master Degerlund was *non compos mentis* and had temporarily lost his sanity, so that justice for his action cannot be brought against him because *impune est admittendum quod per furorem alicuius accidit*.

Master Degerlund has been placed *ad intrin* instead into a secret detention, and is undergoing treatment and continuing his studies.

In order to assume complete closure on the issue, we draw the Chapters attention to the person Constable Torquil who carried out the investigation into the incident in Temeria. Constance Torquil, is a bailiff of Gors Velen, formerly known as a

conscientious officer and a dedicated guardian of the law, showed in the investigation of the incidents on the above mentioned villages, excessive bias and an unwanted investigation from our point of view. We could influence his superiors, to slightly temper his ardor. And if that does not work, it is necessary to collect on the Constable, his wife, parents, grandparents, children and extended family information about their personal life, past convictions, and affairs of a sexual preference. We recommend you contact the law firm "Codringer and Fenn" whose services I dare remind the Chapter we used three years ago in order to discredit and compromise the witness in the case known as "The Grain Scam".

The last item I bring to the attention of the Chapter is unfortunately the involvement of a witcher called Geralt of Rivia. He was an eye witness to the incidents in the settlements, we have reason to believe that he can link these events directly with to Master Degerlund. It will be necessary to also restrain this witcher, if he suddenly begins to dig to deep. Please not that due to the antisocial behavior, nihilism and emotional chaotic promiscuity of this witcher, it may be that one warning will not be sufficient and we will have to use extreme measures. The witcher is under constant supervision, and we are ready to go with such measures, of course, if the Chapter approves and recommends.

It is the hope that the above explanation from the Chapter deems it sufficient to close the case, *bene valere optamus*, and left with the highest esteem.

On behalf of the research group of Rissberg

Semper fidelis vestrarum bona amica

Biruta Anna Marquette Icarti *manu propria*

*Give blow for blow, scorn for scorn, doom for doom - with
compound interest liberally added thereunto!*

Eye for eye, tooth for tooth, aye four-fold, a hundred-fold!

Anton Szandor LaVey, The Satanic Bible

Chapter Seventeen

‘In time,’ Frans Torquil said sadly. ‘we could reach a proposal, witcher. Now begin.’

He lay on the bed, pale as a whitewash wall with hair wet with sweat and plastered to his forehead. It wore only a linen shirt, which immediately reminded Geralt of deathbed apparel. His left thigh from groin to knee was covered in a blood-soaked bandage.

In the middle of the hut stood a table covered in a sheet. A man in a sleeveless black coat was laying tools out on the table one by one. Knives. Drills. Pliers. Saws.

‘My one regret,’ Torquil gritted his teeth. ‘Is that I could not catch them sons of bitches. The will of the gods was against me... And I will not.’

‘What happened?’

‘The same thing as Rogowizna and Pine Copse. But not as usual, at the very edge of the forest. And not in a clearing, but on the road. I ran into some travelers. Three killed, two children stolen. It so happened I was with a group, so we gave chase and soon saw them. Two big boys, huge, like bulls, and one a lousy hunchback. And the same hunchback fired a crossbow at me.’

The constable clenched his teeth and gestured at his bandaged thigh.

‘I told them to leave me and to chase after them. But they didn’t listen, fools. Well, they got away, eventually. And I? So what if I was saved? If they cut of my leg today? It would have been better to me, if they had caught them and I could see their feet kicking as they dangle from a noose. But they disobeyed an order, fools. Now they sit over there, shame on them.’

The constable's subordinates, one and all occupied a bench by the wall. Sitting beside them was an old woman with grey hair.

'We can start,' said the man in the black coat. 'The patient is on the table, tightly strapped. Outsiders are asked to leave the house.'

'Wait a minute,' Geralt straightened. 'Who decided that amputation is necessary?'

'I decided,' the man in the black coat also straightened, but still had to look up to see Geralt's face. 'Master Lyuppi, I was specifically sent by the Bailiff of Gors Velen. An inspection of the wound shows that it is infected. I have to take the leg, there is no other way to save it.'

'How much are you being paid for the operation?'

'Twenty crowns.'

'Here's thirty,' Geralt took from his bag three golden coins.

'Collect your tools and belongings and return to the bailiff. If he asks, say that the patient is feeling better.'

'But... I must protest...'

'Pack and leave. Which of these words is not clear to you? And you, Grandma, here. Unwind the bandage.'

'He,' the old woman pointed to the court physician, 'forbade me to touch the wounded. Because I look like a sorceress and a witch. He threatened to denounce me.'

'Forget it. He is leaving.'

The old lady, in which Geralt immediately recognised as an herbalist, obeyed. She carefully unwound the bandage. Torquil turned his head, hissing and moaning.

'Geralt...' moaned Frans. 'What are you up to? The doctor says there is no other way... It is better to lose a leg than a life...'

‘Lies. Now shut up.’

The wound looked foul, but Geralt had seen worse before. He pulled from his bag a box of elixirs. Master Lyuppi who had already packed his bags, turned and watched.

‘To turn to decoctions,’ Lyuppi said, ‘to magic and voodoo stuff. You’re a quack, and nothing more. As a doctor, I am forced to protest...’

Geralt turned and looked at the medic. He left. Hastily. Stumbling on the doorstep.

‘You four, come here.’ The witcher took a cork from a bottle. ‘Hold him. Bite down with your teeth, Frans.’

He poured an elixir that smelled strong onto the wound. The constable groaned in agony. Geralt waited a minute, then poured on a second elixir. The second elixir foamed, hissed and emitted smoke. Torquil shouted, jerking his head, arched his back, rolled his eyes and lost consciousness.

The old woman fished from an old pot, a handful of green salve, smeared a thick layer over a piece of folded fabric and covered the wound.

‘Larkspur,’ guessed Geralt. ‘A compress of larkspur, arnica and calendula. Well, Grandma, very good. Even more useful would be some St. John’s wort, oak bark...’

‘Do not presume,’ interrupted the old lady not looking up from the constable’s leg, ‘to teach me Herbalism. I, my boy, was treating people with herbs when you were still nursing at your mum’s teat. And you, dear, move away, give him more room. It stinks unbearably. You should change your socks. From time to time. Get out of the house, hear what I say?’

‘The leg will need to be immobilized. Strapped up with long splints...’

‘Don’t tell me how to do my job,’ she said. ‘Now out with you. Why are you standing there? What are you waiting for? Thanks for generously donating your elixirs? The promise that he’ll never forget you while he lives?’

‘I want to ask him about something.’

‘Swear to me, Geralt...’ said Frans Torquil unexpectedly, ‘that you’ll find them. That you will not forgive them...’

‘Let him sleep, he is delirious with fever. And you, witcher, go and wait before the hut.’

Geralt waited, but not for long. The old lady came out, tightened her skirt and straightened a lopsided wreath. She sat down on the bench next to him. She rubbed her foot on the other foot. Her feet were unusually small.

‘He is asleep,’ she said. ‘Perhaps he’ll survive, if nothing bad happens, ugh. You saved his leg, witcher. The lame forever remain on the horse, methinks, sitting is better with two legs, not one. He he.’

She reached into her bodice and there was a strong smell of herbs. She removed a small wooden box, and opened it. After a moment’s hesitation, she offered it to Geralt.

‘Fisstech?’

‘No thanks. I don’t use fisttech.’

‘I...’ the herbalist said putting the drug to one nostril and then the other, ‘only do so occasionally. For clarity of thought. Longevity. And beauty. Just look at me.’

He looked.

‘For your witcher’s cure for Frans,’ the grandmother said with watery eyes, sniffing, ‘I thank you and will not forget. I know that ones such as you are jealous of your decoctions. And you gave it to him without hesitation and without being paid.’

Although you yourself may now not have enough when you need them. Scary?’

‘Scary.’

She turned her head in profile. She would have once been a beautiful woman. However, it would have been a hell of a long time ago.

‘And now,’ she continued, ‘tell me. What is it you wanted to ask Frans?’

‘Nevermind, he’s sleeping, and I need to get on the road.’

‘Tell me where.’

‘To Mount Kremor’

‘So at once. What do you want to know about this mountain?’

The house was quite far outside the village, behind a timber fence that stretched back to a garden, full of apple trees, whose branches bent under the weight of the fruit. The rest of the house was much the same as rural classics – a barn, a shed, a chicken coop, a few beehives, a garden and a bunch of manure. From the chimney stretch a light strip of pleasant smelling smoke.

Hanging out next to the fence a guinea fowl spotted him first, announcing his arrival with a hellish squawk. Children who were spinning in the courtyard – three of them – rushed down the side of the house. A woman appeared in the doorway. Tall, blonde, with an apron and a homespun skirt. The witcher move closer and dismounted.

‘Greetings,’ he said. ‘Is the owner home?’

The children, every one of them girls, clung to their mother’s skirt and apron. The woman looked at the witcher, her eyes vainly seeking sympathy. Not surprisingly. She could see the

hilt of his sword over his shoulder. The medallion around his neck. The silver studs on his gloves he didn't even try to hide. Even showing them off.

'The owner,' he said, 'Otto Dussart. I have a business deal with him.'

'What?'

'It's private. Is he home?'

She watched him silently, her head slightly bowed. A typical peasant beauty, appreciated the witcher, and therefore could be aged from twenty-five to forty-five years old. A more accurate estimate, as in the case of most rural woman, was not possible.

'Is he home?'

'He's not around.'

'Then I'll wait,' he threw the mare's reins over a pole, 'till he gets back.'

'It might take a while.'

'Anyhow, I'll wait. Although, in truth, it would be better in the house than under the fence.'

The woman measured him with her eyes for some time. And his medallion.

'You are welcome,' she said finally, 'as a guest in our house.'

'I accept your invitation,' said the witcher in a conversational manner. 'And I will not break the Rules of hospitality.'

'You will not break them,' the woman doubtfully repeated. 'But you wear a sword.'

'This is from my profession.'

'Swords main. And kill.'

‘Life does too. Am I still invited?’

‘Welcome to our house.’

The entrance, as usual in these villages was through a dark and cluttered passage. The house itself was quite spacious, bright and clean, only on the walls nears the kitchen and fireplace were there traces of soot, while the rest of them were white and pleasing to the eye. Coloured rugs hung everywhere and various utensils, bundles of herbs, garlic cloves, and bundles of peppers. A woven curtain separated the house from the pantry. It smelled of cooking. Like cabbage.

‘Please sit down.’

The hostess was still standing, crumpling her apron in her hands. The children sat on a low bench next to the stove. The medallion around Geralt’s neck quivered. Powerfully and unceasing. Fighting under his shirt, like a bird trying to escape.

‘The sword,’ said the woman, approaching the stove, ‘can be left in the hall. It is indecent to sit at a table with a weapon. Only robbers do it. Are you a robber?’

‘You know what I am,’ the witcher said. ‘And the sword will remain where it is. As a reminder.’

‘About what?’

‘That reckless acts have dangerous consequences.’

‘We don’t have any weapons here, because...’

‘Alright, alright,’ Geralt rudely interrupted. ‘Don’t pretend to be the good hostess. In the house and courtyard – there is an arsenal, people have fallen from hoes, not to mention shovels and pitchforks. I’ve head of one who was killed by a pestle. Harm can come from anything, if you want. Or forced. And while we are talking about it – leave the pot of boiling water alone. And move away from the stove.’

‘Nothing... I wasn’t going to,’ the woman said, obviously lying. ‘There is no hot water, just soup. I was going to server...’

‘Thank you. But I’m not hungry. Therefore, don’t touch the pot and get away from the stove. Sit there with the children. And we’ll wait quietly for the owner.’

They sat in silence, interrupted only by the buzzing of flies. His medallion trembled.

‘I need to move the pot of cabbage,’ the woman interrupted the heavy silence. ‘If I don’t stir it, it will burn.’

‘Let her,’ Geralt indicated the smallest of the girls. ‘She will do.’

The girl got up slowly, staring at him from under blonde bangs. She took a pair of tongs with a long handle, that leaned against the frame of the stove, then suddenly jumped at Geralt like a cat. She tried to hit him in the neck and pin him to the wall, but he dodged, grabbed her and threw her on the floor. Before him she began to change.

The woman and the two remaining girls also changed. At the witcher jumped two wolves – a grey wolf and two cubs with bloodshot eyes and bared teeth. Jumping they split, attaching from all sides like true wolves. The witcher leapt, throwing the bench at the wolf, and throwing his fists with silver studs at the wolf cubs. They whimpered, crouched close to the ground and bared their fangs. The wolf howled wildly and jumped again.

‘No! Edwina! No!’

She fell off him as he hugged the wall. But in human form. The smallest girl had changed and squatted next to the stove. The woman was on her knees at his feet, looking abashed. Geralt did not know what she was ashamed of – the attack or that it had failed.

‘Edwina! What is this?’ thundered a tall, bearded man with his hands on his hips. ‘What are you...’

‘This is a witcher!’ snorted the woman, still kneeling. ‘A rogue with a sword! He has come for you! Assassin! He stinks of blood!’

‘Shut up, woman. I know him. Excuse me, Geralt. She doesn’t know what she’s done. I’m sorry, I didn’t know... I thought once a witcher, the...’

The man stopped, looking worried. The woman and the girls were huddled near the stove. Geralt could swear he heard a quiet growl.

‘Nothing has happened,’ said the witcher. ‘No harm was done. But you came just in time. Very timely.’

‘I know,’ the bearded man flinched noticeably. ‘I know, Geralt. Sit down, sit down... Edwina! Bring beer!’

‘No. Let us leave, Dussart. For a few words.’

In the middle of the courtyard sat a ginger cat. As the witcher approached, it hissed and darted off into a thicket of nettles.

‘I did not want to irritate your wife and frighten the children,’ began Geralt. ‘Besides, I have business, that I would like to talk to you about, face to face. You see, I need a favour.’

‘Whatever you want,’ The bearded man said, ‘tell me. I will fulfil your every desire, if it is within my power. The debt I owe you is huge. Thanks to you I still live in this world. Because you spared me once. I owe you...’

‘Not me. Yourself. The fact that even in your guise of a wolf, you’re still a man and never hurt anyone.’

‘That’s true. And that has given me this? The neighbours became suspicious and immediately out a witcher on my ass. Though poor, they gave every penny collected to hire you.

‘I thought,’ Geralt admitted, ‘to return their money. But it might arouse suspicion. Because I guaranteed them the word of a

witcher that I healed you from the spell of lycanthropy, and now you are the most normal person in the world. Such a feat has to be worth something. If people pay for something, then they believe what they pay for becomes true and legal. The more expensive the better.'

'It makes me tremble when I remember that day,' Dussart became pale, despite his tan. 'I almost died of fright when I saw you with that silver blade in hand. I thought my last hour had come. But the stories weren't true. A witcher's only love is blood and suffering. And you turned out to be a good person. And kind.'

'Don't exaggerate. But you took my advice and left Guaamez.'

'I had to,' said Dussart grimly. 'Those in Guaamez like to believe that I'm disenchanting, but you were right – for a former werewolf it is too difficult to live among those people. It turns out that people judge you for what you are, and not for who you are. I had to get out of there, go some other place where no one knew me. I wondered... And then I met Edwina...'

'Rarely happens,' Geralt said turning his head, 'that two lycanthropes for a couple. Even rarer is offspring from such relationships. Lucky you, Dussart.'

'And so you know,' the werewolf bared his teeth. 'The kids will be nice young ladies when they grow up. And with Edwina, we came together as two of a kind. I'll be with her until the end of days.'

'She immediately recognised me as a witcher. And I was immediately ready to defend myself. I don't believe it but she intended to serve me boiling soup. Surely, she too has heard tales of bloodthirsty witchers, eager for the sufferings of others.'

'Forgive her, Geralt. And try the soup. Edwina is an excellent cook.'

‘Perhaps,’ the witcher said, ‘it is better not to bother them. I don’t want to frighten the children, or even more so – irritate your wife. To her, I’m still a rogue with a sword, we can hardly expect her to immediately be imbued with confidence in me. She says I smell like blood. In a figurative sense, I understand her.’

‘Not really. I don’t want to offend you, Witcher, but the smell of blood carries off you.’

‘I’ve not touched blood in...’

‘Nearly two weeks, I would say,’ finished the werewolf. ‘This blood is old, you touched someone bloody. There is an older blood there as well, somewhere around a month. Cold blood. Reptile blood. Your blood as well. Live blood from a wound.’

‘Amazing.’

‘We werewolves,’ said Dussart proudly, ‘have a nose, a little bit more sensitive than humans.’

‘I know,’ smiled Geralt. ‘I know about werewolves’ noses – a true wonder of nature. That is why I’ve come to ask this favour of you.’

‘Shrews,’ Dussart led with his nose. ‘Shrews and more shrews. And voles. Lots of voles. Shit. A lot of shit. Nothing more.’

The witcher sighed, then spat. He did not hide his disappointment. This was the fourth cave in which Dussart had not smelled anything other than rodents and shit.

They moved on to the next one, a gaping hole in a wall of rocks. Stones escaped from underfoot, falling down the slope. The wall was steep and walking was hard, Geralt had already begun to get tired. Dussart depending on where he walked went in wolf form or remained human.

‘Bear,’ he said looking into the next grotto, sucking air into his nostrils. ‘With it’s young. But it is gone already. And there were marmots. Shrews. Bats. Lots of bats. Ermine. Marten. A wolverine. And a pile of shit.’

Next cave.

‘A female ferret. A wolverine... no two. A pair of wolverines. An underground source of water, a little sour. Gremlins, a dozen or so. Some amphibians such as salamanders... bats...’

From somewhere high above the rocky ledge above them, an eagle circled, shouting. The werewolf raised his head and looked at the mountain top. Dark clouds were approaching from behind them.

‘A storm is coming. And what is a day without a storm... What do we do, Geralt? Next cave?’

‘Next cave.’

To get to the next cave they were forced to pass beneath a waterfall, it was small, but significant enough to get them wet. The mossy rocks were slippery like soap. Dussart went first, changing into a wolf. Geralt, after slipping a couple of time, swore and overcame the difficult stretch of path on all fours. *It’s a good thing Dandelion isn’t here, he thought, he wouldn’t fail to describe this is a ballad. In front, a lycanthrope in wolf form, followed by a witcher on all fours. That would amuse people.*

‘A big cave, Witcher,’ Dussart sniffed. ‘Large and deep. There’s mountain trolls, five or six adult trolls. And bats. And a pile of troll shit.’

‘Move on. To the next one.’

‘Trolls... same as before. The caves are connected.’

‘Bear. Pestun. Was here but is already gone. Recently. Marmots. Bats.’

At the next cave, the werewolf jumped like a scalded cat.

‘Gorgon,’ he whispered. ‘A greater Gorgon sits in the depth of this pit. Sleeping. Besides that there is nothing.’

‘No wonder,’ muttered the witcher. ‘Move away. Quietly. Don’t wake it up...’

They moved away, looking around uneasily. To the next grotto, which was located far from the lair of the Gorgon, they approached slowly, knowing that caution couldn’t hurt. It didn’t hurt, but it was not needed. The next few caves did not hide anything in their depths, except bats, woodchucks, mice, voles, and shrews. And shit reservoirs.

Geralt was tired and disappointed. Dussart too, and he did not hide it. But he behaved, admittedly, with dignity, without showing discouragement by word or gesture. The witcher, however, had no delusions on this score. The werewolf doubted the success of the operation. According to what Geralt had heard and confirmed by the old herbalist, the Kremor mountains east side was full of holes, like cheese, pitted with innumerable caves. Indeed, they had found the caves. But Dussart clearly did not believe that they would sniff out and find one that was in fact an underground passage into the rock complex of the Citadel.

In addition to everything else, lightning flashed. There was a loud clap of thunder. And the downpour began. Geralt was sincerely determined to spit on everything, swear vulgarly and declare the search ended. But he controlled himself.

‘Come on, Dussart, next hole.’

‘As you wish, Geralt.’

Suddenly, at the next hole gaping in the rock, like in a bad novel, the plot broke.

‘Bat,’ announced the werewolf sniffing. ‘Bat and cat...’

‘Lynx? Forest cat?’

‘A cat,’ straightened Dussart. ‘A common house cat.’

Otto Dussart watched with interest as the witcher drank from a bottle or elixir. Observed the changes in the appearance of Geralt and his eyes widened in surprise and fear.

‘Don’t ask me,’ he said, ‘to go with you into the pit. No offense, but I won’t go. My hair stands on end from fear...’

‘It didn’t occur to me to ask you. Go home, Dussart, to your wife and children. You did me a favour, complied with my request, I can’t ask anymore.’

‘I’ll wait,’ protested the werewolf. ‘Wait near the exit.’

‘I don’t know,’ Geralt shifted the sword on his back, ‘when I will come out. Or if I’ll come out.’

‘Don’t say that. I’ll wait... Until dusk.’

The bottom of the cave was covered in a thick layer of bat guano. Small bats – whole bunches – were hanging from the arch of the cave, whirling and squeaking sleepily. The ceiling at first was high above Geralt’s head, and on the uneven bottom he could move quickly and easily. This convenience, however, soon ended – first the vault seemed to begin to decline more and more, and in the end there was nothing left to do but move on all fours. And then to crawl.

There was a time when the witcher paused, deciding to turn back – the tightness was such that it was possible to get seriously stuck.

However, he heard the sound of water, and on his face felt a breath of cold air. Realising the risk, he squeezed into the gap, and gave a sigh of relief when it began to expand. The corridor

suddenly became very steep, the witcher moved down and to the right of an underground stream, which appeared from under a wall and then disappeared under the opposite. From above oozed a faint light, and from up there – from great heights – the cold wind blew.

The stream was completely flooded with water, and the witcher, though he expected he might, was not eager to dive in. He made his way up the stream, against the flow. When he reached a slope up to a great hall, he was soaked to the skin and smeared with mud and limestone deposits.

The room was huge, full of majestic striations, stalagmites and stalactites. The stream running along the bottom was pitted with deep pools. Here, too, he could make out a light and feel a weak draft. And something else. The witcher could not smell as well as a werewolf, but he could smell the same thing as the werewolf did before – the subtle stink of cat urine.

He stood for a moment looking around. The air flow pointed him to a hole, similar in size to a palace door, with huge stalagmite columns on each side. Close by, he noticed a tray filled with fine sand. The cat smell came from it. On the sand there were numerous traces of cat paws.

The witcher again hung his sword on his back, which he was forced to withdraw when squeezing through the trouble spots. He stepped between the stalagmites.

It was an easy climb up the corridor. The floor was dry and covered with boulders, but manageable. At the end the path was a door, solid and locked.

Up until this point the witcher was not sure he was on the right path, had no confidence that he had gone into the right cave. The door seemed to confirm that this was so. In the door, right at the doorstep, there was a recently sawed hole. The passage for the cat.

He pushed the door, but it did not budge. He was slightly startled when his medallion did. The door was magical, protected by a spell. However, the twitching of his medallion, said that it was a powerful spell. He brought his face to the door.

‘Friend.’

The door opened silently on oiled hinges. He realised that the magical protection was protected by a standard factory password – luckily for him – someone had not wanted to install something more sophisticated. They were supposed to protect the cave system from beings who were unable to use even the simplest magic.

Behind the door ended the natural caves. There was a corridor that had been carved from the rocks with picks.

But despite all this, he was not full of confidence. He could see a light ahead. The flickering of a torch or candle. Then he heard a familiar sound. Laughter.

‘Bueeeeh! Bueeh-heeh-heeh!’

Light and laughter, as it turned out, came from a large room illuminated by a torch stuck in an iron holder. Against the wall was piled boxes, barrels and crates. Behind one of the boxes, using the barrels as chairs sat Bue and Bang. They played dice. Bang laughed, apparently, winning more points.

Next to them sat a bottle of vodka. Beside that lay a snack.

Baked human foot.

The Witcher drew his sword from its scabbard.

‘Hi guys.’

Bue and Bang spent some time staring at him with their mouths open. Then they roared, sprang up, knocking over the barrels

and grabbed their weapons. Bue grabbed a scythe, and Bang reached for a scimitar. Both rushed at the witcher.

They surprised him, although he did not expect that everything would be easy. He did not expect the clumsy giants to be so fast.

Bue waved his scythe down low, if Geralt hadn't jumped he would have lost both legs. He narrowly avoided being hit by Bang, the scimitar kicking up sparks from the stone wall.

The witcher knew how to deal with fast things. And large things too. Fast or slow, big or small – everything had areas sensitive to pain.

And they had no idea how quick the witcher had become from drinking his elixirs.

Bue howled in shock when he hit his elbow. Bang howled even louder when hit in the knee. The witcher deceptively fast, jumped over the scythe, and slashed Bue with his blade on the ear. Bue roared, shaking his head and swung his scythe. Geralt crooked his fingers into the Sign of Aard. The spell knocked Bue over backwards onto the floor so hard his teeth clacked together.

Bang swung his scimitar widely. Geralt deftly ducked under the blade, and quickly slashed the giant on the other knee, turned around, jumped onto Bue who was still trying to get up and slashed him across the eyes. Bue, however, managed to turn his head, the blow fell across his eyebrow arches, the blood immediately flooded the giants face. Bue roared, leaped up blindly and dashed towards the witcher, who leaped out of the way. Bue ran and collided with Bang. Bang pushed him out of the way, growling furiously, he rushed the witcher, chopping backhanded with his scimitar. Geralt was gone, with a half turn, he slashed the giant with both elbows. Bang howled, but didn't release the scimitar, he swung again and stuck boldly at

random. Geralt dodge the tip. He found himself behind Bang, and did not fail to take advantage of the opportunity. He turned his blade and slashed from below, vertically between the buttock. Bang grabbed his ass, howled, screamed, moved his feet apart, bent his knees and pissed himself.

Bue, blinded, swung his scythe. He hit. But the witcher had pirouetted to the left. He had hit his comrade who was still bent. And knocked his head off. From a slit in the trachea there was a loud hiss of released air, and then blood burst from an artery like lava from the crater of a volcano, high, right up to the ceiling.

Bang was bleeding like a headless statue in a fountain, holding upright on his huge flat feet. But finally leaned over and fell like a log.

Bue rubbed his eyes covered with blood. He roared like a buffalo when he finally realized what had happened. He stamped his feet, waving his scythe. He spun on the spot, looking for the witcher. He didn't find him. Because the witcher was behind him. The blow under his arm, dropped the scythe from his hands, he rushed at Geralt with bare hands, but again blood flooded into his eyes and he ran into a wall. Geralt jumped after him, slashing.

Bue, apparently did not know that he had a dissected artery. And that he did not have long to live. He growled, spun on the spot, waving his arms. Yet his knees buckled under him and he splashed down in a pool of blood. While on his knees, he continued to growl, but it grew slower and weaker. Geralt moved forward to finish him, poking him under the edge of his sternum. It was a mistake. The giant groaned and grabbed the blade. His eyes were already clouded, but he did not weaken his grip. Geralt put his boot on his chest and pulled. Although Bue's hand was bleeding, he did not let go.

‘You stupid son of a bitch,’ hissed the hunchback entering the cavern, aiming a crossbow at the witcher. ‘You’ve crawled here to your death, so it turned out, you bloody bastard. Hold him, Bue!’

Geralt tugged. Bue groaned, but did not let go. The hunchback grinned and pulled the trigger. Geralt, crouched, and avoided the heavy bolt, which flew past his side and hit a wall. Bue let go of the sword, then lying on his stomach, grabbed the witcher’s legs, immobilizing him. The hunchback roared and raised the crossbow.

But he did not get time to shoot.

Into the cavern, like a grey arrow, burst a huge wolf. He hit the hunchback in the legs and back, tearing ligaments and arteries. The hunchback cried out and fell. The fallen crossbow’s bowstring clicked. Bue wheezed. A bolt went into his ear. The tip of it poking out of the other ear.

The hunchback howled. The wolf opened its terrible maw and grabbed his head. The howl turned into a croak.

Geralt, his feet finally freed from the deceased giant, stood up. Dussart, in human form, stood over the corpse of the hunchback, wiping his lips and chin.

‘Forty-two years as a werewolf,’ he said, meeting the eyes of the witcher, ‘and this is the first opportunity, to finally bite someone to death.’

‘I had to come,’ Dussart explained. ‘I realised that I must warn you, Geralt.’

‘About them?’ Geralt said wiping his blade on the motionless body.

‘Not just them.’

The witcher entered the next room, following by the werewolf. Who then involuntarily retreated.

The stone floor was black with dried blood. In the middle of the room was a gaping black hole surrounded by a fence. Nearby stood a pile of corpses. Naked and mutilated, cut up, quartered, some flayed. It was difficult to estimate how many there were.

From the hole, from the depths, they could clearly hear crunching sounds, the sounds of bones breaking.

‘Before, I couldn’t smell it.’ Dussart muttered, his voice full of disgust. ‘Only when you opened the door, I sensed that down there... Let’s run. Away from all this death.’

‘I’m here to finish something. But you go. Thank you for the rescue.’

‘Don’t thank me. I was in your debt. And I’m happy to be able to repay you.’

Near the back of the room was a spiral staircase, steps carved into the rock and winding upwards like a cylindrical barrel. Similarly, it was difficult to guess how many, but Geralt figured that if it was a standard tower stairway, it would go up two, maybe three floors. He counted sixty-two steps when he finally stopped at a door. Like the one at the bottom, this one also had a sawed out passage for a cat. Like the one at the bottom it was also closed, but without magic, and opened by lightly turning the handle.

Inside the room, there were no windows and it was poorly lit. Under the ceiling hung a few magic globes, but only one of them was active. There was an awful chemical stink, and all kinds of nasty things. At first glance, it was clear what the place was. Banks, bottles, retorts, glass jars, tubes, steel tools and accessories, in a word, a laboratory, without a doubt.

On a shelf near the entrance was a number of large glass jars. The nearest was filled with human eyes, floating in a yellow liquid, like plums in compote. The jar held a homunculus, tiny, no more than two fist put together. In the third...

In the third jar, floating in liquid, was a human head. The facial features were distorted due to the cuts, swelling and discoloured skin, it was difficult to recognise, moreover, it was hard to see through the thick, streaked glass. But the head was completely bald. Only one sorcerer shaved his head bald.

Harlan Tzara, it seemed, never made it to Kovir.

In other jars, other things floated, blue, pale abominations. But no other heads were in them.

The centre of the room held a table. A corrugated steel table with drainage. On the table lay a naked corpse. The corpse was a child's body. A blonde girl.

The body was dissected with Y-shaped cuts. The internal organs were laid out on both sides of the body, smooth, orderly, neat. It looked just like the drawings in an anatomy class. The only thing missing was designations: Fig.1, Fig. 2 and so on.

He noticed movement out of the corner of his eye. A big black cat slipped along the wall, looking at him, then hissed and ran through the open door. Geralt followed.

'Mister...'

He stopped. And turned around.

In the corner stood a cell, low and similar to a pen for chickens. He saw delicate fingers clenching the iron bars. And then her eyes.

'Mister, save...'

A boy, no older than ten years. Huddled and shivered.

'Save me...'

‘Quiet. You aren’t in danger anymore, just a little patience. I’ll come back for you.’

‘Mister. Don’t leave me!’

‘Quiet, I said.’

First he came across a dusty library. Then, a living room. And then a bedroom. It was occupied by a large bed with a black canopy on poles made of ebony.

The witcher heard a rustle. He turned.

In the doorway stood Sorel Degerlund. Neatly combed, in a mantle embroidered with gold stars. Near Degerlund stood something incredibly large, completely grey and armed with a zerrikainian sabre.

‘I’m standing at the ready with a jar of formalin,’ said the magician. ‘For your head, you bastard. Kill him, Beta!’

Degerlund did not have time to finish the sentence, before the grey creature attacked. The incredibly fast grey ghost, moved as light and quietly as a rat, its sabre whistling. Geralt escaped two attacks carried out classically – crosswise. After the first, he felt movement next to his ear and heard the air whistle, after the second – a light touch on his sleeve. The third blow he parried with his sword, and for a moment they were close. He saw the face of the grey creature, large yellow eyes with vertical pupils, narrow slits instead of a nose, and pointed ears. The creature did not have a mouth.

They parted. The creature was swift, attacking immediately, volatile, dancing and again cutting crosswise. Again predictably. It was inhumanly agile, incredibly dexterous, devilishly fast. But stupid.

It had no idea how quickly the witcher had become by drinking his elixirs.

Geralt allowed him one more blow with the same maneuver. Then he attacked. His skill and movement were hundredfold. He moved around the grey creature with a quick half-turn, feinted and slashed it on the collarbone. The blood did not even have time to splash before he turned his sword and cut the monster under the arm. He jumped away, ready for more. But more was not needed.

The creation, as it turned out, had a mouth. On its grey face, a laceration, wide, from ear to ear appeared. But no voice, nor sound issued from it. It fell to its knees, then onto its side. For a moment it twitched, moving its arms and legs like a dog, which was dreaming. Then it died. Quietly.

Degerlund made a mistake. Instead of running, he raised both hands and began to shout a spell, mad, barking, filled with anger and hatred in his voice. Around his hands appeared swirling flames, the formation of a fireball. It looked like the production of cotton candy. And even smelled similar.

Degerlund did not have time to finish the ball. He had no idea how fast the witcher had become by drinking his elixirs.

Geralt jumped, slashing with his sword over the top of the ball and hands of the magician. The ball thundered and sparked like an inflamed oven. Degerlund, squealing, released the fiery sphere from his bleeding hands. The fireball went out, filling the room with the smell of burnt caramel.

Geralt sheathed his sword. He hit Degerlund in the face with a widely swung open palm. The wizard shouted, curled up and turned his back. The witcher grabbed him, took him by the throat, holding him at arm's length. Degerlund yelled and began to kick.

'You cannot!' he howled. 'You cannot kill me! Because I'm... a human!'

Geralt clenched his fingers around his throat. Not too hard to start with.

‘It wasn’t me!’ howled the magician. ‘It was Ortolan! Ortolan ordered me! He made me! Birtua Icarti knew everything! She did! It was her idea, this medallion! It was she who told me to do it.’

The witcher increased the pressure.

‘We were saving the people! Saving!’

Geralt increased the pressure.

‘The people... need... help...’

Degerlund wheezed, from his mouth drool flowed copiously. Geralt looked away. Then increased the pressure.

Degerlund collapsed and sagged. Stronger. The hyoid bone cracked. Stronger. The larynx fractured. Stronger. Even stronger.

The cervical vertebrae cracked and shifted.

Geralt supported Degerlund for a moment. Then abruptly twisted the wizard’s head to one side, for greater certainty. Then he let go. The wizard collapsed onto the floor, silent as silk.

The witcher wiped off the drool on the black canopy.

The big black cat came out of nowhere. It walked to Degerlund’s body. Licked his hand. It mewed plaintively. It lay down next to the body and pressed himself to its side. It looked at the witcher with its wide golden eyes.

‘I had too,’ said the witcher. ‘I had too. You of all people, must understand.’

The cat closed his eyes. In a sign that said that it understood.

*For God's sake, let us sit upon the ground
And tell sad stories of the death of kings;
How some have been deposed; some slain in war,
Some haunted by the ghosts they have deposed;
Some poison'd by their wives: some sleeping kill'd;*

William Shakespeare, Richard II (Translated by M. Donskoi)

Chapter Eighteen

The weather on the Day of the Royal Wedding in Kerack was clear, without a single cloud in the sky. The morning was very warm, the heat softened by the breath of the sea breeze.

From the early morn, excitement prevailed in the Upper Town. The streets and squares were carefully swept, facades were decorated with ribbons and garlands and flags were raised on poles. The road leading to the Royal Palace, in the morning was filled with a stream of suppliers – loaded wagons and carts alternated between full and empty, while porters, artisans, tradesmen, couriers and messengers ran uphill. A while later, the road was filled with sedan chairs, which travelled to the palace full of wedding guests. My wedding – allegedly announced King Belohun – should be remembered, the rumours ran that morning. Therefore, by order of the King, the celebrations should begin early and continue until late at night. During this time the guests will be privileged to unprecedented fun.\

Kerack was a tiny kingdom, and, in general, was not important, so Geralt doubted that the world would be particularly impressed by Belohun's wedding – even if he decided to celebrate it for at least a week, and the devil knows what he would think up for entertainment. To the people living further than a hundred miles, no news of these events would reach them. But to Belohun, it was known that the world was the centre of the city of Kerack and the world itself and its surroundings where no bigger than the size of Kerack.

He and Dandelion dressed up as elegantly as possible within their capabilities, Geralt had even acquired a brand new calfskin jacket that he had paid too much for. As for Dandelion, he announced from the beginning that he was at the royal

wedding for one reason, and he would not take part in it. True, he was registered on the guest list, but as a relative of the Royal Instigator, and not as a world-famous poet and bard. But the fact that he was not invited to perform, Dandelion took it as disrespect and offense. As usual, his offense did not last long, only half a day.

All along the winding road along the slope leading up to the palace were set poles, they lazily fluttered in the breeze, hanging with yellow flags with the emblem of Kerack – a blue dolphin nageant with red fins and tail.

Before entering the territory of the palace, waiting before them was Dandelion's relative Ferrant de Lettenhove, accompanied by several royal guards, dressed in the colours of the dolphin heraldic, blue and red. The Instigator greeted Dandelion and called a page that was supposed to help the poet and conduct him to the place of celebration.

'And you, Master Geralt, follow me.'

They walked down a side alley, obviously having a partial economic purpose, because from there came the sounds of pots and kitchen utensils, as well as vile insults shouted at the cooks by the chef. In addition, there was the pleasant smell of delicious foods. Geralt was familiar with the menu, he knew what would regale the guests during the wedding feast. A few days ago he had visited with Dandelion the "Natura Rerum". Febus Ravenga without hiding his pride, boasted that he, along with several other restaurants would organise the list of dishes and prepare them with other local elite chefs. For breakfast, he said, they will be served oysters, sea urchins, shrimp and crab. For brunch, jellied meats and a variety of pates, salmon smoked and pickled, jellied duck and sheep and goat cheeses. For lunch, would be served a broth of meat or fish, soup with quenelles of liver, monkfish, toasted with honey and grilled sea bass with saffron and cloves.

Then, recited Ravenga, modulating his voice, like an experienced speaker, they will be served with meat tenderloin with white sauce and capers, eggs, mustard, swans legs with honey, capons lined with bacon, quail with quince jam, baked doves, as well as a pie of sheep's liver and barely porridge. Salad and all kinds of vegetables. Then, caramel and nougat biscuits, roasted chestnuts, jams and marmalades. Wines from Toussaint, of course, would be served without interruption and continuously.

Ravenga described everything so vividly, that their mouth's watered. Geralt doubted, however, that he would be able to try any of the extensive menu. At this wedding, he was by no means a guest. He was in a worse position than the rushing pages, who always managed to grab something from the meals being past about, or at least put a finger in a cream sauce or pate.

The main place of celebration was a palace park, once the temple garden, the Kings of Kerack had rebuilt and expanded it, mainly, colonnades and rotundas. Today, among the trees and buildings had been arranged many beautiful pavilions, as protection from the sun and heat. Where guests were already gathering in a crowd. There were not to be too many, a total of about two hundred. The list, according to rumours, accounted for the King himself, and invitations to only his very favourites, the most elite. These elite, as it turned out, counted mainly Belohun's relatives and in-laws. In addition, they had invited the local elite and the cream of society: the key officials, the rich local and foreign businessmen and diplomats, those pretending not to be commercial spies attached to neighbouring countries. The list also contained quite a large group of sycophants, flatterers and masters of kissing the monarch's ass without soap.

Near one of the side entrances to the palace appeared Prince Egmund, dressed in a black coat with rich silver and gold

embroidery. He was accompanied by several young men. They all had long, curly hair, and were dressed in the latest fashion trends in cotton padded doublets and tight pants with a strongly protruding pouch for their genitals. Geralt did not like them. Not only because of the scornful looks they threw at his clothes. But they reminded him of Sorel Degerlund.

When the prince saw the Instigator and the Witcher, he immediately dismissed his entourage. Leaving only one individual. His hair was short and his pants normal.

However, Geralt did not like him. He had strange eye. And his gaze was unpleasant.

Geralt bowed to the prince. The prince, of course, did not bow back.

‘Give me your sword,’ he said to Geralt immediately after the greeting. ‘You cannot wear a weapon here. Do not worry, even though you will not see the sword, at all times it will be within arm’s reach. If I give the order. If something happens, you will be immediately served your sword. From Captain Ropp here.’

‘And what is the probability that something will happening?’

‘If it were low, or hardly any, would I have hired you? Wow!’ Egmund looked at the scabbard and blade. ‘A sword of Viroled! Not a sword, but a work of art. I know, I once had one like it. It was stolen by my brother, Viraxas. When father had him exiled he appropriated it among other things. A memento, I guess.’

Ferrant de Lettenhove coughed. Geralt remembered the words of Dandelion. The name of the exiled eldest son was forbidden to say at court. But Egmund apparently spat on bans.

‘A work of art,’ the prince repeated. ‘I will not ask how you acquired it, but congratulations on the acquisition. Because I do not believe that the ones that were stolen, were better than this.’

‘It is a matter of taste, habits and preferences. I would prefer to recover those that were stolen. The Prince and the Royal Instigator have given me their word that they will find the culprit. Let me remind you: we have a condition in which I take on the task of protecting the king. It is obvious that the condition has not been satisfied.’

‘Obviously not,’ Egmund coldly acknowledged, handing the sword to Captain Ropp. Therefore, I feel obligated to compensate you. Instead of three hundred crowns, which I was going to pay for your services, you will receive five hundred. I would also add that the investigation into the case of your swords is not terminated, and you can still get them back. Ferrant, seems to already have a suspect. Isn’t that true, Ferrant?’

‘The investigation,’ Ferrant de Lettenhove dryly informed, ‘clearly points to Nikefor Muus, a magistrate and court official. He escaped, but his capture is only a matter of time.’

‘Not too long, I believe,’ the prince chuckled. ‘catching a man smeared in official ink. In addition, he certainly has hemorrhoids, from sitting at his desk – It would be difficult for him to escape, both on foot and on horseback. How could he escape?’

‘We are dealing with,’ grumbled the Royal Instigator, ‘a man difficult to predict, probably mentally handicapped. Before disappearing, he arranged for a disgusting mess at the establishment of Ravengi, my apologies, with human excrement... The restaurant had to close for a while, because... I will omit the shocking details. When conducting a search in Muss’s apartment the stolen swords were not found, instead we found... sorry... a leather pouch, filled to the brim...’

‘Don’t say it, we can guess.’ Egmund frowned. ‘Yes, it really does say a lot about the mental state of the subject. Your sword, witcher, in this case, are most likely lost. Even if Ferrant

catches him, he sounds like a madman. Those even under torture just spout nonsense. But excuse me, duty calls.'

Ferrant de Lettenhove guided Geralt back to the main entrance to the palace grounds. Soon, they found themselves on the stone tiles of the patio where the Seneschal greeted arriving guests, and the pages and guards accompanied them on, deeper into the park.

'What can I expect?'

'What?'

'What can I expect here today? Which of these words is not clear?'

'Prince Xander,' the Royal Instigator lowered his voice, 'boasted in front of witnesses, that tomorrow he would be king. But this is not the first time he has said it, and always when drunk.'

'Is he able to organize a revolution?'

'Hardly. But he has backers, confidants and favourites. They are more capable.'

'How much truth is that today Belohun will announce his heir to the throne is his son, who was conceived with his new wife?'

'A lot.'

'But loosing his change to the throne, Egmond hires a witcher to guard and protect his father. That is admirable love.'

'Do not argue. Set to work – to fulfill it.'

'I'm here and I'm fulfilling. Although it is all very vague. I don't know who in this case would be against me. But I at least know who in this case support me.'

‘If you need a sword, then, as promised by the prince, Captain Ropp will give it to you. I will also support you. I’ll help in any way I can. Because I wish you success’

‘Since when?’

‘What?’

‘We never talk face to face. You only ever contact Dandelion, and with him I did not want to involve in this subject. The detail information in writing about my alleged fraud. Where did Egmund get it? Someone had to fabricate it. It is clear it was not him. So you faked it, Ferrant.’

‘I did not have anything to do with this. I assure you...’

‘You’re a terrible liar for a guardian of the law. I can’t imagine by what miracle you reached this position.’

Ferrant de Lettenhove fell silent.

‘I had to,’ he said. ‘I’m following orders.’

The Witcher stared at him.

‘You would not believe,’ he said at last, ‘how many times I’ve heard something like that. It is gratifying that most often it is from the lips of people who in a moment were about to hang.’

Lytta Neyd was among the guests. He found her easily. Because she was very conspicuous.

She wore a very low-cut gown of lush green crepe de chine and the front was decorated with embroidery in the shape of a stylized butterfly, made with tiny sparkling sequins. The bottom of the dress had ruffles. Ruffles in women’s clothing over ten years old, usually evoked ironic sympathy in the witcher, but Lytta’s dress, however, combined with everything else, made it more attractive.

Around the sorceress's neck was a necklace covered in polished emeralds. Everyone about the size of almonds. One of them was much larger.

Her red hair was like wildfire.

Near Lytta was Mozaïk. In a black and surprisingly bold dress of silk and chiffon on the shoulders and sleeves which were completed transparent. Around her neck was draped an intricate chiffon frill, in combination with long black gloves, it gave her an aura of extravagance and secrecy.

Both wore shoes with four-inch heels. Lytta's – iguana leather, Mozaïk – black patent leather.

Geralt hesitated on whether to approach. But only for a moment.

'Hello,' she greeted him calmly. 'What a gathering, it's good to see you. Mozaïk, you've won, some new white shoes.'

'A bet,' he guessed. 'What was the subject?'

'You. I believe that we wouldn't see you again, I offered a bet that you wouldn't show up. Mozaïk accepted the bet, because she assumed otherwise.'

She caught him with her deep jade green eyes, apparently waiting for a comment. For a word. Any. But Geralt remained silent.

'Hello, beautiful ladies!' said Dandelion arriving. 'I bow low, paying tribute to the beauty of Lady Neyd and Lady Mozaïk. Sorry, I did not bring flowers.'

'You are forgiven. Well, what's new in art?'

'As usual with art, everything and nothing,' Dandelion grabbed from a passing tray a couple of glasses of wine and handed them to the ladies. 'It somehow sad at this party, do you not think? But the wine is good. Est Est, forty for a pint. The red is

also good. I've tried it. Just do not drink the hippocras, they do not know how to brew it. All of the guests have almost arrived, have you noticed? As usual all of the higher spheres, are running a race, the one who arrives last wins. I think we are seeing the finish line. Crossing the line is the owner of the sawmill and his wife, and losing, marching just before him, the head of the port and his wife. The next ones are unknown to me...'

'A merchant from Kovir, on a trade mission,' explain Coral. 'And his wife.'

'They are joining up with Pyrall Pratt, that old gangster. With such a partner, wow... the plague!'

'What is it?'

'The woman next to him,' Dandelion choked. 'Its... its... Etna Asiderr the widow who sold me the sword...'

'She introduced herself like that?' grinned Lytta. 'Etna Asiderr. It's a banal anagram. That woman's particular name is Antea Derris. The eldest daughter of Pratt. No she is not a widow, as she has never been married. Rumour has it that she does not like men.'

'Pratt's daughter? It can't be! I was with him...'

'And you did not meet her there,' the sorceress did not let him finish. 'No wonder. Antea is not in good relations with her family, even the name is not used, she uses a pseudonym, made up of the two names. She only communicates with her father on important business matters. I am very surprised, seeing them here together.'

'Perhaps there is a mutual interest,' the witcher said sharply.

'It's terrible to think what. Antea officially deals with trade intermediation, but her favourite sport – scams, trickery and fraud. Poet, I have something to ask you. You're an

experienced person, but Mozaïk isn't. take her among the guests, and introduce her to those she should meet. And show her those that it is not necessary to meet as well.'

Dandelion after been assured that Coral's desire for him to do so was tantamount to an order, took Mozaïk's hand. Then left them alone.

'Let's go,' Lytta broke the long silence. 'For a walk. There, on that hill.'

On the hill, was a monastery of reflection, from this height they overlooked the area of Palmyra, the port and the sea. Lytta shielded her eyes with her hand.

'What is that floating on the river? Moving in to anchor? A three-masted frigate of an interesting design. The one under black sails, ha, it is quite unusual...'

'Forget the frigate. Dandelion and Mozaïk are gone, we are alone.'

'And you,' she turned, 'what are you waiting for? Waiting for me to talk to you. Waiting for me to ask questions. And am I to tell you the latest gossip? From among the sorcerers? Oh, no, don't worry, they won't involve Yennefer. Their concern is Rissberg, a place one way or another, where you are known. There have been major changes recently... I do not see a spark of curiosity in your eyes. Should I continue?'

'Yes, please.'

'It all started when Ortolan died.'

'Ortolan's dead?'

'He died less than a week ago. According to the official version, he was fatally poisoned by the fertilizers, on which he worked. But rumour has it that it was a stroke, caused by the news of the sudden death of one of his favourite pupils, who died as a result of a failed experiment, and very suspiciously. We are

talking about a certain Degerlund. You remember him? You met him when you were at the castle.'

'It's possible. I've met many. Not everyone of them is worth remembering.'

'Ortolan it seems blamed the death of his pupil on the entire staff of Rissberg, he was furious and suffered a stroke. He was very old, and for many years suffered from hypertension, and it was not a secret he was depended on fisstech. Fisstech and hypertension – a dangerous mix. But there must have been something significant happening in Rissberg and there have been significant personnel changes. Even before the death of Ortolan, there was conflict and people were force to resign, among them, Algernon Guincamp, better known as Pinety. You know him. Because if there is someone there worth remembering, it was him.'

'It's true.'

'Ortolan's death,' Coral stared at him, 'brought about a swift response from the Chapter, to which has been heard some disturbing news about the antics of the deceased and his pet. Interestingly, it is starting to look like an avalanche caused by a tiny pebble. It started with some stubborn sheriff or constable. He handed a charge up to his boss the Bailiff of Gors Velen. The Bailiff handed the charge up, and so, step by step, it came to the royal council, and from there to the Chapter. In short: they found them guilty of a lack of control. Because of this the Administration was had to force out Birtua Icarti, she returned to the school of Aretuza. Gone are Axel Esparza and Tarvix Sandoval. Zangenis retained his position and he received from the Chapter a promotion for informing on the others and dumping all the blame on them. How do you like that? Do you have anything to say about this?'

'What can I say, it's your business. And your intrigue.'

‘Intrigues that erupted in Rissberg shortly after your visit there.’

‘You overestimate me, Coral. And my true potential.’

‘I never overestimate. And rarely underestimate.’

‘Mozaïk and Dandelion are about to return,’ she stared into her eyes. ‘You didn’t tell them to leave without reason. Tell me, finally, what is the matter.’

She held his gaze.

‘You know very well what it is,’ she said. ‘Do not insult my intelligence, or downplay your own parade. You were not with me for over a month. No, do not think that I expect cloying melodrama or pathetic sentimental gestures. From a relationship that is behind us, I expect nothing but pleasant memories.’

‘You used the word “relationship”? Indeed, it has a striking semantic capacity.’

‘Nothing,’ his words fell on deaf ears, ‘but pleasant memories. I do not know how you perceive it, but for me, well, I’ll be honest, in this there is nothing good. It would be good, I think, to make a little effort in that direction. I think that much is required. For example, something small, but beautiful, a beautiful final chord. That will leave a pleasant memory. Can you can make up your mind on something like that? Do you still want to see me?’

He did not answer. The deafening bells from the monastery struck ten blows. The trumpets rang – a loud, copper and slightly cacophonous fanfare. Blue and red guards divided the crowd of guests, forming a corridor. Under the portico at the entrance to the palace appeared the Marshal of the Court, with a gold chain around his neck and a big staff in hand. Behind the Marshal marched heralds and the Seneschal. And behind the Seneschal, in a sable hat on his head and a sceptre in his hand, moved a bony and sinewy person – Belohun, King of

Kerack. Beside him was a slim blonde in a veil, which could only be the royal lady, and in the very near future, his wife and queen. The blonde was dressed in a crisp white dress and bedecked with diamonds, perhaps excessively. On her shoulders she wore a mantle or ermine, supported from behind by pages.

Behind the royal couple, somewhere roughly fifteen paces behind the pages, followed the royal family. Among them, of course, Egmond and beside him someone as white as an albino, who could only be his brother Xander. Behind the brothers were other relatives, some men, some women, some of them teenagers, boys and girls, it was obvious, legitimate and illegitimate descendants.

As they passed by, the guest bowed deeply, eventually the royal procession reached its goal – a construction, something resembling a scaffold. On the dais covered with a canopy on top and fenced in on the sides with tapestries, two thrones were set. The king and his bride sat. The remaining family members remained standing.

Trumpets again roared in everybody's ears. The Marshal of the Court, waving his arms like a conductor of an orchestra, called out to proclaim a toast and his congratulations. Then pouring in from all sides was wishes of health, happiness, prosperity, all the best, long life, even longer life, as more and more guests and courtiers tried to outdo each other. King Belohun did not change his arrogant and pompous facial expression, to their wishes, compliments and odes to his honour, he showed only the gentle swaying of his sceptre.

The Marshal reassured the guests and gave a speech, he spoke for a long time, moving smoothly from grandiloquence to the bombastic and back. Geralt had all his attention on the crowd, so that he took in every fifth word of ten. King Belohun, announced the Marshal to everyone, was sincerely happy to

see so many outstanding people, and is pleased to welcome them to this solemn day, he wished the guests the same, that they wished him, and that the wedding ceremony would be held this afternoon, but until then let the guests eat, drink and delight themselves with numerous scheduled entertainments organised for the occasion.

The roar of trumpets announced the end of the official part. The royal procession began to leave the park. Among the guests, Geralt had come to consider some pretty suspiciously behaving coteries. He especially did not like one of them, because they did not bow as low to the procession, and tried to force their way towards the gates of the palace. He moved a little closer to the ranks of red and blue soldiers. Lytta walked alongside.

Belohun walking, looked straight ahead. The bride looked around, sometimes nodding her head to the congratulations from her guests. A gust of wind lifted the veil for a moment. Geralt saw huge blue eyes. He saw those eyes suddenly discover Lytta Neyd among the crowd. And hatred burned in those eyes. Clean, uncomplicated, downright distilled hatred. It lasted a moment, then with the sound of trumpets, the procession passed surrounded by marching guards. The suspiciously behaving group, as it turned out, had a sole purpose of getting to the table with wine and snack, which they immediately occupied and devastated, ahead of the others.

In improvised scenes here and there began performances: and ensemble played harps, lyres, flutes and horns and sand choruses. Jugglers replaced jugglers, strongmen gave way to acrobats, tightrope walkers were replaced by nude dancers with tambourines. It became more cheerful. Ladies cheeks were flushed, men's faces glistened with sweat, and voices grew louder and louder. And a little vague.

Lytta caught up to him at a pavilion. They chased away a couple who were hiding there with a clearly sexual purpose.

The enchantress was not embarrassed and paid them no attention.

‘I don’t know what is gearing up,’ she said. ‘I don’t know, but I can guess what for and why you are here. You looking round, all that you do, you are doing because the royal bride is none other than Ildiko Brackley.’

‘I won’t ask if you are familiar wither her. I have seen her look at you.’

‘Ildiko Brackley,’ repeated Coral. ‘That’s her name. She was kicked out of Aretuza in her third year. For petty theft. I can see she has succeeded in life. She didn’t become an enchantress, but in a few hours she will be queen. And the cherry one the cake, she isn’t seventeen years old. The old fool. She is twenty-five.’

‘And she does not like you very much.’

‘It’s mutual. She was always a schemer, always stretching her pile of problems. But that is not all. The frigate that entered the port under black sails. I already know which ship this is; I’ve heard about it. It called the “Acheron”. It has a very bad reputation. Where it appears, as a rule, things happen.’

‘For example?’

‘It is crewed by mercenaries, which, apparently, can be hired for anything. And what do you hire mercenaries for? Laying bricks?’

‘I have to go. Excuse me, Coral.’

‘Whatever happens,’ she said slowly, looking into his eyes.

‘Whatever happens, I cannot be involved in this.’

‘Don’t worry. I’m not going to call you for help.’

‘You misunderstood me.’

‘Of course. Excuse me, Coral.’

Just behind the colonnade overgrown with ivy he found Mozaïk. Surprising calm and cool amid the heat, hustle and bustle.

‘Where’s Dandelion? He left you?’

‘He left,’ she said. ‘But politely apologized and told me to give you too a sorry. He was asked about a private performance. In the palace rooms, for the queen and her ladies in waiting. He could not refuse.’

‘Who asked him?’

‘A man, like a soldier. With a strange look in his eyes.’

‘I have to go. Sorry, Mozaïk.’

Behind the colourfully decorate pavilion was a large crowd, being served food: pies, salmon and duck. Geralt made his way, looking for Captain Ropp or Feraant de Lettenhove. Instead he ran into Febus Ravenga.

The restaurateur looked like an aristocrat. He was wearing a brocade doublet, on his head as a hat decorated with ostrich feathers. He was accompanied by the daughter of Pyrrall Pratt, who wore an elegant black suit.

‘Oh, Geralt,’ said Ravenga gladly. ‘Let me, Antea, introduce you to Geralt of Rivia, the famous witcher. Geralt this is Miss Antea Derris, reseller. Have some wine with us...’

‘Unfortunately,’ he apologised, ‘I’m in a hurry. Miss Antea, I’m already familiar with you, but not in person. Being in your place, Febus, I would not buy anything from her.’

At the portico at the entrance to the palace some linguist had adorned the inscription: *Crescite et multiplicamini*. Geralt was stopped by the shafts of two crossed halberds.

‘No Admittance.’

‘I have to see the Royal Instigator.’

‘No Admittance.’ The chief of the guards walked over. In his left hand he held a spontoon. His dirty finger of his right hand was aimed right at Geralt’s nose. ‘No one is allowed; didn’t you know?’

‘If you don’t move that finger from my face, I’ll break it in several places. We’ll, that’s better. Now take me to the Royal Instigator.’

‘Whenever you come across guards, scandal follows,’ said Ferrant de Lettenhove from behind the witcher, he was apparently following him. ‘This is a serious character flaw. There may be unpleasant consequences.’

‘I don’t like it when someone tells me not to enter.’

‘And for this there exists a city watch and guard. They would not be needed if the entrance was free to everyone. Let him pass.’

‘We have an order from the King,’ the commander frowned. ‘Let no one in without an inspection.’

‘Then inspect him.’

The inspection was thorough; the guards were not lazy and search everywhere, not limiting themselves to a cursory feeling. They did not find anything, not even the stiletto that Geralt wore strapped to his ankle, which he had not taken off for the wedding.

‘Satisfied?’ the Royal Instigator looked at the commander of the guard from top to bottom. ‘Then move over and let us through.’

‘I apologise to your honour,’ the command muttered. ‘The order from the King was clear. It applies to all.’

What? Do you forget yourself? Do you know who it is that you stand before?’

‘No one is admitted without an inspection,’ the chief nodded.
‘The order was clear. If you are not satisfied with the challenges...’

‘What can I do today?’

‘On this issue, contact the authorities. I was ordered to inspect.’
The Royal Instigator swore softly and agreed to the inspection.
He was not even in possession of a penknife.

‘What’s all this about, I’d like to know,’ he said, when they were finally let through the gate. ‘I am seriously concerned. Seriously concerned, Witcher.’

‘Have you seen Dandelion? It seems he was summoned to the palace to perform.’

‘I don’t know anything about that.’

‘Did you know that in the port a ship called the “Acheron” has arrived? Do you know that name?’

‘Very much. And my concern is increasing. With every minute. Hurry!’

In the lobby – the former courtyard of the temple – stood armed guards, their blue and red uniforms as colourful as a gallery. From a corridor came the clatter of boots and loud voices.

‘Hey!’ The Royal Instigator stopped a passing soldier.
‘Sergeant! What’s going on here?’

‘I’m sorry, your honour... I’m in a hurry with orders...’

‘Stop, I say! What is going on here? I demand an explanation! Is something wrong? Where is Prince Egmund?’

‘Ferrant de Lettenhove.’

At a door, under the banner of the blue dolphin, guarded by four tall fellows in leather armour, stood King Belohun himself.

By ridding himself of his royal attributes, he no longer looked like a king. He looked like a farmer who had just calved a cow.

‘Ferrant de Lettenhove,’ the voice of the king did not resound with joy. ‘The Royal Instigator. So, my Royal Instigator. Or maybe not mine? Maybe my son’s? You appear even though I did not call you. In fact, here with your official duties, even though I did not call you. Suppose, I thought, Ferrant was off having fun, eating, drinking, grabbing some woman and fucking in the gazebo. But I didn’t call you, Ferrant, because I didn’t want to see you here. You know why I didn’t want to? Because I’m not sure whom you serve. Who do you serve, Ferrant?’

‘I serve,’ The Royal Instigator bowed, ‘Your Royal Highness. I am fully committed to Your Majesty.’

‘Did everyone hear that?’ the king looked around theatrically. ‘Ferrant is committed to me! Well done, Ferrant. I was waiting for such a response from the Royal Instigator. You may come in handy. I’ve got quite a few assignments for you, Instigator... Hey! And who is this here? Who is he? Wait, wait! Is this not the witcher who cheated us? Who was pointed out by the sorceress?’

‘It turns out that he was innocent, the sorceress was mistaken. It was all in my report...’

‘Which does not convey innocence...’

‘It was the court’s decision. The case was dismissed for lack of evidence.’

‘If that was the decision, then it stinks. Judicial decisions and judgements come from the imagination and whim of court officials, and that court case stunk. Enough of this, I will not waste time on lectures on jurisprudence. On the day of my wedding, I can afford some indulgence, I will not throw him in jail, but let the witcher immediately get out of my sight. And hope that my eyes never come across him again.’

‘Your Majesty... I am concerned... At the port, allegedly there has arrived a ship called the “Acheron”. In this situation, the security considerations dictate the need to ensure the protection of... the witcher could...’

‘What could he do? Screen me with his chest? Conquer villains with his witcher spells? Was this task given to him by my loving son, Egmund? Protect my father and keep him safe? Follow me, Ferrant. And, hell, if it pleases you, the witcher. I’ll show you something. You will see that I can take care of my own safety and ensure my protection. Look. Listen. Maybe I’ll have something to teach you. And you may learn something. About myself. Come on, follow me!’

They walked, spurred on by the king and surrounded by guards in leather armour. They entered a large hall, under the ceiling painted with the sea and monsters, stood a throne on a dais, on which Belohun went and sat. Beneath the fresco depicting a stylized map of the world, on a bench, under the protection of other guards, were the royal sons. The Princes of Kerack. Black as raven, Egmund and white as an albino, Xander.

Belohun collapsed on his throne. He looked down at his sons with a triumphant glance, which was saved for enemies defeated in battle who had fallen on their knees and begged for mercy. In pictures, that Geralt had seen of winners, the faces tended to have dignity, generosity and respect for the defeated. On Belohun’s face it was pointless to look for these feelings. It was painted only with a venomous sneer.

‘My court jester,’ said the king, ‘became ill yesterday with diarrhoea. I thought it was unlucky, that there would be no jokes, not funny sketches. But I was wrong. I am laughing. Laughing so much my stomach will burst. Because it is you, both of my sons, that are funny. Pathetic, but funny. For many years, I promise you, when in bed with my wife, after making love, we will remember both of you on this day and we will

laugh until tears. Because, in the end, there is nothing funnier that fools.'

Xander, it was easy to see, was afraid. He ran his eyes over the room and was sweating heavily. Egmond, on the contrary, showed no fear. He looked his father straight in the eye with reciprocal acrimony.

'Popular wisdom says: hope for the best – prepare for the worst. And I was ready for the worst. Because can there be nothing worse than treason from one's own sons? Among my most trusted colleagues, you have introduced your agents. Your accomplices have betrayed you, as soon as they clicked. Your collaborators and favourites have simply fled the city.'

'Yes, my sons. Did you think that I was blind and deaf? That I am old, decrepit and weak? You think I don't see how you both seek to gain the throne and the crown? That you crave them like pigs crave truffles? But pigs, when they smell truffles, grow stupid. From desire and greed, lust and wild appetite. Pigs will grow frantic, snorting and digging the ground, in spite of everything, to try and get that truffle. To drive them off, you need to beat them with a club. And you, my sons, are those pigs. Sensing a truffle, you have gone mad with greed and appetite. But you'll get shit, not a truffle. And the clubs too. You went against me, sons, encroached on my power and my lady. The health of people who are against me, as a rule, deteriorates rapidly. It is a fact, confirmed by science.'

'Anchored at the port is a frigate called "Acheron". It sailed here on my orders, I hired the captain. The court will convene tomorrow morning, and a decision will be made before noon. And in the afternoon you both will be on board the ship. From the deck you will pass by the lighthouse. What this means is that your new residence will be Nazair. Ebbing, Maecht. Or Nilfgaard. Or the very edge of the world or purgatory, if you choose to go there. Because here, in these lands, you will

never return. Never. If you want to keep your head on your shoulders.'

'You want to exile us?' Xander howled. 'As you exiled Viraxas? Our names will be forbidden to be said at court?'

'Viraxas, I exiled in anger and without judgement. This does not mean that I will not order his execution if he dared to return. Both of you will be condemned to exile by a tribunal. Legally and lawfully.'

'Are you so sure? We will see! Let's see what is the will of the court!'

'The court knows what sentence I expect them to make. Unanimously.'

'Just so, unanimously! But in this country, the courts are independent.'

'The court, yes. But the judge is not. You are stupid, Xander. Your mother was stupid, like a cork. You take after her. Even this plot you didn't come up with, it was all masterminded by your accomplices. But overall, I'm glad that you conspired, and it will be a pleasure to get rid of you. Another matter is Egmond. Egmond is smart. He hired a witcher to protect his father like a caring son, ah, how cleverly you concealed your secret, so nobody knew about it. The contact poison. The tricky thing was that I have a taster for my food and drink, but who would have thought of touching the handle of the fireplace poker in the royal bedroom? The poker, which only I use and don't let anybody else touch? Cunning, my sly son. Only your poisoner betrayed you, so it is: traitors betray traitors. Why are you silent, Egmond? Have you nothing to say?'

Egmond's eyes were cold, but they still held not the slightest fear. He was not frightened by the prospect of exile, Geralt knew, he was not thinking about being expelled and living a life

in a foreign country, was not thinking about the “Acheron” or the lighthouse. So what was he thinking?

‘Have you,’ repeated the king, ‘nothing to say, son?’

‘Just one thing,’ muttered Egmond. ‘Also from the popular wisdom that you love so much. There is no worse fool, than an old fool. Remember my words, dear father. When the time comes.’

‘Take them and lock them up under guard,’ ordered Belohun. ‘This is your job, Ferrant, as Royal Instigator. Call in here the Marshal, and a notary, everyone else out. And you, witcher... You’ve learned something today, right? Learned something about yourself? That you are a naïve simpleton? If you understand this, then there is at least some benefit from your visit here today. Which just ended. Hey, you two, too me! Escort this witcher to the gate and throw him out. And search him to make sure he didn’t steal any of the silverware!’

In the hallway leading away from the hall they crossed paths with Ropp. In the company of two people with the same eyes, movements and posture. Geralt was willing to bet that all three had once served in the same unit. And suddenly he realised. Suddenly he knew what would happen next, how the events would unfold. So he was not surprised when Ropp accepted responsibility for Geralt and ordered the other guards to leave. He knew that the captain would order him to follow him. As he expected, the other two men took up positions behind him.

He foresaw what he would see in the room into which they just entered.

Dandelion was pale as a corpse, and clearly terrified. But seemingly unharmed. He sat on a chair with a high back. Over the chair stood a skinny man with a braid in his hair. The man held in his hand a long, thin four-side blade. The tip was

pointed at the poet's neck, under the jaw, the blade slanting upwards.

'No nonsense,' warned Ropp. 'No nonsense, witcher. One hasty movement, even a little on and Master Samsa will butcher the musician like a hog. Have no doubt.'

Geralt knew that Master Samsa would not hesitate. Because Master Samsa's eyes were even nastier than Ropp's. They were the eyes of a very unusual expression. People with eyes like these could be sometimes be found in morgues and coroners. They were not hired to make a living but because they realised that they had latent tendencies.

Geralt already knew why Prince Egmund was calm. Why he did not fear the future...

Or looking into his father's eyes.

'It is my assumption that you will be obedient,' Ropp said. 'If you obey, you both stay alive.'

'If you do what we tell you,' the captain continued to lie, 'we will let you go. But if you are stubborn – we'll kill you both.'

'You're making a mistake, Ropp.'

'Master Samsa,' Ropp ignored the warning, 'will stay here with the musician. We, that is, you and I will go to the royal apartments. There will be guards. I, as you can see, have your sword. I'll give it to you, and then give those guards time to call out, then kill them all. Hearing the noise, the valet will take the king to a secret exit, and there these two gentlemen will be waiting, Richter and Tverdoruk. They will change the order of succession to the throne and change the regional history of the monarchy.'

'You're making a mistake, Ropp.'

'Now,' said the captain, coming very close. 'Now you will confirm that you understand the task and you will follow it. If

you don't as I count to three, then Master Samsa will pierce the eardrum of the musician. If there is no expected impact, then Master Samsa will poke the other ear. And then an eye. And so on, until completion when he will drive the knife into the brain. Are you starting to consider, witcher?'

'Don't listen to him, Geralt!' Dandelion's voice miraculously issues from his compressed throat. 'They wouldn't dare touch me! I'm a celebrity!'

'He,' Ropp grimly assessed, 'apparently does not take us seriously. Master Samsa, right ear.'

'Stop! No!'

'Much better,' nodded Ropp. 'Much better, witcher. Confirm that you have understood the task. And execute it.'

'Take the stiletto away from the ear of the poet.'

'Ha,' chuckled Master Samsa, raising the stiletto high above his head. 'Is this better?'

'It's better.'

Geralt grabbed Ropp's left arm by the wrist, with his other hand he grabbed the hilt of his sword. With a strong jerk he pulled the captain towards him and head-butted him in the forehead. There was a crunch. While falling, the witcher drew his sword from its scabbard in one smooth motion and with a short jump was next to Master Samsa cutting at his raised hand. Samsa cried and fell to his knees. Richter and Tverdoruk rushed the witcher with daggers drawn, he slipped between them. Along the way he slashed Richter's neck, blood splattered up to the chandelier hanging from the ceiling. Tverdoruk attacked with his knife, but stumbled on Ropp laying underfoot, and lost his balance for a moment. With a quick lunge, he struck him a blow to the groin and then another to the carotid artery. Tverdoruk fell down and curled into a ball.\

Master Samsa surprised him. Even with his right hand a bleeding stump, he raised his left hand, which contained the stiletto that had fallen to the floor. He threw himself at Dandelion. The poet cried out, but had enough presence of mind to fall out of his chair. Geralt did not give him another chance. Blood again sprayed up to the chandelier and dripped from the candles.

Dandelion got to his knees, leaned his head against the wall, after which he vomited profusely and with quite a splash.

Into the room burst Ferrant de Lettenhove with several guards.

‘What is happening? What is happening here? Julian! Are you intact? Julian!’

Dandelion raised his hand, motioning that he would answer in a moment, because there was no time right now. Then he vomited again.

The Royal Instigator ordered the guards out of the room, shutting the door behind them. He examined the bodies, careful not to stop on the spilled blood, and making sure the blood dripping from the chandelier did not stain his doublet.

‘Samsa, Tverdoruk, Richter,’ he recited, ‘and Captain Ropp. Prince Egmond’s trusted arms men.’

‘They were following orders,’ the witcher shrugged, looking at his sword. ‘Just like you, dutifully following orders. And you had no idea about this. Right, Ferrant.’

‘I did not know anything about it,’ the Royal Instigator quickly assured, stepping back against the wall. ‘I swear! You don’t suspect... You don’t think...’

‘If I thought that you’d be dead. I believe you. They would not have made the attempt on Dandelion’s life.’

‘I must inform the king. I’m afraid that Prince Egmund indictment requires amendments and additions. Ropp is alive, I think. He will testify...’

‘I doubt that he will be able to.’

The Royal Instigator looked at the captain, who was lying, arched, in a puddle of urine, drooling profusely and shaking.

‘What’s wrong with him?’

‘The wreckage of his nasal bone is in his brain. And, perhaps, a few fragments in his eyeballs.’

‘He was hit excessive hard.’

‘I wanted to,’ Geralt wiped the blade of his sword on a table cloth. ‘Dandelion, how are you? Okay? Can you get up?’

‘I’m alright, I’m okay,’ muttered Dandelion. ‘I’m better. Much better...’

‘You don’t look like someone who is better.’

‘Hell, I just barely escaped death!’ the poet stood, holding onto a dresser. ‘Damn, I was afraid for my life... I had the impression that that was it for me. But when I saw you, I knew you’d save me. We’ll I didn’t know, but I counted on it... Damn, that is a lot of blood... And what a stink! I’m afraid I’m going to turn around right now...’

‘We’ll go to the king,’ Ferrant de Lettenhove said. ‘Give me your sword, witcher... You, Julian, stay here...’

‘Never. Not even for a moment, I will not stay here alone. I’ll stay with Geralt.’

The entrance to the royal reception room was guarded, but they were let through with a few words from the Royal Instigator. At the entrance to the private apartments the matter did not go so

easily. The insurmountable obstacles was the herald, the Seneschal and their retinue of four goons.

‘The King is trying on his wedding clothes. He has forbidden his being troubled.’

‘We have a great deal of urgency.’

‘The King has forbidden anyone to interfere. And Master Witcher, it seems, that you had been ordered to leave the palace. When then are you still here?’

‘I’ll explain to the king. Please let us pass.’

Ferrant pushed past Geralt, and shoved the Seneschal. Geralt went after him. They did not make it far as there were a crowd of couriers in front. A group of guards further down were pushing the courtiers against the wall. Geralt and Ferrant did not resist.

The King was standing on a high stool. A tailor with pins in his mouth was making alterations to his trousers. Nearby stood the Marshal of the Court and someone dressed in black, like a notary.

‘Immediately after the wedding ceremony,’ said Belohun, ‘declare that the heir to the throne will be my son, who will be borne by my new little wife. This step should provide me her favour and obedience, hehe. That should give me some time to rest. It will take twenty years until this asshole has reached as age at which he will start something.’

‘But,’ the King winked at the Marshal, ‘if I want to, I can then cancel everything and appoint a successor of someone else. In the end, this is a morganatic marriage, the children of such marriages do not inherit titles, isn’t that so? And who can predict how I will stand? Is there no other girl in this world, more beautiful and younger? So you will need to write the relevant

documents, a marriage contract or something like that. Hope for the best – be prepared for the worst, hehehe.'

The valet presented the king a tray on which were piled jewels.

'Take it away,' Belohun winced. 'I will not be decked out in trinkets, like a dandy, or upstart. I will just wear this. It is a gift from my darling. Small, but tasteful. A medallion with the symbol of my country. I must be of such a character. This is her words: the symbol of the country around the neck – the benefit of the country in the heart.'

It took a moment to see – while being pressed against the wall. The medallion was gold and so was the chain. It featured a blue enamel dolphin and the words: *D'or, dauphin nageant d'azur, lorré, peautré, oreille, barbé et crêté de gueules.*

It was too late to react. He did not even have time to cry out, to warn. He saw the gold chain suddenly tighten, tightening around the neck of the king like a noose. Belohun flushed, opened his mouth, but could neither breath nor scream. With both hands, he grabbed his neck, trying to rip the medallion off, or stick his fingers underneath the chain. He failed and the chain cut deep into his neck. The king fell off the stool, danced and knocked over the tailor. The tailor stumbled and gasped, almost swallowing the pins. He knocked into the notary and the two fell. Belohun, meanwhile, turned blue, his eyes rolled up into his head, he fell to the floor and his feet beat a pattern on the carpet. Then he froze.

'Help! The King had collapsed.'

'Doctor!' shouted the Marshal of the Court. 'Call a doctor!'

'Gods! What happened? What has happened to the king?'

'A Doctor! Hurry!'

Ferrant de Lettenhove put his hand to his head. He had a strange expression on his face. The expression of a person who is slowly starting to understand.

The king was put on a couch. A doctor arrived and examined him for a long time. Even though Geralt was close he could not see. Despite this, he knew that the chain had managed to be pried off before the doctor came running.

‘Apoplexy,’ the doctor said, straightening up, ‘caused the choking. Vile air has penetrated the body and poisoned humours. The reason for this is the constant storms, which increase the heat of the blood. Science is powerless, there is nothing to be done. Our kind and gracious king is dead. He had left this world.’

The Marshal cried and covered his face with his hands. The herald clutched his beret in both hands. Some of the courtiers were crying. Some knelt. The entrance to the corridor was suddenly filled with the sound of heavy echoing steps. At the door, there appeared a giant man, at least seven feet tall. The guardsman’s uniform showed signs of a higher rank. The giant was accompanied by people with kerchiefs on their heads and earrings.

‘My lord,’ the giant broke the silence, ‘we must go to the throne room. Immediately.’

‘What is in the throne room?’ said the outraged Marshal. ‘And what for? Do you have any idea, Colonel de Santis, what has just happened here? What misfortune? You do not understand...’

‘To the throne room. This is the command of the King.’

‘The King is dead!’

‘Long live the King. To the throne room, please. Everybody. Immediately.’

In the throne room, beneath the ceiling depicting the sea and mermaids stood more than a dozen men. Some had coloured kerchiefs around their heads. They were all tanned and all had earrings.

Mercenaries. It was not difficult to guess from where. The “Acheron” command.

On the throne, sat a dark-haired, dark-eyed man, with a prominent nose. He was tanned too. However, he wore no earrings.

Beside him, on a smaller chair, sat Ildiko Brackely, still in a white dress and still ungemmed with diamonds. The recent royal bride and lover looked at the dark-haired man with eyes full of adoration. Geralt had long tried to understand the course of events and how the dots connected together. But now, at this moment, even a person with very limited wit could see and understand that Ildiko Brackely and the dark-haired man were familiar, very familiar. And for a long time.

‘Prince Viraxas, Prince of Kerack, until a moment ago, the former heir to the throne and crown,’ announced the giant de Santis in a rumbling baritone. ‘From this moment on, is the King of Kerack, the rightful ruler of the Kingdom.’

The first to bow, then drop to one knee was the Marshal of the Court. Behind him was the herald. Then the Seneschal followed their example, head bowed. The last to bow was Ferrant de Lettenhove.

‘Your Majesty.’

‘Currently it is not “Your Majesty”,’ corrected Viraxas. ‘The full title will belong to me after the coronation. One that we should not hesitate. The earlier the better. Correct, Marshal?’

It was very quiet. Someone in the court was rumbling in their abdomen.

‘My father died unforgettably,’ Viraxas said. ‘He is gone to our glorious ancestors. Both of my younger brothers, it doesn’t surprise me, are accused of high treason. The process will take place according to the late King, the two brothers are to leave Kerack forever upon conviction. On board the frigate “Acheron” those employed by me... and my influential friends and patrons. The late king, as far as I know, did not leave an official will or formal orders in relation to inheritance. I would submit to the will of the king, if there were such orders. But there are not. The right to inherit the crown belongs to me now. Is there anyone gathered here who would like to challenge this?’

There were no such among those gathered. All present were sufficiently endowed with reason and the instinct of self-preservation.

‘Then please begin the preparations for the coronation. The coronation will be combined with a wedding. I have decided to revive the old custom of the Kerack kings, a law passed many centuries ago. Stating that if the groom dies before the wedding, the bride shall marry the nearest unmarried relative.’

Ildiko Brackley, as was evident by her shining face, was ready to revive the age-old custom that very minute. The other gathered in silence, tried in vain to remember who, when and under what circumstances the custom was set. And how this custom could have been established many centuries ago, when the kingdom of Kerack had not even existed for one hundred years. There were a lot of wrinkled foreheads from the mental effort of the court, but they quickly smoothed. One and all had come to the right conclusion. Because although the coronation had not yet taken place, Viraxas was practically a king and the king is always right.

‘Get out of here, witcher,’ Ferrant de Lettenhove whispered, shoving Geralt’s sword into his hand. ‘Take Julian with you.’

Fade away. You have seen nothing and heard nothing. Nobody will be able to connect any of this to you.'

'I understand,' Viraxas surveyed the crowd of courtiers, 'and I'm aware that to some of you the present situation is surprising. Some changes occur very suddenly and unexpectedly, as events unfold too quickly. I also cannot rule out the possibility that some of those present here are not happy with the way events have turned out. Colonel de Santis immediately made the right decision and took an oath of allegiance to me. I expect the same from the rest of this crowd.'

'Let's start,' he nodded, 'with a faithful servant of my unforgettable father. He also took orders from my brother, who made an attempt on the life of his father. Let's start with the Royal Instigator, Ferrant de Lettenhove.'

The Royal Instigator bowed.

'An investigation will follow you,' announced Viraxas. 'I'll find out what role you played in the conspiracy of the princes. The whole plot was a fiasco, and it talks to the mediocrity of the conspirators. A mistake can be forgiven, mediocrity - cannot. Especially from the Royal Instigator, the custodian of the law. But then, let's start with the basic questions. Approach, Ferrant. Prove to me who you serve. Give me proper tribute. Kneel at the foot of the throne and kiss our royal hand.'

The Royal Instigator obediently headed towards the throne.

'Get out of here,' he again whispered. 'Disappear as soon as possible, witcher.'

The celebrations in the park continued their course.

Lytta Neyd immediately noticed the blood on the cuff of Geralt's shirt. Mozaïk also noticed, but, in contrast to Lytta, she paled.

Dandelion grabbed two glasses from a passing tray, gulped on down and then the other. He grabbed two more, and offered

them to the ladies. They refused. Dandelion drank one and the unwillingly handed the second to Geralt. Coral, narrowing her eyes, stared at the witcher, tensing noticeably.

‘What happened?’

‘You’ll find out now.’

Bells rang out. With a beat so sinister, so bleak and sad that the feasting guests fell silent.

On the dais, like a scaffold stood the Marshal of the Court and the herald.

‘It fills me with grief and sorrow,’ the Marshal said into the silence, ‘that I must tell you, ladies and gentlemen, sad news. King Belohun the First, our favourite, good and gracious lord, in a harsh fate has died suddenly, leaving our world. But Kerack kings do not die! The king is dead, long live the king! Long live His Majesty King Viraxas! Firstborn son of the late King, and rightful heir to the throne and crown! King Viraxas the First! Thrice hail! Long live! Long live! Long live!’

The choir of sycophants echoed the Marshal. The Marshal comforted them with a gestured.

‘King Viraxas is immersed in mourning, like the rest of the court. The celebrations are cancelled, the guests are asked to leave the palace. The King plans to soon have his own wedding, and then the celebrations can resume. The dishes will not be lost, the king has ordered to take them to the city and place them in the market. Meats will be gifted to the inhabitants of Palmyra. For Kerack there comes a time of happiness and well-being.’

‘Well,’ said Coral, straightening her hair. ‘There is a lot of truth in the assertion that the death of the groom can seriously disrupt a wedding ceremony. Belohun was not without flaws, but he was also not the worst, let him rest in peace and the earth rest lightly on him. Let’s leave. I’m already bored. It’s such a good day for a walk along the pier and to take a look at the

sea. Poet, be polite and give your hand to my student. I'll go with Geralt. Because he has something to tell me, I suppose.'

It was a little past noon. Just. It was hard to believe that so much had happened in such a short amount of time.

A warrior dies the hard way. His death must struggle against him. A warrior does not give into death so easily.

Carols Castaneda, The Wheel of Time (translated by Semenov the Old)

Chapter Nineteen

'Hey! look!' exclaimed Dandelion. 'A rat!'

Geralt did not respond. He knew the poet, knew that he used to be afraid of everything, admire anything and look for sensation when there was absolutely nothing deserving to be called sensational.

'A rat!' Dandelion did not give up. 'And a second! Third! Fourth! Oh shit! Geralt, look!'

Geralt sighed and looked.

At the foot of the cliff under the terrace it was swarming with rats. The space between Palmyra and the cliff was filled with an excited, squeaking mass. Hundreds, perhaps, thousands of rodents were fleeing from the area of the port and the river mouth, rushing up along the palisade, up the mountain and into the woods. Other passer-by's also noticed this phenomenon and everywhere there were cries of fear and surprise.

'The rats are fleeing Palmyra and the port,' decided Dandelion, 'because they are afraid! I know what has happened! Perhaps the ship moored to the bank is full of rat-catchers.'

No one bothered to answer. Geralt wiped the sweat from his eyes, the heat was terrible, the hot air made it difficult to breathe. He looked at the sky, clear and cloudless.

'There is a storm,' Lytta expressed what she was thinking aloud. 'A heavy storm. The rats feel it. I can also feel it. I feel it in the air.'

And I, too, thought the witcher.

'A storm,' repeated Coral. 'A storm is coming from the sea.'

‘What sort of storm?’ Dandelion said busily dusting his hat. ‘Where from? The sky is clear and there is no wind. Sorry, but in this heat it would be nice if there was a breeze. A sea breeze...’

But before he could finish the sentence, a wind blew. A light breeze carrying the smell of the sea, giving a pleasant relief and refreshing. It quickly gained momentum. The flags on the masts, which a moment ago had hung down sad and still, started to flap and stir.

The sky on the horizon darkened. The wind grew stronger. The gentle silence was replaced by a rustling noise; the rustling noise was then replaced by a whistle.

The flags on the masts rustled and flapped furiously. Rooster shaped wind vanes on top of rooftops and towers, rattled and spun. Shutters slammed. And clouds of dust flew.

Dandelion at the last minute grabbed his hat with both hands, or it would have flown away in the wind.

Mozaïk held her dress, a sharp gust of wind lifted the chiffon high, almost to her hips. Before she managed to handle the wind tossed cloth, Geralt saw a pleasing amount of her legs. She noticed his gaze. But did not lower her eyes.

‘Storm...’ Coral, in order to speak, had to turn away, the wind was already so strong it drowned out words. “The Storm! The storm is here!”

‘Gods!’ Yelled Dandelion, who did not believe in any gods. ‘Gods! What is happening? Is this the end of the world?’

The sky quickly darkened. The horizon had gone from dark blue to black.

The wind was rising, whistling terribly.

On the road to the port the sea surged with breakers, waves hit the breakwater, spraying white foam. The noise from the sea grew louder. It became as dark as night.

Among the vessels standing at anchor there was a commotion. Some including the clipper “Echo” and the Novigrad schooner “Pandora Parvis” hurriedly set sail, ready to escape into the open sea. The rest of the ships had removed their sails and remained at anchor. Geralt remember some of them, he had watched them from the terrace of Coral’s villa. The “Albatross” out of Redania. The “Fuchsia”, he could not remember from where. And the galleons “Pride of Cintra“, under a flag with a blue cross. And the three masted “Vertigo” from Lan Exeter. And several others. Including the frigate “Acheron” under black sails.

The wind was not whistling. It howled. Geralt saw in Palmyra the first roof break and fling tiles into the air. The second did not wait long. Then a third and a fourth. The wind was still intensifying. Flags flapped, shutters banged, tiles and gutter fell, chimneys toppled and broke planters on the pavement. Under the pressure of the vortex the bell at the temple began to beat a staccato, frightenly sinister ringing.

The wind blew stronger. It drove huge waves to the shore. The noise of the sea grew louder and louder. Soon it was not a noise. It was a monotonous and dull roar, like the roar of some diabolical machine. The waves grew, topped with white foam. The earth rumbled under their feet. The wind howled.

“Echo” and “Pandora Parvis” were unable to leave. They returned to the pier and dropped anchor. Crowds gathered on the terraces and the cries of people grew louder, filled with wonder and horror. People pointed to the sea.

From the sea, there appeared a huge wave. A colossal wall of water. Its surge seemed as high as the galleons mast.

Coral grabbed the witcher’s hand. She said something, or rather, tried to speak, the wind completely plugged her mouth.

‘...run! Geralt! We have to get out of here!’

The wave struck the port, People were screaming. Under the pressure of the water, beams and planks turned to splinters. It

came to the dock, breaking the jib cranes and pylons. Boats and barges docked at the port were tossed around like children's toys made of bark. Houses standing close to the beach were simply washed away, no trace was left of them. The wave broke into the mouth of the river, immediately turning it into a hellish cauldron. From the flooded Palmyra, crowds rushed, headed to the upper town, towards the watchtower. These survived. Some chose the river as a path to salvation. Geralt saw them swallowed by water.

'There's a second wave!' Yelled Dandelion. 'A second wave!' Yes, there was a second. And then a third. Fourth. Fifth. And sixth. Walls of water hit the road and port.

With terrible force the waves struck the ships at anchor. Geralt was people falling from the deck.

Some turned their noses upwind and fought bravely. For a while. Masts were lost, one after another. Then the waves began to cover them. They disappeared in the foam, reappeared, disappeared and reappeared.

The first to cease appearing was the clipper "Echo". It just disappeared. Sometime later the same fate befell the "Fuchsia". In the blink of an eye the "Albatross" disappeared into the abyss. The anchor on "Vertigo" broke, the galleon danced on the crest of a wave, turned and crashed into the breakwater.

"Acheron", "Pride of Cintra", "Pandora Parvis" and two other galleons unknown to Geralt, lifted anchor and the waves carried them to shore. The maneuver was desperately suicidal. The captains could either choose certain death at anchorage or risk moving into the mouth of the river.

The unknown galleons were out of luck. None of them could head in the right direction. Both of them crashed into the pier.

The "Pride of Cintra" and "Acheron" also were not obeying their helm. They faced each other, locked together and then were pinned to the quay and smashed to pieces. Then consumed by the water.

“Pandora Parvis” danced and jumped over the waves like a dolphin. But it held course and was carried into the mouth of the Adalatte. Geralt could hear the cries of people cheering for the captain.

Coral shouted, pointing.

It was a seventh wave.

The previous height had been as high as the masts of the ships, Geralt assessed about five – six fathoms, that is thirty or forty feet. The one that came from the sea now that covered the entire sky was twice as high.

The crowd fleeing from Palmyra crowded around the watchtower, and began to cry. The wind knocked them to the ground, and pulled at the stockade.

The wave struck Palmyra. And like a broom, swept away the earth. The water in a blink of an eye reached the palisade, flooding the people pressed against it. The wave hit the timber stockade, knocking it down. The unstoppable water rammed the rock. The cliff began to shake so that Dandelion and Mozaïk dropped, and Geralt with great difficulty kept his balance.

‘We must run!’ Coral cried, clutching the balustrade. ‘Geralt! Run! There is another wave!’

The wave hit them. People on the terraces, those who had not run away before, ran now. They ran amidst shouts high up the mountain as possible, to the royal palace. Few people remain. Geralt recognised among them Ravenga and Antea Derris.

People were shouting and wailing. The waves eroded a section the cliff to the right of them, under a set of villas. The first villa, slide like a house of cards, down the slope and right into the surf. Then went the second, third and fourth.

‘The city is falling apart!’ Yelled Dandelion. ‘Crubling!’

Lytta Neyd raised her hand. Shouted a spell. And disappeared. Mozaïk clutched Geralt’s hand. Dandelion shouted.

The water was already under them, under the terrace. And there were people in the water. From above people, where throwing down ropes. Next to them, a powerfully built man jumped into the maelstrom, swimming quickly to rescue a drowning woman.

Mozaïk screamed.

The witcher saw waves sweeping over the roof of a house. And clinging to the roof were children. Three children. He pulled his sword from his back.

‘Hold this, Dandelion.’

He shrugged off his jacket. And jumped into the water.

It was not the usual swimming, a swimmer with ordinary skills would have been little use. Waves swept up, down, and sideways, throwing him spinning into a vortex of beams, boards and furniture, and pushing him up against a tree which threatened to squash him like a pancake. When he finally swam over and grabbed the roof, he was beaten severely. The roof jumped and spun on the waves like a top.

The kids bellowed.

Three, he thought. I can't take all three.

Next to his shoulder he felt someone.

‘Two!’ Antea Derris spat water, and grabbed one of the children. ‘Take two!’

It was not easy. The boy, he grabbed and tucked under his arm. The girl in a panic gripped the rafters so hard that he could not remove her hand. It helped when a wave crashed over them. Choking the girl released the rafter, and Geralt gripped her with his other arm. And then all three of them began to sink. The children gurgled and twitched. Geralt fought.

Without knowing how, he emerged. A wave pressed him up against the wall of the terrace, knocking out his breath. He did not let go of the children. People shouted from above, trying to help, holding down things for him to hand onto. It didn't work.

The whirlpool lifted him and carried him away., He collided with someone, it was Antea Derris with the girl in her arms. She struggled, but it was evident that this was her last effort, with difficulty she was holding the child above the water and her head.

Nearby there was a splash and panting. It was Mozaïk. She grabbed one of the children and swam. He saw her get hit by a beam. She screamed but did not release the child.

The waves again threw them at the terrace wall. This time the people above were ready, they had brought a ladder, and hung from it with outstretched arms. They took the children. He watched as Dandelion help Mozaïk up to the terrace.

Antea Derris looked at him. She had beautiful eyes. She smiled.

Then the wave hit them with a bunch of beams. Large beams, from the palisade.

One of the beams hit Antea Derris and pinned her to the terrace. Antea spat blood. A lot of blood. Then, with her head on her chest, she disappeared under the water.

Great was struck by two beams, one in the shoulder, the other in the thigh. The strike paralyzed him, he became completely numb all over. He choked and sank to the bottom.

Someone grabbed him in a painful iron grip and pulled him to the surface. He reached out and felt a solid as rock bicep. The strongman's legs worked, churning up water like a newt, with his free hand he pushed away the floating debris in the whirling chaos. They emerged near the terrace. Above were screams and applause. And an outstretched hand.

A minute later he was lying in a puddle of water, coughing, spitting, and burping on the stone slabs of the terrace. Kneeling close by was Dandelion, pale as paper. On his other side was Mozaïk.

She was also pale. And her hands trembled. Geralt sat up with difficulty.

‘Antea?’

Dandelion shook his head and turned away. Mozaïk dropped her head on her knees. He saw her shoulders shake.

His saviour sat nearby. A strongman. More precisely, a strongwoman. A disorderly stubble on her shorn head. Her stomach muscles like rolls. Her shoulders, like a fighter. Calves, like a gymnast.

‘I owe you my life.’

‘There is...’ The guard-woman waved blithely, ‘nothing to talk about. Generally speaking, you’re an asshole, and me and the girls owe you for the fight. So it’s better not to get caught up in this owing stuff. Got it?’

‘Got it.’

‘But I have to admit,’ the guard-woman spat vigorously, and shook water from her ear, ‘that for an asshole you are courageous. The courageous asshole, Geralt of Rivia.’

‘And you? What’s your name?’

‘Violetta,’ said the guard-woman suddenly darkening. ‘And her? What was...’

‘Antea Derris.’

‘Antea Derris,’ she said twisting her lips. ‘It’s a pity.’

‘It’s a pity.’

On the terrace, it became crowded. It started to brighten, the wind stopped and flags drooped. The waves became smaller and started to recede. Leaving devastation and ruin. And corpses, which the crabs had already started to climb on.

Geralt struggled to his feet. Every movement and every deep breath caused a dull pain in his side. His knee hurt badly. Both of his sleeves were cut off, he did not remember when he lost them. The skin on his left elbow and right shoulder were torn to living flesh. He had many small cuts and bruises. Overall, nothing serious, nothing that he should worry about.

The sun broke through the clouds, and shone on the sea. It glittered off of the roof of the lighthouse at the edge of the cape, the lighthouse of white and red brick, a relic of the elves. A relic, which had already gone through more than one such storm. And it seemed, like it would survive another one.

Having overcome the now calm though choked with debris river, the schooner "Pandora Parvis" emerged under full sail, as if on parade. The crowd greeted her.

Geralt helped Mozaïk to stand. The girl, Had on very few clothes. Dandelion gave her his coat to cover herself. And coughed meaningfully.

Before them stood Lytta Neyd. With a medical bag swung over her shoulder.

'I'm back,' she said looking at the witcher.

'No,' he said. 'You left.'

She looked at him. With cold, alien eyes. And then focused on something very far away, located right behind the witcher's right shoulder.

'So you want to play this out here,' she said coldly. 'Make new memories. Well, your will, your choice. Although the style you chose could have been less pathetic. Goodbye then. I'm going to help the wounded and those in need. You obviously don't need my help. Or I yours. Mozaïk!'

Mozaïk shook her head. She took Geralt's arm. Coral sniffed.

'Even so? You want to do it? In this way? Well' your will. Your choice. Farewell.'

She turned and walked away.

In the crowd, which had begun to gather on the terrace, appeared Febus Ravenga. He apparently had taken part in the rescue, because wet clothes hung on him in shreds. A helpful

man approached him and handed him his hat. Or rather, what was left of it.

‘What now?’ someone in the crowd asked. ‘What do we do now?’

Ravenga looked at them. For a long time. Then he straightened up and squeezed his hat and put it on his head.

‘We bury the dead,’ he said. ‘And take care of the living. And begin to build anew.’

The bell in the temple sounded. As if it wanted to point out that it persevered. That thought much had changed, some things remain unshakable.

‘Let’s leave,’ Geralt took a piece of wet seaweed out of his collar. “Dandelion? Where’s my sword?”

Dandelion gasped, pointing to an empty space under the wall.

‘A moment ago... A moment ago it was right there! Your sword and jacket! Stolen! Curse their mothers! Stolen! Hey, people! There was a sword! Please return it! People! Oh, you sons of bitches! Go to hell!’

The witcher suddenly felt sick. Mozaïk supported him. *Poor thing*, he thought. *Poor thing, if she has to support me.*

‘I’m sick of this town,’ he said. ‘And all that goes with it. And what it represents. Let’s go. As soon as possible. As far as possible.’

Interlude

Twelve days later

The fountain glittered quietly, the fountain bowl smelled of wet stone. The air smelled of flowers and of ivy crawling on the walls of the patio. It smelled of apples, standing in a bowl on a marble table. Two glasses steamed up with chilled wine.

At the table sat two women. Two sorceresses. If they happened to be near any artistically gifted person, full of picturesque imagination and capable of lyrical allegories, it would not have been difficult to imagine the two. Flame-haired Lytta Neyd in a cinnabar green dress was like a sunset in September. Yennefer of Vengerberg, black-haired, dressed in a combination of black and white, suggested a December morning.

‘Most of the neighbouring villas,’ Yennefer broke the silence, ‘lie in ruins at the foot of the cliff. And yet yours is unharmed. Not even a single tile has fallen. Lucky you, Coral. I’d advise you to think about buying a lottery ticket.’

‘Priests,’ smiled Lytta Neyd, ‘would not call it luck. They would say that it was the protection of the gods and celestial forces. The Gods extend their protection over the righteous and virtuous. And they are rewarded fair and decent.’

‘Of course. Rewarded. If they want, and are nearby. Your health, my friend.’

‘Your health, my friend. Mozaïk! Pour for Madame Yennefer. Her glass is empty.’

‘As for the villa,’ Lytta watched Mozaïk, ‘it can be purchased. Purchased because... Because I need to leave. The aura around Kerack has ceased to serve me.’

Yennefer raised her eyebrows. Lytta was not long in coming forth.

‘King Viraxas,’ she said with a faintly mocking voice, ‘began his reign with new royal decrees. First – on the day of his coronation he declared in the kingdom of Kerack a public holiday and non-work. Second, he announced an amnesty for... criminals, and politicians continue to sit, though without the right to appointments and correspondence. Third, he raised the port charges by one hundred percent. Forth, within two weeks all non-citizens of Kerack must leave, so as not to harm the country’s economy and deprive the pure blooded citizen of work. Fifth, in Kerack it is forbidden to perform any magic without the permission of the king, and mages are not allowed to own land or property. Sorcerers living in Kerack need to get rid of property and get a license. Or leave the kingdom.’

‘A remarkable act of gratitude,’ Yennefer snorted. ‘And they say it was sorcerers that seated Viraxas on the throne. That they organised and financed his return. And helped him take power.’

‘Spoken truly. Viraxas generously paid for this capital, for that, he raised the fees and also confiscated the property of non-humans. The decree is for me personally, as no other magician owns a home in Kerack. This is Ildiko Brackley’s revenge. And also it deprives the local women of health care, which Viraxas’s advisers consider immoral. The Chapter could exert pressure for my case, but they will not. The money received from Viraxas and is trading privileges is insufficient. He continues to negotiate and is not intending to weaken his position. So I am declared a *persona non grata*, and will have to emigrate in search of new pastures.’

‘That, I suppose, you will do without much regret. I think that Kerack under the current regime does not have many chance of winning the completion of most pleasant place in the sun. Sell this villa, buy another. Move to Lyria in the mountains. The Lyrian mountains are now in vogue. Many magicians have moved there, because there are good and reasonable taxes.’

‘I don’t like the mountains. I prefer the sea. Don’t worry, I’ll find myself some marina without problems, with my specialty.’

Women are everywhere and they need me. Drink, Yennefer. To your health.'

'You've poured for me, but you have barely touched yours. Are you unwell? You look peaked.'

Lytta sighed dramatically.

'The last few days have been difficult. The palace coup, the terrible storm, ah... the morning sickness... I know, after the first three months it will pass. But that is still two months...'

In the silence, you could hear the buzzing of wasps circling the apples.

'Ha, ha,' Coral broke the silence. 'I was joking. It is a pity that you cannot see your face. Gotcha! Ha ha.'

Yennefer looked at the top of the wall overgrown with ivy. Then stared back.

'I got you,' Lytta said maliciously, 'and I bet your imagination started immediately. Admit it, your imagination just tied my blessed state with... But don't make me say it. The news must have reached you before you got here, rumours spread like ripples on water. But be calm, there is no grain of truth in those rumours. The chances of me getting pregnant are the same as yours, nothing in this respect has changed. And with your witcher, I only had business relations. Professional questions. Nothing more.'

'Oh.'

'People are people; they like to gossip. If you see a woman with a man, it immediately turns into a love story. The witcher, I admit, have been together often. And seen together in the city. But it was, I repeat, in association with business interests.'

Yennefer put down her glass, placed her elbows on the table, joined her fingertips, and folded her hands. She looked into the eyes of the red-haired sorceress.

‘First,’ Lytta coughed slightly, but did not lower her eyes. ‘I would never do anything like that. Second, your witcher had absolutely no interest in me.’

‘No interest?’ Yennefer raised her eyebrows. ‘Indeed? How do you explain this?’

‘Maybe,’ Coral smiled slightly, ‘he no longer had interest in older women? Regardless of their current appearance? Maybe he wanted someone young? Mozaïk! Come here. Just look at her Yennefer. Blooming with youth. And until most recently – innocent.’

‘Was he?’ Yennefer pouted. ‘Was he with her? Your apprentice?’

‘Well, Mozaïk. Please. Tell us about your love affair. It is very interesting to listen to. Love stories are my favourite. Stories of unrequited love. The more wretched – the better.’

‘Mistress Lytta...’ The girl went deathly pale. ‘Please... You’ve already punished me for it... How many times can I be punished for the same offence? Do not make me...’

‘Tell us!’

‘Leave off, Coral,’ Yennefer interjected. ‘Don’t torture her. Besides, it’s not very interesting.’

‘I don’t believe that,’ Lytta Neyd grinned. ‘Well, I forgive the woman, in fact, I have already punished her guilt, forgiven her and allowed her to continue her studies. And it is no longer amusing to hear her mumble her confessions. In short: she fell in love with the witcher and ran away with him. And he, when he grew tired of her, threw her away. One morning she woke up alone. The place in their lovers bed had cooled down, and he left without a trace. He left because he had to. Like smoke. Blown away.’

Mozaïk, although it seemed impossible, paled even more. Her hand were shaking.

‘He left you flowers,’ Yennefer said softly. ‘A bouquet of flowers. True?’

Mozaïk lifted her head. But she did not answer.

‘Flowers and a letter,’ repeated Yennefer.

Mozaïk was silent. But colour slowly returned to her face.

‘A letter,’ said Lytta Neyd, looking at her searchingly. ‘You did not mention a letter to me.’

Mozaïk pursed her lips together.

‘So that’s why,’ Lytta said with outward calm. ‘that’s why you came back, although you could expect a punishment more severe, much more severe than the one that you received from him as a result. It was he who told you to come back. If not for that, then you would not have returned.’

Mozaïk did not answer. Yennefer was also silent, twirling a black curl around her finger. Suddenly she raised her head and looked into the girl’s eyes. And smiled.

‘He told you to come back to me,’ said Lytta Neyd. ‘He told you to come back, even though, he could imagine what you could expect from me. He surprised me, I must confess, I did not expect that.’

The fountain smelled like wet stone. The air smelled of flowers and ivy.

‘Then he surprised me,’ repeated Lytta. ‘I did not expect that from him.’

‘Because you don’t know him, Coral,’ Yennefer calmly replied. ‘You don’t know him’

*What you are I can not say:
Only this I know full well –
When I touched your face today
Drifts of blossoms flushed and fell.*

Siefried Sassoon

Chapter Twenty

A boy groom who had already received half a crown evening before, had their horses saddled and waiting. Dandelion yawned and scratched his head.

‘Oh, gods, Geralt... Do we really need to leave so early? It is still dark...’

‘It’s not dark. It’s just right. The sun will rise in an hour.’

‘An hour,’ Dandelion climbed into the saddle of his gelding. ‘I’d rather sleep for an hour...’

Geralt jumped into the saddle, and gave the groom another half crown.

‘In August,’ he said. ‘From sunrise to sunset is about fourteen hours. I would like in this time to go as far as possible.’

Dandelion yawned. And as if only now noticing the bareback mare eating apples, standing in the stall behind the partition. The mare shook her head, as if to remind him.

‘Wait,’ the poet roused himself, ‘Where is she? Where’s Mozaïk?’

‘She goes with us no further. We are parting.’

‘Why? I don’t understand... Can you explain...’

‘I can’t. Not now. To the road, Dandelion.’

‘You sure you know what you are doing? And you fully aware?’

‘No. Not completely. Not a word more, I don’t want to talk about it now. Let’s go.’

Dandelion sighed. He sent his gelding forward. He looked around and sighed again. He was a poet. Therefore, he had the right to sigh, whenever he wanted.

The inn the “Mystery Whisper” looked quite nice with dawn in the background, in the misty predawn glow. It seemed to be

drowned in mallow, an entangled in bindweed and ivy palace of fairies, a forest temple of secret love. The poet mused.

Once again he sighed, yawned, coughed, spat, wrapped himself in his cloak and rode his horse. After a few minutes of thinking, he'd been left behind. Geralt was barely visible in the fog. The witcher was riding fast. And did not look back.

'I hope this wine pleases,' the innkeeper said as he put a porcelain pitcher on the table. 'A vintage from Rivia that you may like. And my wife has asked to see how you are finding the fowl?'

'I'm finding it,' said Dandelion. 'But not as often as I would like.'

The inn to which they had arrived at the end of the day, was called, as the colourful sign outside proclaim. "At the Boar and Deer". However, it was the only wild game that was offered by the inn, that appeared on the menu. The local specialty was porridge with chunks of fatty pork and thick onion sauce. Dandelion, probably due to his principles, found this a little to plebeian to his understanding of food and turned his nose up at it. Geralt did not complain. The pork was thick and plentiful and the sauce was complex – much like the porridge in every roadside inn. It could be worse, especially since the selection was limited. Geralt insisted that that day they should ride as far as possible, so they had not stopped at any restaurants.

As it turned out the "At the Boar and Deer" was finally destination of their trip. A single shop along a wall occupied by merchant carriages. The merchants were modern, unlike the obdurate they did not disdain servants and did not consider it shameful to eat with them at the same table. Modernity and tolerance did, of course, have its limits – merchants occupied one end of the table, the servants – the other. The demarcation line was easy to spot. The was true of the dishes. Servants ate pork porridge, than the specialised local cuisine and washed it down with stale beer. The lord merchants ate chicken and drank wine.

At the table opposite, was a couple eating a dinner of stuffed boar's head: a blonde girl and an older man. She was dressed richly, very strictly and not girlish. The man looked like a bureaucrat, but not one with a high rank. The pair ate dinner together, and were having quite an animated conversation, but it must have been a recent and most casual acquaintance, as could be inferred from the behaviour of the official, who persistently tried to curry favour with the girl in the explicit hope that he would receive something more from the girl than a look of courtesy and an ironic expression.

One of the short benches was occupied by four priestesses. Wandering healers, which were easily recognised by the grey clothes and the tight hoods that hide their hair. Their meal, Geralt noted, was more than modest, something like barley porridge without gravy. Priestesses never demanded payment for treatment, and healed all for free, and custom demanded that in exchange they are offered table and bed. The innkeeper of the "At the Boar and Deer" knew about the custom, but apparently at the lowest cost.

On a nearby bench, under a set of antlers, three local residents were hovering over a bottle of rye vodka which was clearly not their first. This more or less meet their basic needs, but they started looking for entertainment. And quickly found it. They watched the priestesses. The priestesses were already accustomed to such attention though.

The table in the corner of the room held only one guest. This table was also hidden in the shadows. The guest, Geralt noted, neither ate nor drank. He sat motionless leaning against the wall.

The three locals, jokes and ridicule aimed at the priestesses, became more brutal and obscene. The priestesses behaved stoically, ignoring them. The locals, apparently, had whet their appetite and went back to their vodka. Geralt ate faster. He decided to shut up the drunkard's muzzles, but did not want his porridge to cool.

‘The Witcher, Geralt of Rivia.’

From the corner, in the shadows, a fire flashed suddenly.

The man sitting alone at the table, raised his hand. From his fingers shot wavering flames. The man put his hand to a candlestick on the table and lit all three candles by turn. They light was enough to illuminate him.

He had grey hair, like ash, at the temples mixed with white strands. An ashen face. A hooked nose. And bright yellow eyes with vertical pupils.

Around his neck, pulled out from his shirt, glistening in the candle light was a silver medallion. The head of a cat with bared teeth.

‘The Witcher, Geralt of Rivia,’ He echoed in the silence that followed. ‘On your way to Vizima, I suppose? For the reward offered by King Foltest? For two thousand orens? I’ve guessed right?’

Geralt did not answer. Did not even move.

‘You don’t ask. So you know who I am? Because I know you.’

‘There are few of you left,’ Geralt said calmly. ‘So it is easy to calculate. You’re Brehen. Also known as the Cat of Lello.’

‘I’m very pleased’ snorted the man with the cat medallion. ‘The famous White Wolf deigns to know my name. What a huge honour. The fact that you are also going to steal my reward, I should probably take as an honour as well? I must give primacy, bow and apologise? As in a wolf pack, move away from the kill and wait, wagging my tail and waiting till the leader is sated? And kindly deigns to leave some leftovers?’

Geralt was silent.

‘I won’t give you the prize,’ continued Brehen, nicknamed the Cat from Lello. ‘I won’t share. You’re not going to Vizima, White Wolf. You will not steal my wages. Vesemir has handed out a death sentence. You have the opportunity to fulfil it. Exit the tavern. Into the square.’

‘I won’t fight you.’

The man with the cat medallion jumped up from his table so fast he blurred in the eyes. With a flash he caught up his sword from the table. The man grabbed one of the priestesses with the hood, pulled her from the bench, dropped her to her knees and put the blade to her throat.

‘You are going to fight me,’ He said coldly, looking at Geralt. ‘Get out into the square before I count to three. Otherwise, the blood of this priestess will splatter the walls, ceiling and furniture. And then I’ll slaughter the rest. Taking turns. Nobody move! Don’t anybody move!’

In the inn there was silence, the silence was deaf and complete. Everyone froze. And watched with mouths open.

‘I will not fight you,’ Geralt said quietly. ‘But if you hurt this woman, you will die.’

‘One of us will die, that’s for sure. There, in the square. But most likely it will not be me. They say that your famous swords have been stolen. And new ones, I can see, you have not bothered to buy. Truly you need to have a great arrogance to come to steal someone else’s reward, not even armed. Or, perhaps, the famous White Wolf is so good he does not even need steel?’

With the creak of a chair the blonde girl stood up. She took from the table an oblong parcel. She placed it in front of Geralt and retreated to her seat, sitting down next to the official.

He knew what it was. Before he had even undone the straps and spread the felt.

A sword of siderite steel, a total length of forty and a half inches, blade length – twenty-seven and a quarter. Weighing thirty-seven ounces. The hilt and guard simple, but elegant.

The second sword – the same length and weight – but silver. In part, of course. Pure silver is too soft, so it cannot be well sharpened. Down the length of the entire blade was runic symbols and characters.

The linguist Pyrrall Pratt could not read them, thus showing the level of his knowledge. The ancient runes form the inscription: *Dubhenn haern am glandeal, morch am fhean aiesin.* My brilliance cuts the gloom, my light dispels the darkness.

Geralt snatched from its sheath the steel sword. With a free and continuous movement. He did not look at Brehen. He looked at the blade.

‘Let the woman go,’ he said quietly. ‘Now. Otherwise, you die.’

Brehen jerked his hand a little and from the priestess’s neck ran a trickle of blood. The priestess did not even groan.

‘I need the money,’ hiss the Cat of Lello. ‘The reward should be mine!’

‘Let the woman go, I said. Otherwise, I’ll kill you. Here, on the spot.’

Brehen hunched. He was breathing heavily. His eyes sparkled angrily, his lip curved disgustingly. The knuckles gripping the sword were white. Suddenly, he let go of the priestess, pushing her away. People in the inn shook as if awakened from a nightmare. There were sighs and deep breaths.

‘Winter is coming,’ Brehen said with anguish, ‘And I, unlike others, have no place to spend winter. Cozy and warm Kaer Morhen is not for me!’

‘No,’ said Geralt. ‘It’s not for you. And you know very well for what reasons.’

‘Kaer Morhen is just for you, the good, the just, the fair, right? Fucking hypocrites. You are the same killers, like us! You’re no different than us!’

‘Go,’ Geralt said. ‘Leave this place and be on your way.’

Brehen put away his sword. He straightened. As he walked across the room, his eyes changed. The pupils filled the entire iris.

‘It’s a lie,’ Geralt said as Brehen passed, ‘that Vesemir allegedly ordered a death sentence on you. Witcher’s do not fight or cross swords with each other. But if you ever repeat what happened in Lello, if I hear something like that... Then I’ll make an exception. I’ll find you and kill you. Consider it a serious prevention.’

The dead silence in the hall of the inn lasted for a few minutes after the door closed behind Brehen. Dandelion breathed a sigh of relief in the silence which sounded quite loud. Shortly thereafter, movement began. The local drunks gradually left, not even finishing the vodka. The merchants restrained, though quiet and pale, ordered their servants to leave the table, obviously giving orders and directions to carefully guard the carts and horses who were at risk from these shady characters.

The priestess, her neck bandaged by her colleagues, gave Geralt a silent bow and retired to rest, probably in the barn – it was doubtful the innkeeper had given them a bedroom.

Geralt bowed and gestured at the table with the blonde who had given him his swords. She took advantage of the invitation very willingly and without regret left her former companion, the official with a grim expression on his face.

‘My name is Tiziano Frevi,’ she introduced herself, taking Geralt’s hand and shaking it. ‘Nice to meet you.’

‘I am very pleased.’

‘It was a little bit nervous, right? Evenings at roadside inns are usually boring, but today was interesting. At one point I was even a little bit afraid. But I think these are men game, yes? Duel of testosterone? Comparisons to see who’s is longer. No real threat.’

‘It was not,’ he lied. ‘Mainly because of the swords that were returned. Thank you for them. Only I can’t understand how you got them.’

‘That is supposed to remain a secret,’ she explained easily. ‘I was instructed to quietly and secretly return these swords and

then disappear. But the conditions changed suddenly. I had to, because the conditions required it, to return the weapons openly. Abandoning an explanation now would simply be indecent. Therefore, by not giving an explanation, I take full responsibility for the disclosure of the secrets. The swords were given to me by Yennefer of Vengerberg. This happened in Novigrad, two weeks ago. There by chance I met Yennefer after I had just finished my internship. When she learned I was heading south, Yennefer entrusted me with this mission. And she gave me a letter of recommendation for a magician in Maribor, with whom I intend to train.'

'How is...?' Geralt swallowed. 'How is she? Yennefer? Is she all right?'

'In perfect order, I think,' Tiziano Frevi looked at him from beneath her lashes. 'She's fine, I even envy her looks to be honest.'

Geralt stood and walked over to the innkeeper, who almost fainted in fear.

'Well, you shouldn't have...,' Tiziano Frevi said modestly, when a minute later, the innkeeper returned with a bottle of Est Est, the most expensive wine from Tousaint. And a few extra candles stuck in the necks of empty bottles.

'Right, this is becoming uncomfortable,' she added, when in a moment there were dishes on the table with slices of dried ham, and one a second – smoked trout, and on a third – different cheeses. 'You're needlessly wasting money, witcher.'

'There is a reason. You are great company.'

She thanked him with a nod. And a smile. A cute smile.

After graduating from a School of Magic every sorceress was given a choice. She could stay as an assistant teacher. Or she could seek out independent masters to take them on as permanent interns. Or choose the way of *dvimveandry*.

The system had been borrowed from the crafts. Many of them to receive the title of apprentice must make a journey, during

which they take temporary jobs in various workshops and with different masters, here and there, and finally after a few years they return to take an examination for the title of master. The difference, however, were Those forced to wander and find no work as apprentices too often looked into the eyes of hunger and their journey often turned into vagrancy. Dvimveandrami followed their own will and desires, and the Chapter of Wizards had established a special magical scholarship fund – which Geralt heard was quite significant.

‘That man was terrible,’ the poet joined the conversation, ‘he wore a medallion similar to yours. It was one of the cats, right?’

‘True. I don’t want to talk about it, Dandelion.’

‘The notorious cats,’ the poet turned to the sorceress, ‘are Witchers, but failed. Unsuccessful mutation. Mad men, psychopaths and sadist. The Cats they call themselves, because they really are like cats: aggressive, violent, unpredictable and capricious. Geralt, as usual, is playing it down to appease us. Because there was a threat, a great one. It is a miracle that there was no bloodshed, or corpses. There was a massacre in Lello four years ago. At any moment I expect...’

‘Geralt asked you not to talk about it,’ Tiziano Frevi interrupted politely but firmly. ‘Respect his wishes.’

He looked at her with liking. She seemed to him pleasant. And attractive. Very attractive.

Sorceresses he knew, could have their beauty correct, the prestige of their profession demanded that magic-users be admired. But the embellishment was never perfect, there was always something left behind. Tiziano Frevi was no exception. On her forehead, just below the hairline, there were a few faint, barely noticeable traces of smallpox, contracted, probably in childhood, when she had not been immune. The line of her beautiful mouth was spoiled a little by a small wavy scar on her upper lip. Geralt knew that she would feel anger, anger at his gaze, his eyes noticing such insignificant details, small details

that in the end, was nothing compared to the that Tiziano Frevi was sitting with him at a table, drinking Est Est, eating smoked trout and smiling at him. The witcher, in fact, knew very few women, whose beauty could be considered perfect and the chances that they would smile at him were zero.

‘He spoke about a reward...’ Dandelion said, when on a topic was difficult to move aside. ‘Do any of you know what he meant? Geralt?’

‘I have no idea.’

‘I know,’ boasted Tiziano Frevi. ‘I’m surprised that you still have not heard, because it is an important matter. Foltest, King of Temeria, has posted this reward. For the removal of a curse from his daughter, who was enchanted. Pricked her finger on a spindle and has been forced into eternal sleep, poor thing, according to the rumours, she lies in a coffin in the castle, overgrown with hawthorn. According to other rumours, the coffin is made of glass and has been placed atop a mountain. They also say that she was turned into a swan. But others say a terrible monster, a Striga. As a result of a curse, because the princess was the result of incest. This gossip was supposedly invented by King Vizimir of Redania who is in territorial conflicts with Foltest and has quarrelled with him.’

‘It all sounds like fiction,’ Geralt said. ‘Based on fairy tales or legends. Enchanted and turned into a monster, a princess cursed as a punishment for incest, the reward to someone who can lift it. Classic and banal. Whoever invented it, didn’t strain very hard.’

‘The case,’ the dvimveandra added, ‘has obvious political overtones, so the Chapter has banned any wizards from participating in it.’

‘Fairy tale or not, the cat believe in it,’ reasoned Dandelion. ‘It was obvious he was in a hurry to get to Vizima to the enchanted princess to break her curse and get the promised reward from King Foltest. And he suspected the Geralt was going there too, and wanted to beat him.’

‘He was wrong,’ Geralt said dryly. ‘I’m not going to Vizima. I do not intend to pry into a political cauldron. This work is just right for someone like Brehen, who, he himself said, is in need of it. I don’t need it. I’ve found my swords, and a new order is not nessecary. I have my livelihood. Thanks to the Wizards of Rissberg...’

‘The Witcher, Geralt of Rivia?’

‘Yes,’ Geralt stared up at the officer standing next to his with a sullen look on his face. ‘Who’s asking?’

‘That is immaterial,’ the officer looked up and puffed out his cheeks, trying to sound important. ‘You are essential to the lawsuit. A witness. In accordance with the law.’

The officer gave the witcher a paper scroll. As he left, Tiziano Frevi did not fail to bestow upon him a look of contempt.

Geralt broke the seal, and unrolled the scroll.

‘Datum ex Castello Rissberg, day 20 mens, Jul. anno 1245 post Ressurrectionem,’ he read. ‘The City court of Gors Velen. Plaintiff: Independent Board of Research, Rissberg. Defendant: Geralt of Rivia, Witcher. Subject matter: The refund of the amount of one thousand Novigrad crowns. We ask, *primo*, the defendant Geralt of Rivia to repay one thousand Novigrad crowns together with appropriate interest. *Secundo*, we impose on the defendant to pay court costs in favour of the bearer of the claim in accordance with the pravilami. *Tertio*, Immediate execution of these orders. Justification: the defendant tricked the plaintiff, the indipendant Board of Research of Rissberg worth a thousand Novigrad crowns. Proof: a copy of bank transfers. Payment was issued as an advance on work that the defendant has failed to fulfil and carry out, and his intent was that he never intended to... Witnesses, Biruta Anna Marquette lcarti, Axel Esparza, Tarvix Sandoval... Bastards.’

‘I return your swords,’ Tiziano Frevi looked down. ‘And then the court places more problems on your head. This official tracked me down. This morning, he overheard me asking about you at

the ferry dock. And immediately after that he has clung to me like a burr to a dog's tail. Now I know why. This suit – it is my fault.'

'You need a lawyer,' Dandelion said. 'But I don't advise you to take the defender in Kerack. She is suitable only outside the courtroom.'

'You can forget about a lawyer. Did you note the date on the claim? I bet that they have already held a hearing and the sentence has been passed down in absentia. And that they have seized my accounts.'

'I'm sorry,' Tiziano Frevi said. 'It's all my fault. Forgive me.'

'Don't apologise, you aren't to blame. Let those at Rissberg choke on the courts. Dear innkeeper! Another bottle of Est Est, if you can!'

Soon they were the only guests left in the hall. The innkeeper's demonstrative yawns, gave them to understand that it was time to finish. The first to leave was Tiziano Frevi. Followed by Dandelion.

Geralt did not go to his room, which he shared with the poet. Instead, he gently knocked on Tiziano Frevi door. She opened it immediately.

'I've been waiting,' she murmured, pulling him inside. 'I knew you'd come. And if you had not come, then I would have gone looking for you.'

She must have magically put him to sleep, otherwise he would have certainly woken up when she left. She had left, most likely before dawn, or even in the dark. All that was left was her smell. A delicate aroma of bergamot and iris. And something else. Roses?

On the table, next to his swords was a flower. A rose flower. One of the roses that grew in a flowerpot in front of the inn.

No one could remember what was in that place, who built it, for whom and for what purpose did it serve. For in that valley, there were only ruined buildings, once a large and probably rich architectural ensemble. Of the building there remained almost nothing but the remains of the foundation, a swampy pit, with stone blocks scattered here and there. The rest was dismantled and looted. Building material was expensive, and nothing should go to waste.

They walked under the remains of a destroyed portal, once with impressive archways, now it looked like a gallows: the impression came from the ivy hanging down from it in loops. They walked down an alley which lay under trees. The trees were withered, crippled and ugly, as if the weight hanging over this place was a curse. The alley lead to a garden. Or rather, what was once a garden. Banberry bushes, gorse and climbing roses, probably at one time decoratively trimmed, where now thorny vies with stalks. Because of this mess they almost missed seeing the remains of statues. The remains were so small that it was impossible to determine even approximately what the statue represented. Not that it had any meaning. Ste statues were in the past. They did not survive and had ceased to exist. These were ruins, and they seemed to have been here a long time, and eternal ruin.

Ruins A monument to a destroyed world.

‘Dandelion.’

‘Yes?’

‘In recent times, everything that could go bad, went bad. And it seems to me that I blew it. Everything that I have touched, has gone worng.’

‘You think so?’

‘It seems to me so.’

‘But that is not at all the case. Explanations will have to wait. I’m tired of explaining. Now feel sorry for yourself in silence. Don’t let thy lamentations distract me.’

Dandelion sat down on a collapsed tower, pushed his hat back on his head, crossed his legs and twisted his lute pegs.

The candle flickers and our fire extinguishes

Suddenly we feel the touch of cool breeze...

Indeed, the wind blew sudden and strong. Dandelion stopped playing. And sighed loudly.

The Witcher turned.

She stood at the end of the alley, between the broken statue and a plinth of unrecognisable tangle of dogwood shrubs. Tall, wearing a slinky dress. With greyish spots on her head, more typical for vixens than black foxes. With pointed ears and an elongated muzzle.

Geralt did not move.

‘I promised I’d come,’ in the jaws of the fox, there flashed rows of fangs. ‘Someday. That day is come.’

Geralt did not move. On his back he felt the familiar weight of both of his swords, the severity of which he missed a month ago. They used to give him peace of mind. Today, at this moment, the weight was just a burden.

‘I’ve come...’ the vixen flashed her fangs. ‘I do not know why I have come. Maybe to say goodbye. Maybe, to allow her to say goodbye to you.’

Next to the fox appeared a slim girl in a slinky dress. Her pale and unnaturally motionless face was still half human. But perhaps more fox than human. The change occurs quickly.

The witcher shook his head.

‘You’ve save her... revived her? No, it is impossible. She was alive on the ship? Alive. And pretended to be dead.’

The vixen barked loudly. It took him a while to realise that I was a laugh. A foxes laugh.

‘We could do many things once. Create illusions of magical isles, show dragons dancing in the sky, bring forth the illusion of a huge army approaching the walls of a city... Once upon a time, long ago. Now the world has changed, our abilities have decreased... and we were crushed. We are already more fox than vixen. Yet even the smallest, even the youngest fox is able to fool your primitive human feelings with illusions.’

‘For the first time in my life,’ he said after a moment. ‘I was glad that I was deceived.’

‘It is not true that you did everything wrong. And as a reward you can touch my face.’

He cleared his throat, looking at the sharp teeth.

‘Hmm...’

‘Illusion – that is what you are thinking. What you are afraid of. And what you dream about.’

‘What?’

The fox barked softly. And changed.

Black hair, violet eyes burning in a pale, triangular face. Raven curls like waves in a storm, cascading over her shoulders, shining, reflecting light like peacock feathers, twisting and bouncing with every movement. Lips, wonderfully narrow and paly under lipstick. Around her neck a black velvet ribbon, a velvet ribbon with an obsidian star, sparkling with a thousand reflections. Yennefer smiled. The witcher touched her cheek. And then the dry dogwood flowered.

And then the wind blew, shook the bush. The world disappeared behind a curtain of whirling white petals.

‘Illusion,’ He heard the vixen say. ‘All an illusion.’

Dandelion finished signing. But he did not put down the lute. He sat on a fragment of felled column. He looked up at the sky.

Geralt sat nearby. He was thinking about different things. Laying out plans. Or rather, trying to lay out plans. Most were completely unrealistic. He made promises to himself. Promises he strongly doubted he would keep.

'You,' Dandelion said suddenly, 'never praise my ballads. I sit here and sing them to you. And you never tell me, "That was great, I want you to play it again". Not once have you said that.'

'I agree. I do not say that to you. You want to know why?'

'Why?'

'Because I don't want to.'

'Is it such a sacrifice?' the bard did not give up. 'Can it be so difficult? Say, "Play it again, Dandelion. Play "Time is a river"'.'

'Play it again, Dandelion. Play "Time is a river".'

'You said it quite disingenuous.'

'So what? You're still going to play it.'

'Just so you know.'

The candle flickers and our fire extinguishes

Suddenly we feel the touch of cool breeze

So time is a river

As the days of succession

Silently, invisibly touch us.

Since we are still together, something binds us

Linked with thee, even by accident

*After all, time is a river
As the days of succession
Silently, invisibly bear with us.*

*We were given a memory of the past for an hour
The roads I keep in my heart forever
Though time is a river
Thought the days alternate
They were quite, invisibly hide from us.*

*Therefore, my dear, we have once again
Sing in unison triumphantly
Though time is a river
Let the days alternate
Silently, invisibly move beyond us.*

Geralt stood.

‘It time for the road, Dandelion.’

‘Yes? And where too?’

‘What does it matter?’

‘I guess you’re right. Let’s go.’

Epilogue

On the hill gleamed the remains of buildings, in ruins for a long time so that it was completely overgrown. Ivy entangled the walls, and young trees broke through the broken foundation. It was – although Nimue could not know this – an ancient shrine, the abode of the priests of a forgotten deity. For Nimue it was just ruins. A pile of stones. And a signpost. A sign that she was going in the right direction.

Because immediately after the hillock and the ruins the road forked. One path led to the west, across the moorland. The second, leading to the north, was hiding in a dense dark forest. To delve into that black thicket, was to drown in dim twilight.

And that was the way she must go. To the north. Into the famous Jay's forest. She had heard the tales from those in Ivalo who tried to scare her. But Nimue was not scared, during her trip she had encountered similar things many times; Each area had its scary folklore, local fears and horrors, designed to intimidate visitors. Nimue had heard of mermaids in lakes, to watch at the intersections for ghouls and ghosts in cemeteries. Under every second bridge there dwelled a troll, every second group of willows – a vampire. Nimue finally got used to the everyday fears and was no longer scared. But she did not know how to get rid of the strange restlessness, covering her in front of the dark forest, or on a narrow path between the mounds in the mists or the fog-shrouded path among the bogs.

Now, in front of the dark wall of the forest, she again felt the old anxiety, a tingling in the neck and dry mouth.

The road has been trodden, she mental repeated to herself, it is full of ruts from carts, broken hooves of horses and oxen.

What's wrong is that the forest looks scary, but it is not some wild thicket, it is used as a path leading to Dorian and passing

through the last part of the forest that had survived from axes and saws. Many travel here, many come here. I, too, will pass. I'm not afraid.'

'I am, Nimue verch Wledyr ap Gwyn'

Vyrva, Guado, Sibell, Brugge, Casterfurt, Mortara, Ivalo, Dorian, Anchor, Gors Velen.

She looked around – *what if somebody came. It would be more fun with company*, she thought. But the path, as luck would have it today, was not being used. Was simply empty.

There was no other way. Nimue cleared her throat and straightened the knot of the rod on her shoulder. And then she entered the forest.

The forest was dominated by oaks, elms, and old fused together mushroom, there was also pine and larch. In the undergrowth, tangled together was hawthorn, hazel, wild cherry and honeysuckle. Usually the undergrowth would be teeming with wild birds, but in this forest there as an ominous silence. Nimue was keeping her eyes on the ground. She sighed in relief when at some point, somewhere deep in the forest a woodpecker rapped. *There is something here still alive*, she thought, *I'm not alone*.

She stopped suddenly and turned sharply. She did not see anyone or anything, but a moment ago, she was sure that she should. She felt like she was being watched. Secretly monitored. Fear gripped her throat, and shivers ran down her back.

She quickened her pace. The forest, it seemed, began to thin out, become lighter and greener, and birch seemed to prevail. *Another turn or two*, she thought frantically, *and the forest will end. I will leave the forest behind, along with whoever is sneaking up behind me. And I'll go on.*

Vyrva, Guado, Sibello, Brugge...

She did not even hear a rustle, a movement caught the corner of her eye. From the thick ferns escaped a gray, flat and incredibly fast legged creature. Nimue shouted, seeing snapping pincers, big as scythes. From the legs protruded spines and bristles. Many eyes surrounded its head like a crown.

She felt a jolt, which carried her to the ground and dropped her sharply. She collapsed back onto the elastic branches of a hazel, she clung to them, ready to jump up and run. She froze, looking at what was happening on the road like a wild dance.

The legged monster jumped and turned, incredibly fast, swinging its legs and flicking its terrible pincers. And around it, moving even faster, that he blurred in from of her eyes was a man. Armed with two swords.

In front of the eyes of the petrified with fear Nimue, first one, then a second, then a third severed leg soared through the air. Blows rained down on it flat truck, from which gushed streams of green slime.

The monster resisted and attacked and then finally with a wild leap rushed into the woods to escape. But it didn't escape. The man with the swords caught up to it, swung both his swords and nailed it to the ground. The creature thrashed its long legs on the ground and finally came to a stop.

Nimue pressed her hands to her chest in an attempt to appease her racing heart. She saw her saviour bent over the dead monster, and with a knife rip something from its shell. He wiped off the blades of his swords and put them back in the sheathes on his back.

'Are you ok?'

There was some delay before Nimue realised what she was being asked. But she had not been able to move or get out of

the hazel. He saviour was in no hurry to pull her out of the bush, and she finally tried herself. Her legs were trembling. The dryness was still in her mouth.

‘It’s a bad idea, to walk through the woods alone,’ her saviour said, stepping closer.

He threw back his hood, his white hair shone in the twilight of the forest. Nimue almost cried, involuntary, quickly closing her mouth. *It can’t be*, she thought, *this is absolutely impossible. Perhaps I am dreaming.*

‘But now,’ continued the white-haired man, holding in his hand a blackened metal plate covered with writing. ‘Now it should be safe to walk safely. So what have we here? IDR UL Ex IX 0008 BETA. Ha! You were not enough for good measure, eight. But now the account is closed. How are you, girl? Oh, I’m sorry. Your mouth is a desert, right? I know, I know. One minute, I have water.’

With a trembling hand she took the jar he offered her.

‘Where are you headed?’

‘Up... Up...Up to...’

‘Up to?’

‘Up to Dorian. What was that? That... there?’

‘The ideal product. A masterpiece of the number eight. But, it doesn’t matter what it was. What is important is that it has ceased to exist. And who are you? Where are you going?’

She nodded and swallowed. And decided. She marvelled at her courage.

‘I’m... I’m Nimue verch Wledyr ap Gwyn, going to Dorian, Anchor and from there on to Gors Velen. To Aretuza, the school on the island of Thanedd.’

‘Wow. And where are you from?’

‘From the village of Vyrva. Through Guado, Sibello, Brugge, Casterfurt...’

‘I know this route,’ he interrupted her. ‘You’ve almost travelled half the world, Nimue, daughter of Vledira. The entrance exams at Aretuza are very hard. But likely, not too hard for you. This is a big goal you set yourself, a girl from the village of Vyrva. Very big. Come with me.’

‘Good...’ Nimue was still uncertain on her feet. ‘Good lord...’

‘Yes?’

‘Thank you for the rescue.’

‘You too deserve some thanks. For a few days, I was on the lookout for someone like you. Those who were here before were noisy, in large groups and were armed so number eight dared not attack, would even stick its nose out of cover. You lured him out here. Even at a distance he could recognise easy prey. One who is alone. Small. Defenseless.’

As it turned out, they were right on the edge of the forests doorstep. Behind her, near the lone group of trees, was a horse waiting for the white-haired man. A bay mare.

‘Dorian,’ said the white-haired man, ‘is about forty miles from here. Three days journey for you. Three and a half, if you rest for the rest of the day. Do you know this?’

Nimue suddenly felt euphoria, balanced by numbness and the other effects of suffering fear. *It’s a dream*, she thought. *It seems to me a dream. Because this cannot be real.*

‘What’s wrong? Are you okay?’

Nimue plucked up the courage.

‘This mare...’ in her excitement she had difficulty pronouncing her words. ‘This mare is name Roach. Because that is what

you name every horse. Because you, are Geralt of Rivia. The Witcher, Geralt of Rivia.'

He looked at her for a long time. Silent. Nimue also remained silent, staring at the ground.

'What is the year now?'

'One thousand three hundred and...' she lifted her surprised eyes. 'One thousand three hundred and seventy-three after resurrection.'

'If that's so,' the white-haired man wiped his face with a gloved hand, 'then Geralt of Rivia has been long dead. He died a hundred and five years ago. But I think he would be happy... He would have been please that, after this hundred and five years, people still remember him. Remembered who he was. Ba, even remembered the name of his horse. Yes, I think he would be happy... If he could have known about it. Let's go. I'll walk you.'

For a long time they walked in silence. Nimue bit her lip. Ashamed, she decided not to say anything.

'Ahead,' the white-haired man broke the silence, 'is the intersection and the path. The road to Dorian. You should easily...'

'The Witcher, Geralt is not dead!' Nimue snapped. 'He's just gone, gone to the land of apple trees. But he'll be back... be back, because of the legend.'

'Legends. Fairy tales. Tales. Tales and legends. I could have guessed that Nimue from the Village of Vyrva was going to school at the island of Thanedd. You would not have made this crazy journey if not for legends and fairy tales, with which you grew up. But this is just a fairy tale, Nimue. Only a fairy tale. You've come too far from home, not to understand that.'

‘The Witcher will come back from the dead!’ she did not give in. ‘He’ll be back to defend the people, when once again evil comes. As long as there is darkness, there will be a need for witchers. And there is still darkness!’

He was silent, looking away. Finally, he turned to face her. And he smiled.

‘Darkness still exist,’ he confirmed. ‘Despite the progress, which, we are lead to believe is to dispel the darkness, to eliminate the threat and get rid of the fear. Until now, the major success of progress has not been reached. So far, progress only repeats that darkness is only dark in the light of superstition and that there is nothing to fear. But that is not true. There is something to fear. Because there will always be darkness. And always in darkness evil will be waiting with fang and claw, murder and blood. And we will always need witchers. And those witcher will always be where they are needed. Whence comes a cry for help. A witcher appears with sword in hand. With a sword, that’s brightness will cut the gloom, a light to dispel the darkness. A nice fairy tale, huh? And it ends well, as each tale must.’

‘But...’ she hesitated. ‘But a hundred years... How is it possible to... How is it possible?’

‘Such questions,’ he interrupted her, still with a warm smile, ‘should not be asked by future adepts of Aretuza. A school where they teach that nothing is impossible. Because what is impossible today, may not be impossible tomorrow. This motto you’ll soon see above the entrance to the school, which will soon become your school. Godspeed, Nimue. Farewell. Here we part.’

‘But...’ she felt a sudden relief, and the words flow out of her like a river. ‘But I want to know... To learn more. About Yennefer. About Ciri. With that information I could finish your story. I’ve read it... I know the legend. I know everything. About

the witchers. About Kaer Morhen. I even know all the names of the witcher signs. Please tell me...'

'Here we part,' he interrupted gently. 'In front of you is your destination. In front of me a total different road. The story continues, the story never ends. And as for the signs... There is one that you don't know. It is called crumple. Look at my hand.'

She looked up.

'Illusion,' she heard from very far away. 'All an illusion.'

'Hey, girl! Don't fall asleep. Wake up!'

She lifted her head. And rubbed her eyes. Then she jumped off the ground.

'I fell asleep? I was sleeping?'

'And how!' Laughed a woman with a cart full of goat's milk. 'Like a rock! Like on dead! Twice I cried out to you, and there was nothing at all. I was about to get off the cart... You're alone? Why are you looking around? Are you looking for someone?'

'...A man with white hair... He was here... or... I don't know...'

'I didn't see anyone here,' the woman said.

From behind her, under a tarpaulin, two children poked out their heads.

'If you going that way,' the woman pointed down the road with her stick, 'to Dorian. I can drive you. If you're going that direction.'

'Thank you,' Nimue climbed onto the box. 'Thank you so much.'

'Then,' the woman flicked the reins, 'let's go! It's better to go than sit around all day, right? I see, that you were so tired, that sleep overcame you and you moved just off the road for a nap. Tried to wake you, I tell you...'

'Like a rock,' Nimue sighed. 'I know. I was very tired and fell asleep. And before that, I had a...'

'Well? What happened?'

She looked around. Behind her was the black forest. Ahead of her the road wound between rows of willows. The road to her destination.

The story continues, she thought. The story never ends.

'I had a wonderful dream.'