

LADY OF THE LAKE

A NOVEL OF THE WITCHER

ANDRZEJ SAPKOWSKI

The Lady of the Lake

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They kept riding until they came to a large, beautiful lake full of crystal clear water, and in the middle of the lake, Arthur saw an arm clothed in white cloth holding a beautiful sword.

"Behold, there is the sword of which I spoke," pointed Merlin.

Suddenly they saw a girl walking on the surface of the lake.

"Who is that girl?" Asked Arthur.

"That is the Lady of the Lake," said Merlin.

Sir Thomas Malory
Le Morte D'Arthur

CHAPTER ONE

The lake was enchanted. About that there could be no doubt.

Firstly: it lay beside the mouth of the enchanted valley Cwm Pwcca, the mysterious valley perpetually shrouded by fog and famed for its magical properties and phenomena.

Secondly: one look was enough.

The surface of the water was a deep blue like polished sapphire and smooth as a mirror. So much so that the peaks of the mountain Y Wyddfa that were reflected in it were more beautiful than those that loomed over the lake. From the water blew a refreshing coolness, and the dignified silence was disturbed by nothing, not even the splashing of fish or the cries of a bird.

The knight shook off the impression. But rather than continue riding along the crest of the hill, he led his horse down to the lake. As if drawn by the magnetic force of a spell that slumbered there, deep down in the dark waters. The horse stepped timidly among the broken rocks, giving a snort indicating that he too sensed the magical aura of the place.

Upon reaching the bank the knight dismounted. He took the stallion’s bridle and led him to where small waves disappeared among the coloured pebbles.

His armour rattled when he knelt. Startling fry and fish as vivid as tiny needles, he scooped water into his hands. He drank slowly and cautiously, the ice cold water numbed his tongue and lips, and hurt his teeth.

When he bent down to collect water a second time a sound travelled over the surface of the lake. He raised his head. The horse whinnied, confirming that he also heard it.

He listened. No, it was not an illusion. What he heard was singing. A woman singing. Or rather a girl.

Like all knights he had been raised with bards’ tales of chivalry. In these tales a girl singing or calling was in nine cases out of ten, a lure. The knight who followed inevitably fell into an ambush. Often fatal.

But curiosity won out. The knight was only nineteen years old. He was very courageous and very foolish. He was famous for one and known for the other.

He checked that his sword was in its sheath, then led his horse and set off up the beach in the direction of the singing. He did not have to go far.

The shore was strewn with huge boulders, dark and polished to a bright shine, giant toys carelessly tossed here and forgotten about after the completion of a game. Some of the boulders were lying in the water of the lake, under the dark surface. Some rose above it and were licked by small waves, giving the impression of being ribs of a sleeping Leviathan.

But most of them were lying on the shore, from the beach to the forest. Some were buried in the sand and were only partially sticking out, leaving the imagination to guess how big they really were.

The singing which the knight heard, came from just behind those boulders. The singing girl remained invisible. He led his horse, holding him buy the muzzle and nostrils so as to stop him from neighing or snorting.

The girl's clothes lay on one of the boulders lying in the shallows, flat like a table. The girl herself stood naked, waist-deep in the water and was washing, singing and splashing in the process. The knight listened to her singing but did not understand the words.

And no wonder.

The girl, he would bet his head, was not human. This was demonstrated by the slender body, the strange hair colour and the voice. He was sure that if she turned around he would see big almond shaped eyes. And if she swept her ashen hair back he would see ears ending in points.

This was a resident of Faerie. A fairy. One of the Tylwyth Teg. One of those, which the Picts and the Irish called Sidhe Daoine, the People of the Hills. One of those that the Saxons called Elves.

She stopped singing for a moment and immersed herself up to her neck, she panted and snarled and cursed. The knight, however was not fooled. Fairies, as everyone knew, knew how to swear like a human being. Some said as obscenely as a stable boy. And the curse was often a prelude to some malicious trick, which fairies were famous for – for example, increasing the someone's nose to the size of a cucumber or reducing the size of someone masculinity to the that of a bean.

The knight had interest in neither the first nor the second option, so he tried to slip away quietly. He was betrayed by a horse. Not his own mount who he still held by it's nostrils keeping him quiet and calm, but the horse belonging to the fairy, which the knight had not initially noticed between the boulders. Now the pitch-black mare stamped at the gravel and neighed in greeting. The knight's stallion shook his head and replied politely. The echo reaching across the water.

The fairy came splashing out of the water, presenting the knight for a moment all her glory, pleasant to the eye. She threw herself toward the rock on which lay her clothes. But instead of grasping clothes to decently cover herself with, the fairy grabbed a sword and pulled it from its scabbard with a hiss, clutching the steel with amazing skill. It lasted a brief moment, after which the fairy quickly knelt down, hiding in the water up to her nose and holding her arm with the sword in it above the surface of the water.

The knight blinked in amazement, dropped the reins and bent his knee, kneeling in the wet sand. He understood immediately who it was before him.

“Hail, O Lady of the Lake,” he breathed while stretching out his hands, “it is an honour, a tremendous honour… I accept your sword.”

“I’d prefer if you rose and turned around,” the Fairy poked her mouth above the water. “Maybe stop staring? And let me get dressed?”

He obeyed.

He heard her leaving the water and the rustling of clothes and the sound of her swearing softly as she pulled them onto her wet body. He busied himself staring at the black mare, its coat soft and shiny like the skin of a mole. It was definitely of noble blood and fast like the wind. It was undoubtedly a magic horse and like its owner, also an inhabitant of Faerie.

“You can turn around.”

“Lady of the Lake…”

“And introduce yourself.”

“I am Galahad, of Caer Benic. A knight of King Arthur, Lord of Camelot, ruler of the Kingdom of Summer, as well as Dumnonia, Dyfeint, Powys, Dyfed…”

“And Temeria?” She interrupted. “Redania. Rivia, Aedirn? Nilfgaard? Would you say any of these names?”

“No. I have never heard of them.”

She shrugged her shoulders. In her hand, besides the sword she was holding boots and a shirt, washed and wrung out.

“I thought so. What day is it?”

“It is,” he replied with surprise, “the second full moon after Beltane… Lady…”

“Ciri,” she said unthinkingly, twisting her shoulders to better position the clothes drying on her skin. She spoke with a strange accent. Her eyes were green and huge…

She instinctively brushed back her wet hair and the knight sighed involuntary.

Not only because her ear was normal, human, and in no way elven… Her cheek was marred by a huge, ugly scar. She had been injured. But how can you injure a fairy?

She noticed his astonished gaze, narrowed her eyes and wrinkled her nose.

“A scar, yes!” She said with her striking accent. “Why do you look so frightened? Is it such an uncommon thing for a knight, a scar? Or is it *so* ugly?”

He slowly, with both hands pulled down the hood of his chain mail and passed his hands through his hair.

“Certainly not an uncommon thing for a knight,” he said with youthful pride, demonstrating a barely healed scar running from his temple to his jaw. “And nasty are the scars of honour. I am Galahad, son of Lancelot du Lac and Elaine, daughter of King Pelles, Lord of Caer Benic. This wound was caused to me by Breunis the Cruel, an undignified oppressor of women, even though I beat him in a fair duel. Truly, I am honoured to take this sword from your hand, Lady of the Lake…”

“What?”

“The sword. I am willing to accept it.”

“This is my sword. I don’t let anyone touch it.”

“But…”

“But what?”

“The Lady of the Lake has always… Always emerges from the water and gives her sword.”

She was silent for some time.

“I understand,” she said finally. “Well, another country, another custom. I’m sorry, Galahad or whatever your name is, but apparently you have not found the lady of which you have heard. I am not giving away anything. Or letting anything be taken. Let’s be clear.”

“But yet,” he dared to say, “you’ve come from the Faerie, Lady, is it so?”

“I come,” she said after a moment, her green eyes seemed to stare into the abyss of space and time. “I come from Rivia, and from the city of the same name. Next to the lake Loc Eskalott. I came here on a boat. It was foggy. I could not see the edges. I heard neighing… Kelpie… My mare had followed me.”

She spread her wet shirt out on a stone. The knight gave a start again. The shirt was washed, but not very thoroughly. He could still see traces of blood.

“The river current brought me here,” continued the girl, without seeing that he had noticed or pretending not to see. “The river current and the magic of the unicorn… What do you call this lake?”

“I do not know,” he admitted. “In Gwynedd there are many lakes…”

“In Gwynedd?”

“Of course. Those are the mountains, Y Wyddfa. If you keep them to your left and if you go through the forest for two days you’ll arrive at Dinas Dinlleu and beyond that Caer Dathal. And the river… The nearest river…”

“It’s not important what the nearest river is. Do you have anything to eat, Galahad? I’m starving. Why are you looking at me like that? Are you afraid that I’ll disappear? That I’ll fly off with your sausage and biscuits? Don’t be afraid. In my world I have created enough mess and I won’t be going back for some time. So I will stay in yours for a time. In a world in which I search in vain for the Dragon or the Seven Goats in the night sky. Where we are now in the second full moon after Belleteyn and Belleteyn is pronounced Beltane. Why do you stare at me, I ask you?”

“I did not know that fairies eat.”

“Fairies, sorceresses and elves. They all eat. They drink. And so on.”

“What do you mean?”

“It does not matter.”

The longer he studied her, the more she lost her magical aura and became more human and ordinary – almost mundane. He knew, however, that such was not the case, it could not be. A plain, ordinary girl would never have been met alone at the foot of Y Wyddfa, on the edge of Cwm Pwcca, bathing naked in a mountain lake and washing a blood-stained shirt. No matter how the girl looked, in no case could she be an earthly creature. Despite knowing this, Galahad could look calmly and without superstitious fear at her mouse coloured hair, which to his amazement now that it was dry, was traversed by shiny streaks of silver. He could now look at her slender hands, her little nose, her pale lips her male clothing with a strange cut, made with an extremely delicate fabric. And her sword, with its strange design and ornaments, but which did not seem like an ornament for parades. And her bare feet, covered with the dry sand of the beach.

“To be clear,” she spoke, wiping one foot with the other, “I’m not a fairy or an elf. A sorceress, that is, a fairy, I’m… a little unusual. Ehh, I’m not.”

“I’m sorry, really.”

“Why are you sorry?”

“They say…” he blushed and stammered. “They say that fairies, if they happen to encounter a young man, they lead them to Elfland and there… Under the bushes in a forest, on a bed of moss, show them…”

“I understand,” she looked at him quickly and firmly bit the sausage. “In

regards to the Land of the Elves," she said swallowing, "I fled there some time ago and I'm in no hurry to return. With regards to the bed of moss… Indeed, Galahad, you have not found the lady that was needed. Nevertheless, thank you for your interest."

"Lady! I did not mean to offend you…"

"Do not apologise."

"It's because you are so beautiful."

"I thank you again. But this changes nothing."

They were silent for a while. It was hot. The sun at its zenith warmed the stones nicely. A slight breeze wrinkled the surface of the lake.

"What does it mean…" Galahad suddenly said in a strangely exalted voice. "What does it mean, a spear with bloody tip? What does it mean and why does the King suffer so, from a pierced thigh? What does a lady in white carrying a grail, a silver cup…"

"Are you feeling alright?" She interrupted.

"I'm just asking."

"I do not understand your question. Is it a password? A signal with which to recognise initiates? Explain it to me."

"I cannot explain better."

"Then why do you ask?"

"Because…" he said, fidgeting. "Just… One of us did not ask when he had the opportunity. Either he could not find the words or he was ashamed… He did not ask and that is why many misfortunes have occurred. So now I always ask. Just in case."

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"Are there any wizards in this world? You know, those dealing in magic. Mages. Seers."

"There is Merlin. Or Morgana. But Morgana is evil."

"And Merlin?"

"About half."

"Do you know where to find him?"

"Of course. In Camelot. In the court of King Arthur. I'm headed there."

"Is it far?"

"From here to Powys, to the river Hafen, then up the Hafen to Glevum. From there it is near to the plains near the Kingdom of Summer. All in all about ten days riding."

"Too far."

“You can,” he stammered, “shorten the journey by going through Cwm Pwcca. But it is an enchanted valley. It is horrible. There live the Y Dynan Bach Teg, evil dwarves…”

“Do you only wear your sword for show?”

“And can a sword do anything against magic?”

“Can do, can do, do not doubt. I’m a witcher. Have you heard of them? Eh, of course you haven’t heard. And I’m not afraid of dwarves. I have many friends among the dwarves.”

Sure, he thought.

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“Lady of the Lake?”

“My name is Ciri. Do not call me Lady of the Lake. It brings back unpleasant memories, painful, harmful. So they called me in the Land of… What did you call that land?”

“Faerie. Or as the Druids say: Annwn. Or Elfland by the Saxons.”

“Elfland…” she covered her shoulders with a chequered blanket. “I was there, you know? I entered the Tower of Swallows and bam! I was among the elves. And that’s what *they* called me. Lady of the Lake. I even liked it at first. It flattered me. Until I realised that in that land, in that tower over the lake, I was no lady, but a prisoner.”

“Is that,” he could not hide his curiosity, “where you stained your shirt with blood?”

She paused for a long time.

“No,” she said at last, and her voice it seemed was trembling slightly. “Not there. You have keen eyes. In short, you cannot escape the truth by hiding your head in the sand… Yes, Galahad. I’m often covered in blood in recent times. With the blood of the enemies I’ve killed. And with the blood of friends who I tried to save… and who died in my arms… Why do you look at me like that?”

“I do not know if you are a goddess or a mortal woman. Or a supernatural being born on earth…”

“Get to the point if you please.”

“I wish,” Galahad’s eyes flared, “to hear thy story. Would you tell me, O Lady?”

“It is long.”

“We have time.”

“And it does not end happily.”

“I do not believe that.”

“Why?”

“You were singing as you bathed in the lake.”

“You are observant,” she turned her head, pursed her lips and a frown marred her face suddenly. “Yes, observant… But very innocent.”

“Tell me thy story. Please.”

“Well, if you want,” she sighed. “I will tell.”

She sat down comfortably. The horses walked along the edge of the forest, grazing on grasses and herbs.

“From the beginning,” Galahad prompted. “From the very beginning…”

“More and more, it seems to me” she said after a moment, tightly wrapping the plaid blanket around her, “my story actually has no beginning. I’m not even sure whether it has actually ended. Know that the past and the present intermingle terribly. There was an elf who told me that it is like a snake that bites it own tail. This snake, so you know, is called Uroboros. And if he bites his own tail it means the circle is closed. In any moment of time is hidden the past, present and future. In any moment of time lies eternity. Do you understand?”

“No.”

“It doesn’t matter.”

Truly, I say, who believes in dreams is like one who wants to catch the wind or is grasping at shadows. Fooled by deceptive images in a curved mirror that lies or twists the truth like a false woman. It is a fool indeed who gives faith to the dream and walks the path of deception.

But even he who has few dreams should not put faith in them and wisely does not. Why, if dreams would not have any meaning, would the gods gift us the ability to dream?

The Wisdom of the Prophet Lebioda 34; 1

Is all that we see or seem
But a dream within a dream?

Edgar Allan Poe

CHAPTER TWO

A breeze wrinkled the steaming cauldron that was the surface of the lake, scattering thin ribbons of morning mist. The oarlocks squeaked and rumbled rhythmically, and a bright spray of droplets showered from the oars.

Condwiramurs put her hand on the railing. The boat was sailing at a slow speed and the water rose and fell just over her fingers.

“Ah ah,” she said, putting as much sarcasm in her voice as she could. “What a speed! We seem to be flying over the waves. My head is spinning!”

The rower, a short, stocky, thickset man, growled something angry and indistinct, not even raising his head of overgrown curly hair, worthy of a sheep. The adept was already fed up of the muttering, grunting and growling, with which the man answered her questions.

“Careful,” she said with difficulty, maintaining the peace. “From rowing so rapidly you could overturn the boat.”

This time the man lifted his face, with skin that was as dark as if it had been tanned. He muttered, coughed and pointed with his gray stubble chin to a line from a wooden reel mounted on the rail, that disappeared into the water, straining with the motion of the boat. Apparently convinced that the explanation was enough, he continued rowing. With the same pace as before. Oars up. Pause. Lower the oars half into the water. Long pause. Pull. An even longer pause.

“Ah,” Condwiramurs said looking at the sky. “I understand. It is important that the lure that you drag behind the boat must move at the proper speed and the proper depth. Fishing is important. Nothing else matters.”

It was so obvious that the man did not even both to grunt.

“Well, who cares,” Condwiramurs continued her monologue, “that I have been travelling through the night? That I’m hungry? That my ass hurts and itches from the hard, wet bench? That I have to pee? No, it is only important to catch fish. And it is pointless anyway. The lure that we are dragging behind us in the middle of the stream is not going to catch anything.”

The man raised his head and gave her an ugly look. Condwiramurs flashed her teeth in a sly smile. The man continued to row slowly. He was angry. She

collapsed on the bench at the stern and crossed her legs. So that the slits in her skirts were as visible as possible.

The man grunted and pulled on the oars with his calloused hands, pretending not to watch anything but the tow rope. Of course, the speed of the rowing did not accelerate. The adept sighed in resignation and turned to watch the sky.

The oarlocks creaked, shiny droplets splashed from the paddles.

From out of the quickly lifting fog appeared the outline of an island. And rising above it the dark obelisk of a domed tower. The man, sitting with his back to it was aware that they had almost arrived. Taking his time, he placed the oars inside the boat, stood up and began to slowly wind the rope on the reel. Condwiramurs still with her legs crossed, whistled and watched the sky.

The man slowly rolled up the end of the fishing line and began to view the lure – a shiny brass spoon equipped with a triple hook and a tail of dyed wool.

“Oh, nothing caught,” Condwiramurs said sweetly, “What a shame. I wonder why you were so unlucky? Maybe the boat was moving too fast?”

The man gave her a look that said a lot of ugly things. He sat down, coughed, spat overboard, grabbed the oars in his gnarled hands and bent his strong back. The oars splashed, stirring in the oarlocks and the boat was launched across the lake like an arrow, the water roared and foamed at the bow and circled in whirls at the stern. The distance separating them from the shore was about the quarter of the length of a crossbow shot and they covered the distance in two grunts. The boat slammed into the sand with such force that Condwiramurs fell off the bench.

The man muttered, coughed and spat. The adept knew that translated into the language of civilized people as “Get out of my boat, annoying witch!” She also knew that she couldn’t count on his arms to get her out. She took off her shoes, lifted her skirt to a provocative height and lowered herself from the boat. She swallowed a curse as the shells on the shore dug painfully into her feet.

“Thank you,” she said through clenched teeth, “for the ride.”

Without waiting for the next grunt and not looking back, she walked barefoot toward the stone stairs. All the hardships and pains had fled without a trace, erased by her growing excitement. She was here on the island of Inis Vitre, on the lake Loc Blest. It was an almost legendary place where only a chosen few visited.

The morning fog had lifted almost entirely, the red ball of the sun began to shine strongly in the heavens. Above the water, crying sea-gulls circled and flew around the battlements of the tower.

At the top of the staircase leading from the shore to a terrace, leaning against a statue of crouching, grinning chimera, was Nimue.

The Lady of the Lake.

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She was delicate and small, she was no larger than five feet. Condwiramurs heard mention that as a young girl they called her ‘Thumbelina’, now she saw that the nickname was appropriate. But she was sure, that for a least half a century, no one had dared say that to the little sorceress.

“I’m Condwiramurs Tilly,” she introduced herself with a nod, a little embarrassed, still with her shoes in her hand. “I am happy that you have invited me to your island, Lady of the Lake.”

“Nimue,” the little sorceress corrected. “Nimue and nothing else. We can forgo the titles and epithets, Lady Tilly.”

“In that case, I’m Condwiramurs. Condwiramurs and nothing else.”

“Then, with your permission, Condwiramurs. We’ll talk over breakfast. I guess you are hungry.”

“I will not deny it.”

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The breakfast was rye bread, cottage cheese with chive butter, eggs and milk. Serving it were two very young and quiet maids who smelled of starch. While dining Condwiramurs felt the stare of the small sorceress.

“This tower,” Nimue said, watching every movement of her visitor, her every bite, “has six floors, including one underground. Your room is on the second floor, you’ll find all the necessary comforts. The ground floor, you see, is for the management of the house, here is where the rooms for the servants are. In the basement is the laboratory and in the first and third floors are the library and the gallery. To all these floors you have free access and use of all the equipment that is in them, whenever you want.”

“I understand. Thank you.”

“In the upper two floors are my private rooms and office. In those rooms I have absolute privacy. For the future to avoid misunderstandings, note that in this respect I am very sensitive.”

“I respect that.”

Nimue turned her head toward the window, through which one could see the gruff fisherman who had managed to unload all of Condwiramurs’ luggage and now carried in his boat a reel, nets and other paraphernalia of the art of fishing.

“I’m a little old fashioned,” she continued. “But some things… I’m used to

using some things with exclusive rights. Toothbrushes, for example. My private rooms, my library, my bathroom. And the Fisher King. Please do not try and use the Fisher King."

Condwiramurs nearly choked on her milk. Nimue's face expressed nothing whatsoever.

"And if…" She continued before the woman regained speech. "And if he was interested to use you, reject him."

Condwiramurs, swallowed and finally nodded her head, refraining from making any comments. Although she was about to say a stinging rejoinder, that rural fisherman were not her type. Especially when they have a gray head and manifest themselves as morose louts.

"So," Nimue said emphatically. "We have made our introductions. It is time to move on to more specific things. Do you want to know why out of so many candidates I choose precisely you?"

Condwiramurs, if she hesitated a bit before answering, would only show that she was pretending not to show too much pride. She concluded that to show Nimue false modesty, even if it was only a very small degree, would sound too fake.

"I'm the best at the academy," she replied coolly, objectively and without boasting. "In my third year I had the second best rating in oneiromancy."

"I could have had brought to me the first." Nimue said, painfully sincere. "Incidentally, you were proposed to me with honours. Even quite strongly, because apparently you are the daughter of someone important. As for dreaming, dear Condwiramurs, you know, that oneiromancy it is a somewhat fickle gift. Failure can happen to even the best dreamer."

Condwiramurs again refrained from a brisk reply that its failures can be counted on the fingers of one hand. After all, she was speaking with a master. *It is necessary to know peace in matters large and small,* as one of her professors are the academy was fond of saying.

Nimue's reward for her silence was a nod of approval.

"I have detailed reports on you," she said. "I know that you do not need the help of dreaming drugs. I am glad, because I do not tolerate drugs."

"I dream without drugs," Condwiramurs confirmed with pride. "With oneiromancy it is enough for me if I have an anchor."

"What?"

"Well, an anchor," the adept cleared her throat. "Something that the subject who I'm dreaming about is somehow associated with. Any personal belongings.

Or a picture…”

“A picture?”

“Yes. I’m never wrong with a picture.”

“Oh.” Nimue smiled. “Oh if a picture helps, then we will not have a problem. If you have finished breakfast, let’s go, the best and second best among the oneiromancers. It would be good for me to explain the other reasons why it is I chose you as an assistant.”

The stone walls emitted cold, which even the dark wood panelling and carpeting wasn’t able to stop. She felt the cold even through the soles of her shoes.

“Beyond these doors,” Nimue pointed out, “is the laboratory. As I mentioned, you can use it as you wish. Of course, I recommend caution. Moderation is advised, especially if you try and force a broom to carry water.”

Condwiramurs laughed out of politeness, even though it was an old joke. All the professors in her lectures entertained jokes that related to the mythical trouble of the legendary magician’s apprentice.

The staircase wound up like a sea serpent, and it seemed to have no end It’s stages were high and steep. Before they arrived, the young adept was panting and sweating, but Nimue seemed to appear unaffected in any way by the effort.

“This way please,” she opened an oak door. “Beware the threshold.”

Condwiramurs entered and sighed.

The room was a gallery. Its walls were covered with paintings from floor to ceiling. There hung huge oil paintings, old chipped and cracked miniatures, engravings, and yellowed woodcuts, faded watercolours and sepia. There also hung here recent works – vivid colours, modernist tempera and gouache, aquatints and etchings of clean strokes, contrasting prints and mezzotints, which attracted the eye with its sharp black spots.

Nimue stopped before a picture that was hanging closer to the door, depicting a group of people gathered under a huge tree. She looked at the canvas, then Condwiramurs… and her silent gaze was extraordinarily eloquent.

“Dandelion,” the adept said, realising the point was not to wait, “singing ballads at the foot of the oak Bleobheris.”

Nimue smiled and nodded. She took a step and stood before another picture. A Watercolour.

Symbolism. Two female figures on a hill. Gulls circling above them, beneath them, on the slopes of the hill, a procession of shadows.

“Ciri and Triss Merigold. The prophetic vision at Kaer Morhen.”

Smile, nod, step, another picture. A rider on a galloping horse, a misshapen double row of alders, stretching out their arms, their branches towards him. Condwiramurs felt a chill go through her.

“Ciri… Hmmm… Apparently her night ride to her meeting with Geralt at the Halfling Hofmeier’s farm.”

The next picture, a dark oil painting. A battle scene.

“Geralt and Cahir defending the bridge on the Yaruga.”

Then faster and faster.

“Yennefer and Ciri, their first meeting in the temple of Melitele… Dandelion and the dryad Eithne, in the woods of Brokilon… The company of Geralt during a blizzard on the mountain pass of Malheur…”

“Well done,” Nimue praised. “A excellent knowledge of legend. Now you know the second reason why you are here and not someone else.”

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The wall above the ebony table at which they sat, was dominated by a large canvas depicting a battle scene, it seemed to be the Battle of Brenna, a key moment in the battle or a tacky scene of a death of a hero. The canvas was beyond a doubt the work of Nicholas Certosy, you could tell by the expression, the perfect attention to details and the artist’s lighting effects.

“Yes, I know the legend of the Sorceress and the Witcher,” said Condwiramurs. “I dare say, down to the smallest detail. As a child I loved this story, I literally listened to the story and read it many times. I dreamed to be Yennefer. But I’ll be honest – even if it was love at first sight, even if they were explosively passionate… It was not eternal.”

Nimue raised her eyebrows.

“I learned that the history,” said Condwiramurs, “was a popular abbreviation for young people. Later I naturally read a few of the so-call full and serious versions. Dilated to the border of redundancy and sometimes beyond. Then my passion was replaced by cool reflection and the passionate flare turned into something like a marriage of convenience. You know what I mean?”

Nimue’s nod was barely perceptible confirming that she knew.

“In short, I prefer those legends that cling more to the legendary conventions, and do not mix fiction with reality and do not try and combine the simple and straightforward moral of a fairy tale with amoral historical truth. I prefer the legends without the prefaces of the encyclopaedists, archaeologists and historians. Those whose conventionalism are free of experiments. I prefer that if the prince comes to the top of Crystal Mountain and kisses Sleeping Beauty, she

wakes up and the two live happily ever after. Yes, no other, should end a legend… Who painted this portrait of Ciri? The one on the stand?"

"There is not one portrait of Ciri," the voice of the little sorceress was dry. "Neither here nor anywhere in the world. There remains not a single portrait or miniature painted by someone who has seen Ciri or even remembers her. The portrait on the stand shows Pavetta, Ciri's mother. It was painted by the dwarf, Ruiz Dorrit, the court painter for the rulers of Cintra. It was documented that Dorrit portrayed Ciri when she was ten years old, but the picture had not been preserved. Let us go back to the legend and your relationship with it. In your opinion how should legends end?"

"They should have a good ending," she insisted. "Good must prevail. Evil must be punished by way of example; the lovers are joined together until the end of life. And none of the good heroes may die, dammit! And the legend of Ciri? How does it end?

"Exactly… How?"

Condwiramurs was speechless for a moment. She had not expected such a question; she smelled a test, an exam, a trap. She stopped to avoid being caught.

How ends the legend of Ciri and Geralt? After all, everyone knows that.

She stared into the dark tones of the watercolour depicting the clumsy barge moving along the surface over a misty lake, a figure standing on the barge was only visible as a black silhouette.

This is how the legend ends. That's right.

Nimue read her mind.

"It is not that certain, Condwiramurs. It is not that certain."

***

"The legend," said Nimue, "I first heard from the lips of a wandering storyteller. I was a village child, the fourth daughter of a poor cottager. The most beautiful memories from my childhood are days when the wandering storyteller Pogwizd came to our village. I could forget for a few moments my work, and in my mind's eye I could see these fabulous wonders, see this wide open world… A beautiful and miraculous world… Further and more wondrous than the town nine miles away… I was about six or seven years old. My sister was fourteen and she was beginning to slouch from the eternal toil. A woman's destiny. We were preparing for it since childhood. Slouching! We were constantly stooped, bending our backs to work, or to care for the child because the weight of your gut has yet to recover from childbirth… It was these stories of the old man that made me begin to desire more than just toil and bending, dream of more than

giving birth, a husband and children. The first book I bought, with the money I got for the sale of blueberries I picked in the forest, was the legend of Ciri.

“This version as you aptly put it was softened and modified for young people. This was the version for me. I read poorly. But even then I knew what I wanted. I wanted to be like Philippa Eilhart or Sile de Tancarville, and Assire var Anahid…”

Both looked at the gouache, representing a table in the hall of a castle with women sitting around it. Legendary women.

“At the Academy,” continued Nimue, “into which I entered on the second attempt, I was concerned with only the legend of the Grand Lodge and its aspect in the history of magic lectures. I had no time for reading for pleasure at first; I had to occupy my time… to keep pace with the daughters of earls and bankers for which everything was easy, they laughed at a village girl…”

She paused, then snapped her fingers.

“Finally,” she went on. “I found time for reading, but then I realised that the adventures of Geralt and Ciri held far less interest to me that they did in my childhood. It appears to be a similar syndrome with me as with you. What did you call it? A marriage of convenience?

“That was until…”

She paused and wiped her hands over her face. Condwiramurs noticed with astonishment that the little sorceress’s hand trembled.

“I was about eighteen when… when it happened. Something that revived the legend of Ciri in me. I started to deal with it seriously and scientifically. I devoted my life to it.”

The adept was silent and listened intently.

“Do not pretend like you did not know,” Nimue said sharply. “Everyone knows that the Lady of the Lake is possessed by an almost unhealthy obsession with the legend of Ciri. Everyone gossips about how it started out as a harmless hobby that gradually turned into something like a drug addiction, or even mania. There is a lot of truth in these rumours, my dear Condwiramurs, a lot of truth! And you, if you choose to assist will also fall in to mania and addiction. Because I demand it. At least for the duration of your practice. Do you understand?”

The adept nodded.

“You seem to understand,” Nimue controlled her emotions. “But I’ll explain. Gradually. And when the time comes, you’ll know everything. But for now…”

She paused and looked out of the window at the lake, at the black silhouette of the boat of the Fisher King, a contrast to the shimmering, golden surface of

the lake.

“For now, rest. Look around the gallery. Look in cabinets and shelves and you’ll find albums and cardboard prints, all related to the legend. In the library are all versions and transformations of the legend and almost all the scientific literature. Give them some time. Look, read, concentrate. I want you to get inspiration to dream. An anchor, as you say.”

“I’ll do it. Lady Nimue?”

“I’m listening.”

“The two portraits. These hanging side by side… Are these not Ciri?”

“There are no portraits of Ciri,” Nimue patiently repeated. “Later artists portrayed her only in scenes, each according to his own imagination. As for the portraits, the one on the left is a variation on the chosen topic, it is the elf Lara Dorren aep Shiadhal, a person who the painter could not have known. The painters name is Lydia van Bredevoort. One of her surviving oils still hangs in the academy.”

“I know. And the other portrait?”

Nimue looked for a long time at the portrait of a young girl with blonde hair and sad eyes.

She was dressed in a white dress with green sleeves.

“Robin Anderida painted it,” she said, she turned to look Condwiramurs straight in the eye. “And whom it portrays… That is for you the dreamer and oneiromancy to find out. Dream this. And tell me your dream.”

***

Master Robin Anderida saw the Emperor approaching first, and bent low in a bow. Stella Congreve, Countess of Liddertal, stood up, curtsied and with a quick gesture motioned for the girl sitting in the carved chair to do the same.

“My greeting, ladies,” Emhyr var Emreis nodded his head. “And my greetings to you, Master Robin. How is your work?”

Master Robin grunted embarrassedly and bowed again, nervously wiping his fingers on his apron. Emhyr knew that the artist suffered from severe agoraphobia and was pathologically shy. But who cared about that. What mattered was how he painted.

As usual, when he was travelling on the road, the emperor was wearing an officer’s uniform of the ‘Impera’ Guard Brigade – black armour and cloak embroidered with a silver salamander. He stepped closer and examined the portrait. First the portrait, then the model, a slender girl with blonde hair and sad eyes. In a white dress with green sleeves and wearing a necklace with a single

jewel.

“Excellent,” he said deliberately into space and in such a way that it was not possible to estimate what was praised. “Excellent, Master. Please continue, do not pay any attention to me. If you will allow me a moment, Countess.”

He walked a few steps towards the window forcing her to follow him.

“I’m leaving,” he said quietly. “Affairs of state. Thank you for your hospitality. And the princess. Well done, Stella. You really should be commended. Her too.”

Stella Congreve curtsied deeply and with grace.

“The Imperial Majesty is exceedingly kind to us.”

“Do not praise the day before sunset.”

“Oh…” She pursed her lips slightly. “Is that so?”

“It is.”

“What is it, Emhyr?”

“I do not know,” he said. “In ten days we resume the offensive in the North. It promises to be a difficult, very difficult war. Vattier de Rideaux reveals new conspiracies and plots directed against me. The reasons of state may force many different things.”

“This girl is not guilty of anything.”

“I said: reasons of state. Reasons of state have nothing to do with justice. At the end of the day…”

He waved a hand.

“I want to talk to her. Alone. Come on, Princess. Faster. Closer. The Emperor commands.”

The girl curtsied deeply. Emhyr measured her with his eyes, looking back to that fateful audience in Loc Grim. He was full of praise, nay, even admiration for Stella Congreve, who, within the six months that had elapsed since then, had managed to transform a clumsy ugly duckling into a young aristocrat.

“Leave us,” he said. “Take a break, Master Robin, say, to clean your brushes. You, Countess, please wait in the anteroom. And you, Princess, follow me to the terrace.”

The wet snow that had fallen during the night had melted in the early morning sun, but the roof tops and towers of the castle Darn Rowan were still wet and blazing in the sun like fire.

Emhyr approached the balustrade. The girl, according to court etiquette kept one step behind him. With an impatient gesture, he beckoned her to come closer.

The Emperor was silent for a long time; he leaned with both hands on the

railing, staring out at the hills and the evergreen yews that grew on them. Clearly distinguishable from the white rocky limestone recesses. Below them the river gleamed like a silver ribbon winding through the gorge.

The wind brought the scent of spring.

“I seldom come here,” Emhyr said. The girl remained silent.

“I seldom come here,” he repeated, turning away. “It is a beautiful and peaceful place. Beautiful surroundings… Do you agree?”

“Yes… Imperial Majesty.”

“You can smell spring in the air. Have you noticed?”

“Yes, Imperial Majesty.”

From the lower courtyard they heard a noisy clatter disturbed by singing and the ringing of horseshoes. The escort, which had already received the order to depart, were in a hurry to get ready to leave. Emhyr remembered that among the guards was one who sang. Often regardless of the circumstances.

Look down on me regretfully
Eyes of azure
And give me graciously
Your charms
Remember me regretfully
In the dark night-time
Do not deny me graciously
The desire that dwells within you

“A beautiful ballad,” he said thoughtfully, passing his fingers over his heavy gold, imperial chain.

“Beautiful. Imperial Majesty.”

Vattier assures me that he is already on Vilgefortz’s trail. That locating him will be a matter of days, weeks at most. The heads of traitors will fall and the true Ciri, Princess of Cintra will be delivered to Nilfgaard. And before the genuine Cirilla, Princess of Cintra comes to Nilfgaard, I will have to do something with the double.

“Lift up your head.”

She obeyed.

“Do you have any wishes?” He asked sternly. “Requests? Complaints?”

“No, Imperial Majesty, I do not.”

“Really? That’s interesting. No, but then I cannot command that you had. Raise your head, as befits a princess. Stella taught you courtly manners?”

“Yes, Imperial Majesty.”

In fact, he thought, they trained her really well. Rience first and then Stella. They taught her the role – certainly under threat of torture and death. They warned her that the part that she would have to play would be before a ruthless and unforgiving audience. Before the terrible Emhyr var Emreis, Emperor of Nilfgaard.

"What is your name?" He asked sharply.

"Cirilla Fiona Elen Riannon."

"Your real name."

"Cirilla Fiona…"

"Do not try my patience. Name!"

"Cirilla…" the girl's voice broke like a reed stalk. "Fiona…"

"Enough, by the Great Sun," he said through clenched teeth, "Enough!"

In a breach of etiquette, she sniffed loudly. Her lips trembled but etiquette did not forbid it.

"Calm down," he ordered, albeit in a low voice, almost soft. "What do you fear? Are you ashamed of your own name? Are you afraid to tell me? Does it raise unpleasant memories? I only ask because I would like to address you by your real name. But I must know what it is."

"It's nothing," she said, her big eyes suddenly sparkled like emerald in the glow of candles. "Because it is a bland name, Imperial Majesty. A person who wears it is a nobody. As long as I'm Cirilla Fiona, I mean something… As long as…"

Her voice stuck in her throat so rapidly that she instinctively raised her hands to her neck, as if what she had on was not a necklace, but a choking garrotte. Emhyr continued to measure her with his eyes, still full of praise for Stella Congreve. At the same time he also felt anger. Unfounded anger and therefore even more terrible.

What I do want from this child, he thought, feeling the anger rising in him, as it boiled and seethed like soup in a cauldron. *What I do want with this child whose…*

"Know that I had nothing to do with your kidnapping girl," he said sharply. "I had nothing to do with your kidnapping. I gave no such orders. I was fooled…"

He was angry with himself, aware that he was making a mistake. He should have ended this conversation long ago, ended it with grace, with power, menacing, like an emperor. It was necessary to forget about this girl with the green eyes. The girl did not exist. She was a double. An imitation. She did not even have a name. She was nobody. The emperor does not ask for forgiveness,

does not apologise to someone who…

“Forgive me,” he said, the words sounded strange, unpleasantly sticking to his lips. “I made a mistake. Yes, it’s true, I am guilty of what happened to you. Guilty. But I give you my word that you will come to no danger, no injustice, no harm, no threat. Do not be afraid.”

“I’m not afraid,” she lifted her head and etiquette notwithstanding meet his gaze. Emhyr flinched, struck by the honesty and trust in her eyes. He immediately straightened, the proud and noble emperor once more.

“Ask of me what you want.”

She looked at him again, and he involuntarily recalled countless times when he had bought in this way the peace of mind for the damage of his meanness. He secretly enjoyed selfishly paying the off so cheaply.

“Ask of me what you want,” he repeated and by the fact that he was tired, his voice became a little more human. “I will fulfil your every wish.”

Do not look at me, he thought. *I cannot bear that look. People are apparently afraid to look at me. What do I have to fear?*

Fuck Vattier and his reasons of state. If she asks for it, I’ll take her home to where she was abducted. Perhaps in a golden coach with six horses. She simply has to ask.

“Ask of me what you want,” he repeated.

“I thank you, Imperial Majesty,” said the girl, lowering her eyes. “His Imperial Majesty is very noble and generous. If I could ask for anything…”

“Speak.”

“I want to stay here. Here at Darn Rowan. At the home of Lady Stella.”

He was not surprised. He sensed something.

Tact prevented him from asking the questions that would be humiliating to them both.

“I gave my word,” he said coldly. “My will be done.”

“Thank you, Your Majesty.”

“I gave my word,” he repeated, “and I will honour it. However, I think you chose wrong. You did not choose that which you desire. If you change your mind…”

“I will not change,” she said when it was clear that the emperor was not going to finish. “Why would I change my mind? I have chosen Lady Stella, I have chosen things that I have experienced in my life so little… A house, warmth, kindness… Love. You cannot make a mistake when choosing something like that.”

Poor, naive, little thing, thought Emhyr var Emreis, Deithwen Addan yn Carn aep Morvudd – The White Flame Dancing on the Barrows of his Enemies. *It is such desires that are filled with the most terrible mistakes.*

But something – perhaps long-forgotten memories, prevented the Emperor from saying it out loud.

***

"Interesting," Nimue said, when she heard the story. "A very interesting dream. Were there any others?"

"Bah!" Condwiramurs cut the top off of the boiled egg with a knife. "My head is still spinning after that parade! But this is normal. The first night in a new place always produces chaotic dreams. Do you know, Nimue for us, it is claimed that our talent lies in the fact that we have dreamlike visions. We do not use hypnosis or a trance; our visions are no different from other people's dreams, in intensity, or abundance or content. Unique to us, and this is what our talent determines… We remember our dreams. Rarely do we forget what we dream of."

"Because you have atypical and typical activities in your endocrine glands," said the Lady of the Lake. "Your dreams are, and I'm trivialising a bit, nothing more than a body dedicated to endorphins. Like most innate magical talents, yours is also prosaically organic in origin. But why am I explaining something that you yourself already know. Do you remember any more dreams?"

"A young boy," Condwiramurs frowned, "travelling with a pouch over his shoulder through fields. It is early spring, the fields are empty. Willows… along the edges of the road. Willows bent, hollow and deformed… and bare, yet still with leaves. The boy walks and looks around. It is dark. In the sky there are stars. One of them is moving. It is a comet. A reddish, flickering spark, diagonally crossing the sky…"

"Good," Nimue rejoiced. "While I have no idea about who you were dreaming of, I can pinpoint the date. The Red Comet was visible for only six days in the spring of the year of the Peace of Cintra. More specifically, in the first days of March. In *other* dreams do you experience time stamps?"

"My dreams," Condwiramurs snorted, taking solace in her egg, "are not an agricultural calendar. They do not have dated subtitles. But for the record, I also dreamed of the Battle of Brenna, probably because I looked for a time at the canvas by Nicholas Certosy in your gallery. And the date for the Battle of Brenna is also known. It was also in the same year as the comet, unless I am mistaken."

“No, you are not wrong. Was there something special about the dream of the battle?”

“No. A chaos of horses, people and weapons. People screamed and killed. Someone, surely a mad man, shrieked – *‘The Eagles! The Eagles!’*”

“What else? You said that there was a whole parade of dreams.”

“I do not remember…” Condwiramurs paused.

Nimue smiled.

“Well,” the adept said, wincing hard, preventing the Lady of the Lake from delivering any mocking comments. “Yes, sometimes I forget. Nobody is perfect. I repeat, my dreams are visions, not some organised shelves in a library…”

“I know,” Nimue said. “We are not doing this to test your abilities as a dreamer, we are analysing the legend. The riddles and blank spaces. It goes pretty well for us, as in the first dream you’ve discovered who was the girl in the portrait: The double of Ciri who Vilgefortz attempted to deceive Emperor Emhyr…”

She stopped because into the kitchen came the Fisher King. He bowed, muttered and pulled out a loaf of bread, a bottle and a package wrapped in cloth from the cupboard. Then he turned to leave, not forgetting to bow and grunt.

“He is lame,” Nimue said with ill-concealed sympathy. “He was seriously wounded in a hunt with a wild boar which gored his leg. That’s why he spends so much time on the boat. With the oars and fishing he forgets about his injures. He is a very decent and good man. And I…”

Condwiramurs remained politely silent.

“I need a man,” said the little sorceress impartially.

I also, thought the adept. *The devil, as soon as I return to the Academy, I’ll let someone seduce me. Celibacy is food, but not for longer than one semester.*

Nimue snorted.

“If you’ve finished eating and dreaming, let’s go to the library.”

***

“Let’s get back to your dream.”

Nimue opened a folder, and she turned and took out several sheets of sepia wash drawings. Condwiramurs immediately recognised the captured scene.

“The audience at Loc Grim?”

“Of course. The double is present in the imperial palace. Emhyr pretending that he has been deceived and putting a good face on things. Here, look, the ambassadors of the Northern Kingdoms, for whom his performance is played. And here we see the Nilfgaardian dukes. They feel humiliated, the emperor has

rejected their noble daughters and so despised their offers of alliances. They stand aside, whispering, planning revenge, conspiracy, murder. The double stands before the throne with her head bowed. The artist has done this to emphasize her mystique, even her features are hidden under the veil on her face. This is basically everything we know about the false Ciri. No version of the legend mentions what happened to her later."

"It's not hard to imagine," Condwiramurs said sadly, "that fate was not kind to the girl. When Emhyr got the original, and we all know that he acquired her, he got rid of the forgery. In the dream I sensed no tragedy, and in principle I should have felt something if… On the other hand, what I see in dreams is not necessarily the real truth. As with any person, my dreams reflect my desire, longing… And fears."

"I know."

***

The discussed until lunchtime, looking through folders and bundles of prints. The fishing must have been good to the Fisher King because the lunch was grilled salmon. For dinner, too.

That night, Condwiramurs slept poorly. She had eaten too much.

She did not dream of anything. She was a little angry and embarrassed by it, but Nimue showed no concern.

"We have time," she said. "Before us are many more nights."

***

The tower of Inis Vitre had several bathrooms, truly luxurious, plush, lined with marble and gleaming with brass, and heated by pipes whose furnace was located somewhere in the basement. Condwiramurs could laze in the bath for hours, but today she met Nimue in the sauna, a small log cabin with a landing that went out into the lake. They sat together on a bench in the steam rising from red-hot stones washed down with water, flicking themselves with birch brushes. Salty sweat ran down into their eyes.

"If I understand correctly," Condwiramurs wiped her face, "the end result of my experience on Inis Vitre should be to answer all the riddles and blank spaces in the legend of the Sorceress and the Witcher?"

"You are correct."

"By day, by examining images and discussions, it should prepare me for the night, when I have the power to dream, about that event that is now completely forgotten and about what really happened? "

This time Nimue did not consider it necessary to confirm this. She got up and

poured water from a bucket onto the stones. The hot steam took their breath away for a moment. The rest of the bucket of water, Nimue poured on herself. Condwiramurs admired her figure. Though tiny, the sorceress was built extraordinarily proportionately. The body and supple skin of the sorceress could be the envy of many a young girl. Condwiramurs was only twenty-four and she envied her.

“But even if I dream of something,” she continued, wiping her sweaty face again, “how can I be sure that what I dreamed was the true version? I certainly do not know…”

“Let’s halt this discussion for a while,” cut off Nimue. “We go out. I’m already tired of sitting in this slow cooker. Let’s refresh. And then we’ll talk.”

As it was part of the ritual. They ran out of the sauna, their bare feet pattering on the boards of the landing and with a loud cry jumped into the cold water. Once they had dipped, they swam to the landing and wrung out their hair.

The Fisher King, alarmed by the splashing and yelling, looked back from his boat, he shaded his eyes with his hand, then immediately turned around and devoted himself to his fishing tackle. Condwiramurs considered this behaviour offensive and reprehensible. Her opinion of the Fisher King had greatly increased when she noticed the time that he did not spend fishing he spent reading. He walked with a book, even to the bathroom, and it was nothing less than *Speculum Aureum*, a work both profound and intellectually challenging. So if it was true that in her early days on Inis Vitre, Condwiramurs was somewhat astonished by the inclinations of Nimue, they had now stopped. It was clear that the Fisher King was an uncouth lout only in appearance. Apparently, such behaviour was considered a secure mask.

Nevertheless, thought Condwiramurs, *it is an unforgivable insult and an affront turning towards his rods and bait when there were two women parading naked, with bodies worthy of nymphs, from which the eyes should not be able to break away.*

“If I dream something,” she returned to the subject at hand as she wiped her breasts with a towel, “what guarantee do we have that it is the true version? I know all the literary versions of the legend, from Dandelion’s *Half a Century of Poetry*, to Andre Ravix’s *Lady of the Lake*. I know all of Reverend Jarre’s, various scientific treatises on the popular editions that I will not even mention. All of these readings have left a trace, had an effect, I am not able to eliminate this from my dreams. Is there a chance to break through the fiction to dream the truth?”

“There is.”

“How high?”

“The same as,” Nimue nodded towards the boat on the lake, “that which the Fisher King has. You see how he tirelessly checks his hooks. They anchor weeds, roots, submerged stumps, trunks, old shoes and the drowned-devil knows what else. But from time to time he catches something.”

“So happy fishing then,” Condwiramurs sighed and began to dress. “Let us set the bait and start fishing. Look for the real version of the legend inside the upholstery and lining of an old trunk and hope to find a false bottom. And what if there is no false bottom? With all due respect, Nimue, but we are not the first in this fishery. What are the chances that some details escaped the attention of historians and the researchers who fished in front of us? Do we even have a minnow left?”

“They left,” Nimue said with conviction, combing her hair, “Blank spaces filled with rhetoric and fabrications. Or wrapped in silence.”

“Like what?”

“For example, the witcher’s winter stay in Toussaint. All versions of the legend dispose of this episode with a short sentence: ‘The heroes spent the winter in Toussaint.’ Even Dandelion, who devoted two chapters to his adventures in the Duchy, is surprisingly enigmatic in terms of the witcher. Is it not worth it to find out what happened this winter? After escaping from Belhaven, and meeting with the elf Avallac’h in the underground complex of Tir na Bea Arainne? After the skirmish in Caed Myrkvid and the adventure of the Druids? What did the witcher do in Toussaint from October through to January?”

“What did he do? Hibernated!” Snorted the adept. “Before the spring thaw, he would not be able to cross the mountain passes, and so he spent the winter bored. It is not surprising that later writers relieved this piece of boredom with a terse: ‘Winter passed by.’ But if you need, I’ll try to dream something. Do we have a picture or a drawing?”

Nimue smiled.

“We have lots of pictures.”

***

The rock painting represented a hunting scene. Lean casual strokes depicted little men carrying bows and spears hunting a large buffalo. The buffalo was purple, striped like a tiger and above its curved horns hung something that resembled a dragonfly.

“This,” Regis said nodding his head, “is the work of the elf Avallac’h. The elf

that knew much."

"Yes," Geralt confirmed dryly. "This is his painting."

"The problem is that we have thoroughly explored the caves and there is no trace of either elves or any other creatures you mentioned."

"They were here. Now they are hiding. Or gone."

"This is an indisputable fact. Do not forget, you were only awarded the audience through the intercession of the flaminica. Apparently it was concluded that one hearing was enough. After the flaminica categorically refused to cooperate, I really do not know what else you can do. We have been wandering around these caves all day. I'm afraid there is no point"

"Me, too," said the witcher bitterly. "I cannot resist such an impression. I've never understood the elves. But at least now I know why most human have no sympathy for elves. Because it is hard to shake the feeling that they are mocking us. In everything that they do, what they say, what they think, elves make a mockery of us and scoff."

"The anthropomorphism is speaking through you."

"Maybe a little. But the impression remains."

"What do we do?"

"Return to Caed Myrkvid, to see Cahir, who no doubt has had his scalp wound healed by the Druids. Then we get on the horses and take full advantage of the invitation of Countess Anna Henrietta. Do not look at me like that vampire, Milva has broken ribs, Cahir a broken head, and rest in Toussaint will benefit both of them. And we will also have to remove Dandelion from the mess he has gotten into, because I fear he has gotten into a good one."

"Well," sighed Regis. "Have it your way. I'll have to avoid mirrors and dogs, and will have to beware of sorcerers and telepaths… And if I'm still exposed, I'm counting on you."

"You can count on me," Geralt said seriously. "I'm not in the habit of leaving a friend in need."

The vampire smiled and because they were alone, he did not hide his fangs.

"Friend?"

"The anthropomorphism speaks through my mouth. Come on, let's get out of this cave, my friend. Because here we will find only rheumatism."

"Probably. Unless… Geralt? From what you saw, the Elven necropolis of Tir na Bea Arainne is behind this wall. We could get there if… you know. If we broke through. Have you thought about this?"

"No. I had not thought of it."

***

The Fisher King had again prospered because there was lake trout for dinner again. The fish was so delicious that the lesson went out the window. Again Condwiramurs ate too much.

***

Condwiramurs belched. *It is time to sleep*, she though, when she caught herself for the second time mechanically turning the pages of a book without perceiving the content. It is time to dream.

She yawned and put down her book. She rearranged the pillows from a reading position to resting. With a spell she put out the lamp. The chamber was immediately plunged into darkness as thick as molasses. The heavy velour curtains were fully drawn. As the adept discovered, it is best to dream in total darkness. *What to choose?* She thought, stretching between the sheets. *Go with the current and dream or try and anchor?*

Despite their proud statements, Dreamers did not remember half of their prophetic dreams, a significant portion of them remained in the minds of the oneiromancers as gibberish images, changing colours and shapes like a kaleidoscope - a child's toy with mirrors and glass. If the dreamlike visions were stripped of all pretence of order and meaning, then they could safely ignore them. According to the rules: 'If I do not remember it, it means, it was not worth remembering'. In the jargon of the dreamers these dreams are called 'lemons'.

Worse and a somewhat embarrassing affair are 'ghost' dreams, from which the dreamer only remembers fragments, and very short snippets of events, after which the next morning one is left only a vague feeling of a message received. If the 'ghost' is repeated several times, it is certain that it is a dream which is important for some reason. Then the dreamer, through concentration and autosuggestion tries to force the dream again, this time a more specific 'ghost'. The best methods are to force oneself to dream again immediately after waking up – called 'hooking'. If the dream does not produce a 'hook' they try and produce a vision during one of the following session by concentration and meditation prior to going to sleep.

Such pressure programming is called 'anchoring'.

After twelve nights on the island, Condwiramurs already had three lists of dreams. There was a list worthy of pride: a list of 'ghosts' that she had 'hooked' or 'anchored' successfully. Among them there was the dream of the rebellion on the Island of Thanedd and the journey of the witcher and his companions in a blizzard in the pass of Malheur, and the spring downpours softening the roads in

the Sudduth valley. There was also a list that Nimue had recognised as a list of failures, dreams that despite all their efforts remained an enigma. And there was also a working list, a list of dreams waiting their turn.

And there was a dream, strange but very nice that was coming back in bits and pieces in elusive sounds and silky touches.

A nice, pleasant dream.

Well, thought Condwiramurs, closing her eyes. *Let it be.*

***

"I think I know what the witcher did during the winter in Toussaint."

"Well, well," Nimue looked over the edge of the leather-bound grimoire that she was reading. "So you finally dreamed something?"

"Of course" Condwiramurs said boastfully, "I dreamed! Of the Witcher Geralt and a woman with short, black hair and green eyes. I do not know who it could be. Maybe this Countess, Dandelion writes about in his memoirs?"

"You must not have read carefully," the sorceress said somewhat coolly. "Dandelion described Countess Anareitta in detail and all sources confirm that her hair was, quote *'Chestnut coloured and truly shining like a halo of gold.'*"

"So it was not her," admitted the adept. "My woman had black hair. Like coal. And the dream was… hummm… interesting."

"I'm eagerly listening."

"They were talking together. But it was not an ordinary conversation."

"What was so strange?"

"Most of the time her legs where on his shoulders."

***

"Tell me, Geralt, do you believe in love at first sight?"

"Do you?"

"I believe."

"Now I know why we are together. Opposites attract."

"Do not be cynical."

"Why? Cynicism reportedly shows intelligence."

"That's not true. Cynicism, for all its aura of pseudo intelligence is disgustingly hypocritical and insincere. While we're at it… Tell me, witcher, what do you most love about me?"

"This."

"You go from cynicism to triviality and banality. Try again."

"What I most love about you is your reason, your intelligence and inner depth, your independence and freedom, your…"

“I do not understand where you get so much sarcasm.”

“It was not sarcasm, it was a joke.”

“I cannot stand such jokes. Especially at the wrong time. Everything, my dear, has its time, and under the sky all are assigned their time. There is a time to be silent and a time to talk, a time to weep and a time to laugh, time to sow and a time to pick, sorry, collect, a time for jokes and a time for seriousness…”

“A time to touch and a time to refrain?”

“Oh, do not take it so seriously! Assume instead that it is a time for compliments. Loving without the compliments becomes just mindless activities to satisfy physical needs. Tell me, compliments!”

“From the Buina to the Yaruga, there is no one with such a beautiful ass as yours.”

“Now you go and compare me to barbaric rivers from the north that I do not know. Leaving aside the quality of your metaphor, could you have not said from the Velda to the Alba? Or from the Alba to Sansretour?”

“I’ve never been to the Alba. I try to avoid forms of flirting that I cannot back up with factual experience.”

“Oh, really? So I guess that you have seen and experienced so many asses, that you are able to judge? What, white-haired one? How many women have you had before me? Well? I asked you a question, witcher! Put away those hands, you will not escape having to answer. How many women did you have before me?”

“None. You’re the first.”

“Finally!”

***

Nimue had already spent a long time contemplating a picture that appeared in a subtle chiaroscuro of ten women sitting around a table.

“Too bad we do not know that they really looked like.” She said at last.

“The great teachers?” Condwiramurs snorted. “There are dozens of portraits! Only in Aretuza itself…”

“I said: *really*.” Interrupted Nimue. “I did not mean embellished imaginations based on other embellished imaginations. Do not forget, there was a time of destruction of the images of sorceresses. And the same of sorceresses. Then came the era of propaganda, the teachers had to build up the appearance of respect, admiration and reverent fear. Then from the reunion of the Lodge came oaths and convents, pictures and paintings recording those present at the table were of ten wonderful and alluring women. But there are no authentic portraits.

Except for two. The portrait of Margarita Laux-Antille which hangs in Aretuza, on the island of Thanedd and was by a miracle saved from fire. And a picture of Sile de Tancarville in Ensenada in the palace of Lan Exeter."

"And what of Francesca Findabair's image by an unknown elvish painter, hanging in the gallery in Vengerberg?"

"A fake. When the Gate opened and the elves left, they took with them or destroyed all their works of art and left not a single image. We do not know if the Daisy of the Valley was really as beautiful as they say. We do not know the appearance of Ida Emean. And the images of the Sorceresses of Nilfgaard were destroyed thoroughly and systematically, we have no idea of the true appearance of Assire car Anahid or Fringilla Vigo."

"Let us assume," sighed Condwiramurs, "that they looked as they were later portrayed. Dignified, noble, good, wise, honest and generous. And beautiful, dazzlingly beautiful… Let us assume that. Then it is somehow easier to live."

***

The daily tasks on Inis Vitre gradually fell into a dull routine. The analysis of dreams started after breakfast and usually lasted until noon. Before lunch, Condwiramurs went for a walk, but walks soon became boring. No wonder; in an hour it was possible to circle the island twice and look at things as interesting as rocks, dwarf pines, sand, clams and sea gulls.

After lunch and a long nap, they began discussions, reviewing books, scrolls and manuscripts, viewing pictures, images and maps. And long, protracted disputes in the evenings on the relationship between legend and truth.

And then at night came the dreams. Different dreams. Celibacy began to be noticed.

Instead of dreams of the enigma of the legend of the witcher, Condwiramurs dreamed of the Fisher King in a variety of situations from the non-erotic to the extremely erotic. In the extremely non-erotic dreams the Fisher King dragged her behind the boat tied to a rope. He rowed slowly and lazily, so she sank into the lake, swallowing water and she felt a terrible fear, because she felt something rising from the bottom, something huge and hungry, something that wanted to swallow the bait, which she was. When it seemed the something was about to catch her, the Fisher King pulled powerfully on the oars, the rope tighten and she was pulled away from the jaws of the unseen predator. She felt like she couldn't breathe, then she awoke.

In her undoubtedly erotic dreams she was kneeling on the rickety boat, clinging to the rail and the Fisher King held her around the neck from behind as

he fucked her enthusiastically, grunting, spitting and growling the whole time. Apart from the physical pleasure, Condwiramurs felt an apprehension that chilled her bowels: what if Nimue caught them? Suddenly in the water of the lake she saw the wobbling, threatening face of the little sorceress… she woke up, drenched in sweat.

She got up, opened the window and felt the cool night air, and saw the moonlight falling on the mist from the lake.

And then she dreamed on.

***

The tower of Inis Vitre had a balcony that overlooked the lake. At first Condwiramurs paid it no attention, but over time she had reason to ponder. The balcony was special because it was inaccessible. It was impossible to get to it from any room she knew.

Aware that the home of the sorceress cannot part with such a secret anomaly, Condwiramurs did not ask questions. Even when taking a stroll around the lake she saw Nimue watching. Apparently in was only inaccessible to those unauthorised and uninvited.

She was a little angry because it was considered rude but pretended that she did not see anything.

But it did not take too long before the mystery was solved.

It was after a series of dreams, caused by Wilma Wessely's watercolours. The author was apparently fascinated by the adventures of Ciri and the Tower of Swallows, because all of her works had been devoted to them.

"I've had weird dreams," she complained one morning. "…I dream images. Not scenes, no scenes, but pictures. Ciri and a tower… A still picture."

"And nothing more? Nothing except the visual experience?"

Nimue, of course, knew that a capable dreamer, like Condwiramurs, used all her senses, she doesn't just receive the dream through her eyes like most people, but also through hearing, touch, smell – and even taste.

"Nothing," said the adept. "Just…"

"Well?"

"A thought. A stubborn thought. In this tower, I'm not a lady, but a prisoner."

"Come with me."

As Condwiramurs had guessed, access to the balcony was only possible going through the private chambers of the sorceress. Clean rooms that were meticulously neat and fragrant; smelling of sandalwood, myrrh, lavender and mothballs. It was necessary to use a small secret door and a spiral staircase

leading down. Then they came to where they had to go.

The chamber, in contrast to the other rooms, did not have wood panelling on the walls, or tapestries, it was only whitewashed so it was very light. Even more clear light, because there was a huge triple window, or rather a glass door, which led directly to the balcony overhanging the lake.

The only furniture in the room were two chairs, a huge oval framed mirror and a sort of mahogany stand with a horizontal framework where a tapestry had been hung. The tapestry measured about five feet seven and reached its fringes to the floor.

The tapestry showed a rocky bluff overlooking a mountain lake. A castle was embedded in the cliff that seemed to be part of the stone wall. Condwiramurs knew the castle well, she had seen it in many illustrations.

“Vilgefortz’s citadel, where he imprisoned Yennefer. Where the legend ended.”

“Yes,” Nimue said, apparently indifferent. “That is where the legend ended, at least in the traditional versions. We know these versions, so it seems to us that this is the ending. Ciri escaped from the Tower of Swallows, where, as you dreamed, she was being held as a prisoner. When she realised what they wanted to do, she ran away. The legend gives many versions of this escape…”

“I,” interrupted the adept, “liked the best version, where the objects are thrown behind her. A comb, an apple and a handkerchief. But…”

“Condwiramurs.”

“I’m sorry.”

“As I said, there are many versions of the flight. But it still remains unclear how Ciri went directly from the Tower of Swallows to Vilgefortz’s castle. If you cannot dream of the Tower of Swallows, then try and dream of the castle. Look carefully at the tapestry… Are you listening?”

“This mirror… It’s magic, right?”

“No. I squeeze pimples in front of it.”

“Sorry.”

“It is a mirror of Hartmann,” Nimue said, seeing the adept’s wrinkled nose and angry gesture. “You may want to look. But be careful, please.”

“Is it true,” Condwiramurs asked, her voice trembling with excitement, “that with a mirror of Hartmann you can move to other…”

“Worlds? It is. But not immediately, not without long preparation, exercise, meditation and many other things. When I urged caution, I was thinking of something else.”

“What?”

“The mirror of Hartmann works in both directions. It is always possible someone or something may come out.”

***

“Do you know, Nimue… When I look at the tapestry…”

“Did you dream last night?”

“I dreamed. But strangely. A bird’s eye view. I was a bird… I saw the castle from outside. I could not get inside, something was guarding the entrance.”

“Look at the tapestry,” Nimue ordered. “Look at the citadel. Look carefully, focus your attention to every detail. Concentrate hard, record this image in your memory. I want you, if you can get there in the dream, to go inside. It is important that you enter.”

***

Outside, beyond the castle walls, raged a blizzard but inside, fuelled by thick logs a fire blazed. Yennefer revelled in the warmth. Her current cell was indeed better than the wet cell, in which she had spent the last two months, but even so, her teeth chattered with the cold.

While imprisoned she had lost track of time, they were in no hurry to inform her of the date, but she was certain it was winter, in December, maybe January.

“Eat, Yennefer,” Vilgefortz said. “Do not hesitate.”

The sorceress did not allow for embarrassment or accident. She ate slowly only because her barely healed fingers were stiff and awkward and it was difficult to hold the cutlery. And she would not eat with her hands, she was eager to show her superiority to Vilgefortz and the rest of the guests of the sorcerer. She knew none of them.

“It is with great regret I must inform you,” said Vilgefortz, his fingers caressing the stem of his cup, “that Ciri, your ward, has departed from this world. You can only blame yourself, Yennefer. And your foolish stubbornness.”

One of the guests, a short man with dark hair, sneezed loudly, wiping snot on a cambric handkerchief. His nose was red, swollen and undeniably congested.

“To your health,” Yennefer said, not upset at all by Vilgefortz’s angry words. “How did you come by such a terrible cold, noble sir? Did you stand in a draft after a bath?”

Another guest, an older, taller, thin man, with unnaturally pale eyes, laughed. The man with the cold, though his face flushed with anger, thanked the sorceress with a short bow and a short, nasal response. It was not short enough to hide the Nilfgaardian accent.

Vilgefortz turned to face her. He no longer wore on his head the golden structure or the glass lens over his eye socket, but it looked even worse than in the summer, when she saw him maimed for the first time. The left eyeball had regenerated sufficiently, but was much smaller than the right. The appearance was breath-taking.

“You, Yennefer,” he drawled, “probably think I’m lying to deceive you. Why would I? The report of the girl’s death has crushed me like you, if not more. After all I had far-reaching plans for her, which would decide about my future. Ciri is dead and now my plans have collapsed.”

“Good,” Yennefer, barely keeping the knife in her fingers, clumsily cut into her second course of stuffed pork chop.

“On the contrary,” continued the sorcerer, “to you Ciri was only a silly sentiment, consisting of equal parts of the penalty of your infertility and your guilt. Yes, yes, Yennefer, a sentiment of guilt! After you had actively participated in genetic experiments, by which Ciri came into the world. Incidentally the experiment failed because the experimenters lacked knowledge.”

Yennefer saluted him in silence, praying that the cup would not slip from her fingers. She slowly came to the conclusion that at least two of them would be stiff for a long time. Maybe permanently.

Vilgefortz snorted at her gesture.

“It’s too late,” he said through gritted teeth, “you have to know, Yennefer, I have enough knowledge. And if I had this girl, I would use this knowledge. In fact, you have nothing to regret, even though you are dry and barren as a desert, I wanted to strengthen the weak maternal instinct and give you not only a daughter, but even a grandchild. Or at least an ersatz grandchild.”

Yennefer snorted dismissively, although inside she was boiling with rage.

“I’m sorry to spoil your good humour, my dear,” said the wizard coldly. “Because I have the sad news that the witcher, Geralt of Rivia is also dead. Yes, Yes, the same witcher Geralt, with whom, as with Ciri, you associated your surrogate feelings, foolish, embarrassing and nauseating to the stomach. Know Yennefer that our dear friend, the witcher, said goodbye to the world in a truly fiery spectacular. On this occasion, you should not have any remorse. For the witcher’s death, you are not guilty to even the smallest degree. All the credit belongs to me. Taste the candied pears, they are really delicious.”

Yennefer’s violet eyes blazed with hatred.

Vilgefortz laughed.

“Such is your will,” he said, “Indeed, if not for your dimeritium bracelets,

your eyes would have burned me to ashes. But since the dimeritium is working, you cannot burn me, only look."

The man with the cold, sneezed, blew his nose and coughed until there were tears in his eyes. The tall man looked at her with his unpleasant fish eyes.

"And where is Mister Rience?" Yennefer asked, emphasizing the words. "Mister Rience, who has promised to do so much to me. And where is Mister Schirru, who never failed to hit or kick me? And why does my guard, who until recently, were violent and vulgar brutes, started to behave in timid reverence? No, do not answer, Vilgefortz. I think I know. What you told me is a lie. You have lost Ciri and Geralt escaped, while organising a bloodbath for your minions. Now what? Your plans have collapsed, turned to dust and you yourself have recognised that your dreams of power have faded like smoke. And the sorceresses and Dijkstra draw closer and closer. It is not without reason and not out of pity that you have stopped torturing me. And Emperor Emhyr tightens his network, and this is turning out to be very, very bad. *Ess a tearth, me tiarn? A'pleine a cales, ellea?*"

"I understand elder speech," said the Nilfgaardian with the cold. "And my name is Stefan Skellen. And I do not have full pants. Rather, I believe I am in a considerably better situation that you, Lady Yennefer."

After the speech he took a breath, coughed again and blew his nose into his soaked handkerchief. Vilgefortz slapped the table with his opened hand.

"No more games," Vilgefortz said, rolling his miniature macabre eye. "Know, Yennefer that you are no longer needed by me. In fact, I should put you in a sack and drown you in the lake, but I tend to draw on such methods with the greatest distaste. Until such a time that circumstances permit me or force me to another decision, you will remain isolated. But I warn you – don't cause me any problems. If you try to go on a hunger strike again, I will no longer waste time trying to feed you through a tube. I will simply let you starve. And if you try and escape, the guard's orders are clear. And now, farewell. Unless you haven't satisfied yourself…"

"No," Yennefer stood up and crumpled her napkin on the table. "Maybe it was something I ate, but the company has taken away my appetite. Goodbye, gentlemen."

Stefan Skellen sneezed and coughed. The tall man with the pale eyes measured her with anger and a sinister smile. Vilgefortz looked away.

As usual, when being led from cell to cell, Yennefer tried to figure out where she was, to get some scrap of information that could help her plan her escape.

And as usual, she was disappointed, the corridors down which she was led, had no windows, so there was no chance to see the surrounding countryside, or at the least the sun in order to determine the cardinal points.

Telepathy was prevented by the two heavy bracelets and a hoop around her neck, all of dimeritium, which effectively blocked any attempt to use magic.

The chamber in which she was imprisoned, was as cold and bleak as a hermit's hut.

Yennefer remembered, however, how happy she was when they had moved her here from the dungeon. From the basement, in whose bottom there was always a stinking pool of water, and the walls dripped with nitrate and salt. The basement where they fed her leftovers which the rats tore from her mangled fingers effortlessly.

When, after about two months he removed the chain, took her from there and allowed her to change clothes and bathe, Yennefer was beside herself with joy. He took her to a small room which seemed to be the bedroom of a king and the slurry that was served, bird's nest soup, worth of an emperor's table. Then things cleared. After a while the soup became a nasty slop, the bed a hard cot and the room a prison. A narrow cold prison, in which in just four steps you would come to the other wall.

Yennefer cursed, sighed and sat on the stool that was, apart from the cot, the only piece of furniture she had.

He came in so quiet that she almost didn't hear him.

"My name is Bonhart," he said. "It would be nice that you remember this name, witch. That you engrave it in your memory."

"Go fuck yourself, pig."

"I am a bounty hunter," he growled. "Three months ago, in September, I caught your little bastard in Ebbing – the famous Ciri, which you were talking about."

Yennefer listened carefully. September. Ebbing. Caught her… But she isn't here. Maybe he is lying?

"The ashen-haired witcher was trained at Kaer Morhen. I told her to fight in an arena, to kill people while people in the audience screamed. Slowly, slowly I turned her more into a beast. I taught her this role with whip, fist and boot. She learned for a long time. But then she escaped me, the green-eyed snake."

Yennefer imperceptibly sighed with relief.

"She escaped into another world. But we will meet again, I'm sure of it. You know, witch, the only thing I regret is that your lover, the witcher Geralt was

burned at the stake. I wanted to give him a taste of my blade, damn mutant."

Yennefer snorted.

"Listen, Bonhart, or whatever your name is. Do not make me laugh. The witcher was not brought up to heel. You cannot compare with him. You can only hunt puppies. Only small dogs."

"Look here, witch."

With a sharp movement he parted his shirt and pulled out a chain with three silver medallions hanging from it. One had the shape of a cat's head, the other an eagle or a griffin.

The third she did not see exactly, but she thought it was a wolf.

"Such trinkets," she said, feigning indifference, "you can buy at any fair."

"These are not from a fair."

"Whatever you say."

"It was once so," hissed Bonhart, "that good people were afraid of the witchers more than the monsters. Monsters, after all, sat in the woods and caves, however, witchers had the nerve to walk the streets, enter taverns, and hover near shrines, temples, schools and playgrounds. Decent people were offended, so they started looking for someone who could bring the insolent witchers to order. They found someone. Not easily or soon, not even close. But they found someone. You see, I have killed three. Not another mutant appeared in the area to upset the honest citizens. And if he appeared, I do to him what I did to the previous ones."

"Really," Yennefer said, "with a crossbow from around a corner? Or by poisoning?"

Bonhart put the medallions back under his shirt and took a step towards her.

"You insult me, witch."

"That's what I wanted."

"Oh, really? Now I will show you, witch, that I can compete with your Witcher lover in any field and even be better than him."

The guards standing at the door jumped upon hearing the crash, bang, howling and whimpering from the cell. And if the guards had ever happened in their life to hear a panther caught in trap, they would have sworn that the cell held a panther.

Then the guards heard from the cell a terrible roar, like a wounded lion, which they had also never heard on watch and only ever seen on their coat of arms. They looked at each other. Shook their heads and entered.

Yennefer sat in the corner of the room, among the remains of the stool. Her hair was dishevelled, her dress and shirt torn from top to bottom, her breasts rose

sharply with her heavy breathing. Blood flowed from her nose, a bruise was quickly growing on her face, and there were scratches on her right arm.

Bonhart was sitting in the other corner of the room, among bits of stool, holding his head in both hands. He too was bleeding from his nose, the blood colouring his moustache a deep crimson. His face was marked by bloody grooves. Yennefer's barely healed fingers were a pitiful weapon, but the dimeritium bracelets had some wonderfully sharp edges.

In Bonhart's cheek, neatly along the cheek bone, embedded deeply was a fork, which Yennefer had silently stolen at dinner.

"Only small dogs," the sorceress gasped, trying to cover her breasts with the remains of her dress, "And stay away from the dogs, you are too weak for them, bastard."

She could not forgive herself for not getting him where she was aiming – his eye. But the target was moving, and besides, no one is perfect.

Bonhart grunted, stood up, grabbed the fork and roared and reeled with pain. He swore horribly.

Meanwhile, two more guards had entered the room.

"Hey, you!" Bonhart roared, wiping blood from his face. "Come here! Hold this whore on the floor, stretch open her legs and hold her!"

The guards looked at each other, then at the ceiling.

"You'd better leave, sir," said one. "There will be no hold or stretching here. It is not our job."

"Besides," added the second in a whisper, "we do not want to end up like Rience and Schirru."

***

Condwiramurs put down the paper which had an image of a prison cell. In the cell was a woman, sitting with her head down, shackled and chained to a stone wall.

"They imprisoned her," she muttered. "While the witcher was in Toussaint with some dark haired lady."

"Are you condemning him?" Nimue asked sharply. "Without knowing practically anything?"

"No. I'm not condemning him, but…"

"No buts about it. Be quiet, please."

For some time they sat there silently and flipped through prints in a folder.

"All the versions of the legend," Condwiramurs identified one of the images, "give this place as the end, the decisive clash between Good and Evil, the castle

of Rhys-Rhun. All versions. Except for one."

"Except for one," Nimue nodded. "Apart from the little known anonymously authored version called The Black Book of Ellander."

"The Black Book states that the end of the legend took place in Stygga castle."

"Correct. Some of the events presented in the book differ considerably from the canon."

"I wonder," the adept raised her head, "which of the two castles is in the picture? Which castle is on your tapestry? Which image is real?"

"We will probably never know. The castle, where the legend ends, was destroyed and there remains no trace of it, which is confirmed by all versions of the legend, including the Book of Ellander. None of the proposed locations are convincing. We do not know and will probably never learn what the castle looked like and where it stood."

"But the truth…"

"The historical truth is of no importance," Nimue sharply interrupted. "Remember that we do not know what Ciri really looked like. But here, in this picture drawn by Wilma Wessely, in a violent conversation with Avallac'h set against the background of macabre statues of children, is Ciri. There is no doubt."

"But," Condwiramurs did not give up, "your tapestry…"

"Shows the castle where the legend ended."

There was a long silence. The rustling of pictures being turned.

"I do not like," Condwiramurs spoke, "the version of the legend in the Black Book. It is so… so…"

"Frighteningly realistic," Nimue finished, shaking her head.

***

Condwiramurs yawned and put down the book *Half a Century of Poetry*, the supplemented edition with the afterword by Professor Everett Denhoff Junior. She changed the position of the scattered cushions in the configuration for sleeping. She yawned, stretched and turned off the lamp. The chamber was drowned in darkness, brightened only by slivers of moonlight coming through the gap in the curtains. What to choose for this night, she thought, squirming between the sheets. Leave it to chance? Or try and anchor?

After a moment she decided on the latter.

There was a vague, recurring dream that she could not remember the end of, it got lost and disappeared among other dreams, like a thread that gets woven

among the colourful patterns in a fabric. A dream that escaped her memory, although it was stubbornly there.

She fell asleep instantly. As soon as she closed her eyes, the dream came.

There was a cloudless night sky, with a moon and stars. On the slopes of a snow-dusted hill she saw vineyards. The black angular outline of buildings with jagged walls and corner towers. There were two riders. Both entered the empty courtyard, both dismounted, both headed for the portal. However, into the dark hole, only one entered.

The one with white hair.

Condwiramurs moaned in her sleep, she thrashed on the bed.

The white-haired one followed stairs that went deep, deep underground. Walking down dark corridors, he pauses at regular intervals, lighting torches in their iron brackets. Shadows dance on the walls and ceiling.

More halls, stairs, another corridor. A room, a domed cellar which had barrels along the walls.

Rubble, a heap of bricks. Then the corridor forks. In both forks there is darkness. The white-haired one lights another torch. He pulls a sword from the sheath on his back. He hesitates, he doesn't know which fork to follow. Finally he decides on the right. It is very dark and twisted, full of debris.

Condwiramurs moaned in her sleep, a mortal fear seizes her. She knows that the path that the white-haired one has chosen, leads into danger. But at the same time she knows that the white-haired one is looking for danger.

Because it is his profession.

The adept stirs between the sheets, moaning. She is a dreamer, the dreamer is in a oneiromanic trance, suddenly she is able to predict what will happen in a moment.

Watch out, she wants to scream but she knows that she will not be able to shout. *Watch out, watch out!*

Be careful, witcher!

The monster attacked in the dark, from behind, silently, with malignancy. It materialised suddenly from the darkness like a fire that explodes. Like a tongue of flame.

At dawn of day, when falcon shakes his wing,
Mainly from pleasure, and from noble usage,
Blackbirds too shake theirs then as they sing,
Receiving their mates, mingling their plumage,
O, as the desires it lights in me now rage,
I'd offer you joyously, what befits a lover.
See how Love had written this very page:
Even for this end are we come together.

Francois Villon

Although he was in a hurry and pushed himself hard and did not rest, the witcher stayed in Toussaint almost the entire winter. What were his reasons? I will not write about it. It happened and that is enough, there is no reason to go breaking my head. To those who would condemn the witcher, remember that love has many names, judge not, lest ye be judged.

Dandelion
Half a Century of Poetry

Those were the days of good hunting and good sleeping.

Rudyard Kipling

CHAPTER THREE

The monster attacked from the darkness, from its hiding place, quietly and with premeditation. It materialised suddenly from the darkness like a fiery explosion. Like a tongue of flame.

Geralt, though surprised, reacted instinctively. He dodged to the side, brushing up against the wall of the dungeon. The beast flew by and bounced from the stone wall like a ball, waved it wings and jumped again, hissing and opening its horrible beak.

But this time the witcher was prepared.

He struck with a short attack from the elbow, aiming at the throat, the red flap of the gizzards. He succeeded. He felt the blade penetrate the body. The momentum of the blow knocked the monster onto the floor near the wall. The skoffin howled with a cry that almost sounded human. It threw itself among the broken bricks, flapping its wings, spewing blood and thrashing its tail around like a whip. The witcher was sure the fight was over, but the nasty monster gave him an unpleasant surprise. It unexpectedly launched at his throat, screeching, showing its claws and snapping its beak. Geralt jumped, bouncing his shoulder against the wall and launched a blow from below, using the momentum of the bounce. He was successful. The skoffin fell once more between the bricks, its fetid blood spilled down the dungeon wall forming a fanciful pattern. The monster shook, screeched and stretched its long neck, its throat swelled and shook. The blood flowed rapidly from it and disappeared among the bricks where it lay.

Geralt could easily finish it off, but he did not want to destroy the skin. He waited calmly until the skoffin bled to death. He moved a few steps away, undid his pants and took a piss while whistling a nostalgic tune.

The skoffin was silent and still. The witcher moved closer to it and nudged it carefully and gently with the tip of his sword. Seeing that it was over, he grabbed the monster by the tail and held it up. He held the base of the tail at the height of a human’s waist; the skoffin’s sharp beak reached the ground. Its wing span was just over four feet.

“You’re not particularly heavy,” Geralt shook the monster that weighed no more than a fattened turkey. “Fortunately for me I get paid per piece not by weight.”

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“Wow,” Reynart de Bois-Fresnes whistled through his teeth, which for him, Geralt knew, meant the highest expression of astonishment and admiration. “This is the first time I have seen something like this with my own eyes. A true monster, on my honour. So this is the dreaded basilisk?”

“No,” Geralt lifted the monster a little higher so the knight would see better. “It is not a basilisk. It is a cockatrice.”

“So what is the difference?”

“The essentials. The basilisk is also known as the regulus, is a reptile. The cockatrice, also called a skoffin, is an ornithosaur – that is, half reptile, half bird. It is the only representative of the subclass, which scientist call Ornithoreptilia and after long disputes they came to the conclusion that…”

“And which of the two,” Reynart de Bois-Fresnes interrupted, apparently without interest of the discussions of scientists, “can kill or turn a man to stone with a glance?”

“None. Those are stories.”

“Then why are people so afraid? This thing here isn’t so large. Can it be so dangerous?”

“This thing here,” Geralt shook the dead monster, “usually attacks from behind and without error goes perfectly between the vertebrae or the aorta or under the left kidney. Usually all it takes is a single thrust of its beak. With regards to the basilisk, it will kill you no matter where it bites; it has the strongest know poison which is a neurotoxin that kills within a few moments.”

“Brrr… Tell me, which one can you kill with a mirror?”

“All of them. If you slam it hard enough in the head with the mirror.”

Reynart de Bois-Fresnes burst out laughing. Geralt did not laugh, the joke about the basilisk and the mirror was one the teachers in Kaer Morhen repeated often. Equally funny were the jokes about virgins and unicorns. There was also a story of foolishness about a young witcher from Kaer Morhen who made a bet to shake hands with a dragon.

He smiled. Memories.

“I prefer it when you smile,” Reynart said, watching him carefully. “Like you are at this moment. Not like back in October when we first met in the Druidic woods. Back then you were gloomy, bitter and resentful at the world like a

moneylender who had been cheated, and on top of that, like a man who throughout the night has come to nothing. Even in the morning."

"Really, I was like that?"

"Really. So do not be surprised that I prefer you such as you are now. Changed."

"Therapy through work," Geralt again shook the cockatrice he held by the tail. "The beneficial effects of exercise on mental health. And to continue the therapy, I'll get straight to business. The skoffin can earn more than the agreed upon price for capture. There is little damage to it, so you could take it to a taxidermist for stuffing, but do not take less than two hundred for it. If you have to sell it in pieces, remember that the most valuable feathers are those above the tail, especially these, the central rudders. They are far softer than those of a goose and write very nicely and cleanly with little wear. An experienced scribe will not hesitate to give you five per pen."

"I have clients to collect the body," the knight smiled. "The Guild of Coopers. They saw in Castel Ravello that stuffed ugly thing, that monster, or whatever you call it… That you, the day after Saovine, went into the basement and killed."

"I remember."

"Now the Coopers had seen that stuffed ugly bitch and asked me about obtaining a similar rarity to decorate their guild hall. In Toussaint, the Coopers cannot complain about a lack of work, and as a result they are prosperous so they will not think much if we charge two hundred and twenty for the cockatrice. Maybe even a bit more if we try to haggle. In regards to the feathers… They are not going to know if we took some feathers from the thing's ass to sell to the county chancery. The chancery does not pay out of pocket, but the county will pay cash, without haggling, not five but ten per pen."

"I bow to your cunning."

"*Nomen omen*," Reynart de Bois-Fresnes' smile broadened. "My mum must have known something, baptising me after the sly fox from the nursery rhyme."

"You should be a businessman, not a knight."

"I should," agreed the knight. "But if you are born the son of a knight, you will die the son of a knight and will sire another knight. And it does not change, even if you are broke. You know how to count, Geralt, and the culture of the market."

"No, not culture. For similar reasons as yours. With the sole difference that I won't be siring anything. Let's get out of these dungeons."

Outside, beneath the walls of the castle, the frost stung and the wind blew from the mountains. The night was a clear and cloudless sky full of stars and the moonlight sparkled on the fresh snow.

The waiting horses snorted in welcome.

“We could go directly to my customer and make a deal,” said the knight. “But you probably need to get to Beauclair, huh? To a certain bedroom?”

Geralt did not answer, because he did not respond to such questions on principle. He tied the cockatrice onto the back of his horse then mounted, Roach.

“We will visit the customer,” he said. “The night is still young and I’m hungry. I would also like to drink something. Let’s go to town. To Pheasantry.”

The knight laughed and adjusted the red and gold chequered shield hanging on the high saddle so he could scramble up.

“As you wish, my friend. We go to, Pheasantry. Forward mount.”

They went down the slope to the road lined by a row of poplars.

“You know what, Reynart,” Geralt suddenly said. “I like you as you are now. Speaking normally. Back when we first met, you used annoying, moronic mannerisms.”

“Upon my honour, witcher, I am a knight-errant,” chortled the Reynart de Bois-Fresnes. “Have you forgotten? Knights always talk like morons. It is as much a part of their character as this shield here. Thanks to the speech and the coat of arms we know who belongs to the brotherhood.”

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“On my honour,” said the Checkerboard Knight, “you are unnecessarily troubled, Sir Geralt. Your companions have certainly returned to health and their injuries forgotten. The Duchess has palace doctors in profusion, able to cure every disease. On my honour, there is more to discuss.”

“I am of the same opinion.” Said Regis. “Lighten up, Geralt. After all the Druidess healed Milva…”

“And the Druidess is familiar with treatments,” Cahir interjected. “The best example is my own head. Look, it is as good as new. Milva is certainly healthy already; there is no reason for concern.”

“I hope so.”

“Healthy already,” repeated the Knight, “I bet that when we return we will find her dancing at all the balls! Feasting! In Beauclair, at the court of the Duchess Anarietta there is always continuous dancing and feasting. Ha, ha, on my honour, now that I have fulfilled my knightly vow, I am…”

“You have completed your vow?”

“I was in the favour of Fortune! I would like to explain that I made an oath. And not just any oath, but on the heron. In Spring. I vowed to apprehend five hundred malefactors before Yule. I have completed this, so I am relieved. I can once again drink and eat beef. And I do not have to hide my name. Let me introduce myself. I am Reynart de Bois-Fresnes.”

“A pleasure to meet you.”

“You were talking of balls?” Angoulême said, urging her horse up next to them. “I hope that there will be enough food and drink for us. And I would gladly dance!”

“On my honour, at the court of Duchess Anna Henrietta, there will be plenty of both,” said Reynart de Bois-Fresnes. “Singing and feasting and performances by jugglers, theatre, music, dancing and poetry in the evenings. You’re friends of Dandelion… I mean, the Viscount Julian. And he is very dear to Her Belovedness Our Lady Duchess.”

“And how long he boasted!” Angoulême said. “Was there truly an affair with them both? Do you know the story, Sir Knight? Tell us!”

“Angoulême,” said the witcher. “Do you need to know?”

“I do not need to. But I want to! Leave off the protesting, Geralt. And stop looking so annoyed, otherwise the mushroom pickers will have nothing to do because the sight of your mouth will spoil the mushrooms on the roadside. And you, Sir Knight, tell me.”

The other errant knights who rode at the head of the procession sang a song with a repeated refrain. The words of the song were almost unbelievably stupid.

“It happened,” began the knight, “six years ago. The poet was a guest at the court during the winter and spring, playing his lute, singing romances and declaiming poems. Prince Rajmund was at the time in Cintra for the congress. He was in no hurry to get back home; there was no secret that he kept a courtesan in Cintra. The Duchess Anarietta and Mister Dandelion… Well, Beauclair is a special, magical place where love works like a powerful spell on people… I’m sure you’ll notice this. The Duchess got to know the troubadour. Maybe they did not even know it was happening – the poems, compliments, flowers, words, glances and sighs… To cut a story short, they both became too close.”

“How close?” Laughed Angoulême.

“I was not an eyewitness,” the knight said stiffly. “And it is not suitable to pass on gossip. Moreover, you should know at your age, my dear, that love has many names, ultimately men can be attracted to women, body to body.”

Cahir snorted softly. Angoulême had nothing to add.

“They met in secret for about two months,” continued Reynart de Bois-Fresnes. “From Belleteyn in midsummer. Over time, however, they forgot prudence. Rumours spread and vicious talk of them did not leave them alone. Mister Dandelion did not stay and hurriedly left the principality. It soon became clear how wise that was. For barely had he left before Prince Rajmund returned from Cintra, and a servant told him everything. The Prince, when he had heard of the insult that had been made against him, as you can imagine, fell into a severe rage. He threw his bowl of soup on the table, slit the informers throat with a knife and roared words of little decency. Then he hit the Marshal in the face and broke his teeth and then in front of witnesses broke a wonderful mirror from Kovir into pieces. The Duchess was sent under arrest to her quarters and was threatened with torture to extract what had happened. After that he commanded that his soldiers pursue Mister Dandelion, and to kill him without mercy and cut his heart out of his chest. Inspired by some old ballads, he had thoughts to fry the heart and force Duchess Anarietta to eat the heart in front of the whole court. Ugh, disgusting! Thankfully, Mister Dandelion managed to disappear over the border in time.”

“Thankfully. Then the prince died?”

“He died. The incident, as I was told, brought his blood to the boil, it is said that he had apoplexy and became paralysed. He lay for nearly half a year like a log. But then he was fine. He stood on his feet again and walked. But with squinty eyes, like…”

The Knight turned in his saddle, screwed up his eyes and grimaced like a monkey.

“While Prince Rajmund,” he continued, “had always been renowned as a womanizer, with the squint, he became even greater at fornicating, because every woman was thinking that he was winking in a sign of love for her. And quite a few females enjoyed the prince’s attention. I am not saying that all the weaker sex in Toussaint are greedy with loose morals, but as the prince winked almost eternally, the majority of those women came out on top. But in the end trying to keep up with all this mischief, one night the apoplexy stuck him again. He breathed his last. In the bedroom.”

“On top of a girl?” Laughed Angoulême.

“Indeed,” the normal serious Knight, smiled behind his moustache. “In truth he was beneath her. But there is no need to go into details.”

“It stands to reason that you do not,” Cahir said seriously. “Though I think

there wasn't a lot of mourning for Prince Rajmund? During your story I got the impression…"

"That the unfaithful wife will be more loved that the cheating husband," interrupted the vampire in his usual way. "Which is perhaps why she rules now?"

"That is one reason why," Reynart de Bois-Fresnes answered with a disarming sincerity. "But not only that. Prince Rajmund, to put it mildly, was dishonest, a villain, and forgive me, a motherfucker, that would cause the devil himself an ulcer in six months. And Toussaint suffered under his rule for seven years. But Duchess Anareitta is adored by the people."

"So we do not have to worry," Geralt asked sourly, "that the deceased Prince Rajmund left anyone who would honour him by putting a dagger into our friend, Dandelion?"

"You do not have to worry," the Knight looked at him understandingly. "On my honour, nothing will happen to him. As I told you, Our Lady is devoted to the poet and Anarietta would make mincemeat out of anyone who tried to harm him."

The good knight returns,
When the war is over,
Not expecting his beloved,
Has now been married,
Hey, ho, ho,
That's the knight's fate.

Alarmed by the knights singing, a flock of screaming crows took flight from the trees lining the roadside.

Soon they left the forest into a wide valley between the hills, on which the towers of a palace shone white against the blue sky. As far as the eye could see, the gentle hills were covered in neatly trimmed hedges and bushes. The ground beneath the bushes was lined with red and yellow leaves.

"What is that?" Angoulême asked. "Grapevines?"

"Grapevines," confirmed Reynart de Bois-Fresnes. "The famous valley of Sansretour. The world's most excellent wine is made from the grapes that grow here."

"True," said Regis, who as usual, knew everything. "Due to the volcanic soil here and the local microclimate that provides the ideal amount of sunny days with annual precipitation. If we add to this tradition the knowledge and care from the workers of the vineyard, the resulting product is a superior quality

brand.”

“Well put,” the Knight smiled. “Quality and brand. Oh, look, for example, on the slopes below the palace, in this region we give names to the wines and vineyards. This is called the Castel Ravello and its wines come from vineyards such as Erveluce, the Fiorano, the famous Pomino and Est Est. Surely you have heard of it. A barrel of Est Est wine is tenfold as much as you would pay for a barrel from the Cidaris vineyard of Alba. And there, oh, look, you can see other castles and vineyards, but the names will probably be too foreign to you – Vermentino, Toricella, Casteldaccia, Tufo, Sancerre, Nuragus, Coronata and finally Corvo Bianco, which the elves call, Gwyn Cerbin. I take it these names are foreign to you?”

“Foreign, ha!” Said Angoulême. “You especially need the knowledge so that a rogue innkeeper does not pour one of these wines and not ordinary plonk, otherwise more than once I would have had to leave my horse as a pledge, of what Est Est wine would cost. This stuff might be great for lords, but we the ordinary people, the cheaper the better. And I can tell you this for I’ve experienced both – puking is the same whether you’ve had Est Est wine or cheap wine.”

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“Don’t judge us on our cheap wines, Angoulême,” Reynart said, sitting at a bench behind a table. “We’ll bring you a quality brand and a good year. We can afford to, we’ve earned it. We can treat ourselves to our heart’s content.”

“Of course,” Geralt said, waving to the innkeeper. “Dandelion sometimes says that there are other motivations for making money, but can never recall what. I want to taste what is making those tempting smells from the kitchen. Anyway, I did not expect at this late hour, Pheasantry would have this many guests.”

“But today is the feast of Yule,” said the innkeeper, who had heard his words. “People are celebrating. Having fun. Having fortunes read. According to tradition…”

“I know,” the witcher interrupted. “And in the kitchen, what tradition are you preparing today?”

“Smoked tongue and horseradish. Capon broth with meatballs. Roast meat, dumplings and sauerkraut…”

“Bring it quickly, my good man. And for… What do we ask for, Reynart?”

“With meat,” thought the Knight, “We’ll have a red Cote de Blessure. The year that the old Countess Caroberta kicked the bucket.”

“A wonderful choice,” the innkeeper nodded. “At your service, gentlemen.”

A spring of mistletoe thrown over the shoulder of one of the girls at a neighbouring table fell into Geralt’s lap. The celebrating company laughed and the girl blushed prettily.

“None of that,” the Knight threw the spring back. “This is not your chosen one. He is already busy, gracious lady. He is already captivated by certain green eyes…”

“Shut up, Reynart!”

The innkeeper brought the ordered food and drank, and then they ate and drank in silence, watching the surrounding festivities.

“Yule,” Geralt said thoughtfully, placing his cup on the table. “Midinvaerne. The winter solstice. I’m stuck here for two months. Two months lost.”

“One month,” Reynart corrected him soberly. “If you lose anything, then it is only one month. The snow will cover the mountain passes and you will not be able to leave Toussaint. You will have to stay here during Yule and probably until spring, because it will be in vain to waste tears on *force majeure*. In any case, do not go overboard with the sadness and grief. I do not believe that they are sorry for you.”

“What do you know, Reynart? What do you know?”

“Not much,” replied the Knight, pouring. “Not much more than what I see. And I saw your first meeting, you and her. In Beauclair. Remember the festival of the vat? The white underwear?”

Geralt did not answer. Remembering.

“Our castle in Beauclair is magical, its charms act powerfully on people,” muttered Reynart, sipping wine and rolling it over his tongue. “The view alone is able to charm. I remember how you gasped when you saw it, in October. Cahir show us what expression he used then.”

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“A spectacular castle,” Cahir said with admiration. “On my soul, it is admirable and pleasing to the eye.”

“A pretty place your Duchess lives,” said Regis. “This has to be our stop.”

“A fucking nice place,” Angoulême added.

“Palace Beauclair,” Reynart de Bois-Fresnes said proudly. “An Elvish building only slightly modified and redesigned. Apparently by Faramond himself.”

“No doubt,” said the vampire. “There is no doubt the Faramond style is evident at first glance. Just look at those towers.”

The towers, slender, white obelisks, that Regis pointed to, rose high above the red roofs to the sky. At first sight they resembled candles, with wax cascading down to the masterfully decorated base.

“At the foot of Beauclair,” the Knight Reynart explained, “lies the city. The wall, of course, was added later, after all, elves do not build walls around a city. Spur your horses, gentlemen, we still have a long way to go. Beauclair looks close, but the mountains throw off perspective.”

“Let’s go.”

On the way to the city they overtook carts and wagons, lots of carts and wagons – all full of grapes. They entered the noisy and grape scented streets of a city park after dark, full of poplar, yew and berberis. They passed roses, mostly multiflora varieties and centifolia.

Finally they stood before the carved columns and portals of the palace, were stood soldiers and footmen in livery.

Among those that greeted them was Dandelion, combed and dressed like a prince.

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“Where is Milva?”

“It’s okay, don’t worry. She is sitting in the chambers, which were prepared for you, and does not want to move from there.”

“Why?”

“We’ll talk about that later. Now come, the Duchess is waiting.”

“Right now?”

“That was her wish.”

The hall into which they entered was full of people as colourful as birds of paradise. Geralt did not have time to look around, because Dandelion pushed him towards a marble dais on which stood two women, significantly differing from the surrounding society.

It was quiet, but it grew quieter.

The first of the women had a sharp, slightly raised nose and penetrating blue eyes that seemed feverish. Her auburn hair was adjusted in a perfect and truly artistic style, tied with silk ribbons and submitted to the last detail – including flawless crescent curls on her forehead. The bodice of her dress was cut deep and interwoven with pale blue and iridescent purple stripes on a black background, with a dense and regular design of small embroidered gold chrysanthemums. Her neck was adorned with a mesh of extremely complex goldsmith’s work – a necklace of emeralds, onyx and lapis lazuli, the lowermost

edge was completed with a jade cross, located between her breasts, bound by the tight bodice. It seemed that the fragile shoulders of the woman would not generate sufficient support for her broad and deep cleavage, and that at any moment her breasts might slip out. However, they remained in place, kept in position by the secret mysteries of dressmaking and the buffers of puffy sleeves.

Her companion was more or less the same height and had lipstick on her lips the same colour. But that's where the similarity of the two women ended. The other wore her hair cropped short in a lace cap trimmed with a muslin veil reaching to the tip of her nose. The flower motif of the veil could not conceal her large lustrous eyes, highlighted with green shadow. The same floral veil covered a very modest neckline of a black dress with long sleeves. The dress was seemingly randomly decorated with gold stars embroidered with tiny cut aquamarines and mountain crystals.

"Her Ladyship, the Duchess Anna Henrietta. Kneel, Sir," said someone, whispering behind Geralt.

I wonder which one, thought Geralt, who with effort bent his sore knee in a ceremonial bow. I'll be damned if they both don't look royal.

"Arise, Sir Geralt," the lady with the auburn hair and slightly raised nose, dispelled his doubts. "I welcome you to Castle Beauclair in the Principality of Toussaint. I am delighted to be able to host those who are carrying out such a noble mission. Moreover, you've also been a friend to our dear Viscount Julian."

At these words Dandelion bowed deeply.

"The Viscount," continued the Duchess, "has revealed to me your names and the reason and purpose of your mission, and told me what brings you to Toussaint. His story touched my heart. I am going to give you a private audience, Sir Geralt. It will have to be delayed a small while, as I am saddled with state requirements. The harvest is complete and tradition requires our participation in the feast of the vat."

The woman in the veil at the Duchess's side leaned forward and whispered something quickly. Anna Henrietta looked at the witcher, smiled and licked her lips.

"It is my desire," she raised her voice, "that during the festival alongside Viscount Julian, Geralt of Rivia will serve us."

A murmur swept through the group of courtiers and knights, like the rustling of wind through the pines. The Duchess Anarietta gave the witcher one last glance and left the room with her companion and retinue of pages.

"Damn," said the Chessboard Knight. "That is a surprise. You have received

a great honour, Sir Geralt."

"I'm not too clear what it was," said Geralt. "How should I serve Her Grace?"

"Her Belovedness," corrected a nobleman with the appearance of a confectioner. "I'm sorry, sir, to correct you, but I have to meet obligations. We, in Toussaint, adhere to tradition and protocol. I am Sebastian Le Goff, chamberlain and marshal of the palace."

"Pleased to meet you."

"The official title of Lady Anna Henrietta," said the chamberlain, who not only looked like a confectioner, but even smelled like icing, "is 'Your Enlightenedness' and unofficially 'Lady Duchess' for outside of court. But you should always address her as 'Your Belovedness'."

"Thank you, I'll remember that. And the other lady? How do I title her?"

"Her official title is 'venerable'" the chamberlain instructed him seriously. "But it is possible to address her as 'ma'am'. She is a relative of the Duchess, called Fringilla Vigo. According to the will of Her Belovedness, it is Lady Fringilla that you will serve at the festival."

"And what is involved with this service?"

"Nothing complicated. Let me tell you, long ago we used mechanical presses for grapes, but the tradition…"

***

The courtyard resounded with the hum and trills of pipes, flutes and the fierce clatter of drums and tambourines. On stage, in the middle of the courtyard stood a huge vat, in which jugglers and acrobats jumped around doing flips and somersaults. The courtyard and the galleries were crowded with spectators – ladies, nobles, knights, burgesses, merchants and common people.

Sebastian Le Goff lifted a staff entwined with vines and tapped it three times on the pavement.

"Ho, ho!" He called. "Noble ladies and gentlemen, knights, people!"

"Ho, ho!" Replied the crowd.

"Ho, ho! This is an ancient custom! Let the vines thrive! Ho, ho! Let the sun ripen them!"

"Ho, ho! Let them ripen!"

"Ho, ho! Let them ferment! Let them take strength and flavour from the barrels! Let it change into wine! Let it flow into our cups and raise them to the honour of our majesty, the beautiful ladies, brave knights and industrious winemakers!"

“Ho, ho! Cheers!”

“Let them Beauties come forward!”

From a damask tent on the opposite side of the courtyard stood two women – Duchess Anna Henrietta and her dark-haired companion. Both were shrouded in long scarlet cloaks. “Let the young come forward!”

The ‘young’ were instructed in advance what to do. Dandelion went to the Duchess and Geralt stepped out to meet the dark-haired companion, who he knew as Fringilla Vigo.

Both women dropped their cloaks and the crowd rose in a thunderous ovation. Geralt swallowed.

The women were wearing sleeveless white shirts made of thin spiderweb like fabric, which did not even reach to their thighs. And lacy panties. And nothing more. Not even jewellery. And they walked barefoot.

Geralt offered Fringilla his arm, she willingly embraced him around the neck. She smelled of roses and amber. Her body was warm and soft.

The women were brought to the vat, Geralt with Fringilla and the Duchess with Dandelion and helped to stand up in the grape juice. The crowd roared.

“Ho, ho!”

Anarietta and Fringilla stood facing each other and laid their hands on each other’s shoulders to more easily maintain balance among the grapes, which rose to above their knees.

Juice spat and sprayed. The women spun around inside the vat and laughed like kids.

Fringilla shot the witcher a playful wink.

“Ho, ho!” Shouted the audience. “Let then ferment!”

Juice flowed and bubbled about the calves of the females.

The chamberlain struck his staff on the pavement. Geralt and Dandelion approached and help the women get out of the vat. Geralt saw Anarietta nibble on the troubadour’s ear when he lifted her in his arms. Her eyes glittered dangerously. He himself felt Fringilla’s lips brush his cheek, but could not swear whether by accident or intentionally. The strong smell of wine, hit him in the head. Fringilla stood on the stage and wrapped herself in a scarlet cloak. The brunette squeezed his hand strongly.

“These old traditions,” she said, “can be exciting, right?”

“Yes.”

“Thank you, witcher.”

“The pleasure is all mine.”

“Not all of it, I assure you.”

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“Pour, Reynart.”

The company at the next table performed a more festive divination – throwing a chain of peeled apple skins and guessing there future partners from the letter it resembled. Even though practically every throw produced the letter ‘S’, they continued to throw.

The knight poured.

“Milva, it turns out,” said the witcher, lost in thought, “is healthy, though she still wears a bandage around her ribs. But she is sitting in her room refusing to exit because she does not want to wear a bloody dress. It seemed that the conflict was going to break protocol, but the situation was calmed by the omniscient, Regis. Citing a hundred precedents forced the Chamberlain to bring her some male clothes. Angoulême was happy for a change to get rid of her pants and riding boots. After some soap, a comb and a dress she resembles a pretty girl. All of us seem to be in a better mood after a bath and clean clothes. Even me. I was in a fairly good mood when we went to the audience…”

“Wait a minute,” interrupted Reynart and with a movement of his head indicated the across the taproom. “We have some interest heading towards us. Ha, not one but two vineyards. Our Customer Malatesta is bringing his neighbour… and competitor. Wonder of wonders!”

“Who is the second?”

“Pomerol vineyards. From there comes the Cote de Blessure, the wine that we just drank.”

Malatesta, Vermentino’s vineyard administrator, waved his arms and rushed over to them. The man he was leading had lush black hair and a black moustache, like an outlaw rather than an honourable citizen.

“Allow me, gentlemen,” Malatesta said. “Mister Alcides Fierabras, Pomerol vineyard administrator.”

“Sit down, please.”

“Just a minute. Mister Witcher about the monster from our cellars. By the fact that you are here, I assume the beast is slain. Am I correct?”

“Quite dead.”

“The agreed upon sum,” Malatesta assured him, “will be paid to your account with G later today. Thank you very much, Mister Witcher. Very few large wineries can boast such a large cellar, deep and spacious, bearing to the north, neither too dry nor too wet – just perfect for wine. It was a shame that it could

not be used. Did you see for yourself the part of the cellar when the monster managed to crawl through? The devil knows from where… Probably straight out of hell…”

“The caves in volcanic tuffs often serve as havens for various monsters.” Reynart instructed importantly. He had accompanied the witcher for more than a month and was a good listener and learned things. “Sure enough, where there is a tuff, you’ll find a monster.”

“Maybe the tuff,” Malatesta squinted at him. “But people say it’s because our basement connects with deep caverns that lead into the heart of the country. Such caves are numerous in this country…”

“You don’t have to look far,” said the bearded Pomerol. “Also under our cellars are corridors that stretch for miles and nobody knows where they end. Those who went to explore never returned. And there have been seen terrible monsters. So I would ask…”

“I can guess,” said the witcher, “what you would ask. I accept. I will examine your cellars. My fee is determined in accordance with this and what I come across.”

“You will not regret it,” said the bearded man. “Uh, uh, uh… One more thing…”

“Speak. I’m listening.”

“The succubus that haunts the nights and torments men… The one that the enlightened Duchess has ordered you to kill… I think there is no requirement to kill her. She bothers no one, to tell the truth… Oh, sometimes we will visit when drunk… to sometimes just try a little…”

“But only the adults,” Malatesta added quickly.

“I had it on the tip of my tongue, neighbour. As I said, the succubus harms no one. And lately even appears to be frightened of you Mister Witcher. So why pursue her? After all, you do not need the cash. But if you are offended…”

“You could help my account with Gianfanelli,” Geralt said with a straight face. “A witcher pension fund.”

“So be it.”

“The succubus’s blonde head will not fall.”

“And farewell,” both of the vineyard administrators stood up. “We will leave you in peace and not disturb you. This is a day of festival. A tradition. And here in Toussaint a tradition is…”

“I know,” said Geralt. “Holy.”

***

The company at the next table should loudly with joy at a new divination, which was made by using a ball of pie dough and the bones of a fish. Drinking at the same time. The innkeeper and the wenches bustled about running with jugs.

“The famous succubus,” Reynart said scooping more cabbage into his dish, “was one of the first of the witcher contracts you accepted when you came to Toussaint. After that everything move so fast and you couldn’t get rid of customers. The funny thing is I do not remember which of the wineries gave you your first assignment…”

“You were not there. I happened the second day after the audience with the Duchess. The audience where you were not needed.”

“It’s no wonder. It was a private audience.”

“Private,” spluttered Geralt. “It was attended by about twenty people. And that is not counting the footmen who were motionless as statues, pages, young children and a boring clown. Among those that I counted, were Le Goff, the chamberlain who would rather be a confectioner. There were several nobles bending under the weight of gold chains. There were a few cronies in black, councillors, maybe judges. There was baron with a bull’s head coat of arms from Caed Myrkvid. And Fringilla, of course, who is obviously close to your duchess. And there was our bunch, including Milva in male attire. Oh, we were poorly expressed. It was not our whole group, we were missing Dandelion. Dandelion or rather Viscount Julian was lounging in a chair beside Duchess Anarietta and strutted like a peacock. A royal favourite. Only Anarietta, Fringilla and Dandelion sat. No one else was allowed to sit. Even so, I was glad we did not have to kneel. The Duchess listened to me very intently, but fortunately she jumped only a few times during my talk. When I finally briefly recounted my conversation with the flaminica, she anxiously wrung her hands. The gesture was as sincere as it was exaggerated. It probably sounds like an absurd contradiction in terms, but trust me, Reynart, it was precisely so.”

***

“Oh, oh, oh,” sighed the Duchess Anna Henrietta, wringing her hands. “Your story distresses me, Mister Geralt. It seizes my heart with sadness.”

She sniffled her nose and reached out her hand, Dandelion at once placed a cambric handkerchief embroidered with a monogram into it. The Duchess touched the handkerchief lightly to her cheeks, so as not to remove her makeup.

“Oh, oh,” she repeated. “So the druids know nothing of Ciri? Were they not able to offer help? Were all your efforts in vain as the outcome of your journey?”

“Surely not in vain,” he answered. “I recognise that I did not get any concrete

information from the druids or any clues, albeit only the most vague, to explain why Ciri had become the object of such fierce persecution. The druids, however, could not or would not help. In that case, I really did not learn anything new, but…"

He paused for a moment. Not to be dramatic, but just to wonder if he could speak frankly in from of the whole gathering.

"I know Ciri lives," he said dryly. "Probably was injured. And is still in danger. But she lives."

Anna Henrietta sighed again and took the handkerchief from Dandelion again.

"I promise you our help and support," she said. "Stay in Toussaint as long as you wish. You should know that I used to visit Cintra, I knew and cultivated a friendship with Pavetta and knew and loved little Ciri. I am with you wholeheartedly, Mister Geralt. If necessary, you will have the assistance of our scholars and sorcerers. The doors of our library and bookstores are open to you. I believe that we can find some clue, some sign or indication to point you on the right track. Do not act hastily. You need not hasten. You can stay here as a welcome guest as long as necessary."

"I thank you for your kindness and grace," Geralt bowed. "However, we must continue on the road. Ciri is still in danger. And we are also in danger. When we stop for too long in one place, the danger not only grows, but begins to threaten the people around us. I will not allow this."

The Duchess was silent for a while, stroking Dandelion's forearm with a rhythmic movement, like a cat.

"Your words are noble and honest. But you do not have to worry here. The villains that stalked you were crushed by my knighthood, so that none escape, so I have been briefed by Viscount Julian. And one who dares cross your path better be careful. You are under my protection."

"I appreciate that," Geralt swept another bow, and cursed his sore knee in spirit, and not just his knee. "However, I must not conceal what Viscount Dandelion has forgotten to tell you. The rogues who chased me to Belhaven and the one that the brave knights beat in Caed Myrkvid, were indeed rogues from the guild of illustrious rogues, but also wore the colour of Nilfgaard."

"And what of it?"

"Well, this was the tip of the force of Nilfgaardians that conquered Aedirn in twenty days, and they could do the same to you Duchy in twenty minutes.

"It is a war," he insisted. "What happened in the woods of Caed Myrkvid and

Belhaven maybe regarded as rebellion and disruption to the rear of the imperial troops. Something like that usually causes repression. In a state of war…"

"The war," interrupted the Duchess, lifting her nose in the air, "has undoubtedly been revoked. I wrote of this matter to my cousin Emhyr var Emreis. In my letter, I asked him firmly to stop the senseless bloodshed. The war has ended and there has definitely been a peace agreement."

"Not so," Geralt said calmly. "Across the Yaruga roam sword and fire, blood is being spilled. There is no indication that the war was to end. Rather the opposite."

He immediately regretted what he said.

"How is this possible?" The Duchess's nose lifted even higher, her voice became harsh. "Did I hear right? The war continues? Why were we not told about this? Minister Tremblay?"

"Excellency, I…" one if the nobles in gold chains fell to his knees. "I did not want to worry… Upset… Highness…"

"Guards," she screamed. "To the tower with him! You're fallen out of favour Mister Tremblay! In disgrace! Lord Chamberlain! Mister Secretary!"

"At your orders, Your grace…"

"Have our foreign minister immediately send a note to our cousin, the Emperor of Nilfgaard. We demand that he immediately, immediately cease fighting and sign for peace. For war and discord are bad things! Discord ruins strength and harmony!"

"Your truth has clarity" said the Chamberlain. So far he smelled like powdered sugar, now his face took on its colour.

"What are you still doing here, gentlemen? I have issued an order. No go, act!"

Geralt looked around discreetly. The noble and officials maintained their stone faces, similar incidents like this were nothing new at court. He decided from now on he was just going to agree with the Duchess.

Anarietta took the handkerchief and touch the tip of her nose with it and smiled at Geralt.

"As you can see," she said. "Your fears were in vain. You have nothing to fear and can stay here as long as you want."

"Yes, Your Excellency."

In the silence you could clearly hear the worms chewing wood in the antique furniture. And the curse of one of the groom in the far courtyard dealing with a horse.

“We would also like to ask you something, Mister Geralt,” Anarietta interrupted the silence. “Since you are a witcher.”

“At your service, Your Excellency.”

“It is a plea from the many of the virtuous ladies of Toussaint. A nightmare is troubling their homes. A spirit, a demon in female form, a succubus, so shameless that we dare not describe her, tortures faithful and virtuous spouses. She enters the bedrooms at night and makes all kinds of knavery and abominable perversion that our modesty forbids us to speak of. You as an expert, certainly know what it is.”

“Yes, Your Excellency.”

“The women on Toussaint ask that you put an end to this indecency. And I assure you our infinite gratitude.”

“Thank you for your confidence, Your Excellency.”

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Angoulême found the witcher and the vampire in the castle park; both were enjoying a walk and a quiet conversation.

“You will not believe,” she said. “You will not believe what I have to tell you. But it is the pure truth…”

“Speak.”

“Reynart de Bois-Fresnes, the Checkerboard knight, in addition to other knights, are in line at the county treasurer’s chamber. And you know what for? To collect his pay for this month! The line, is at least half an archery field long and there are so many tabards, the eyes get tired. When I asked Reynart about it he said that a knight-errant shouldn’t starve.”

“What is so strange in all this?”

“Are you kidding! A man becomes a knight for a noble calling! Not for a monthly salary!”

“One does not exclude the other,” Regis said seriously. “Trust me, Angoulême.”

“Trust him, Angoulême,” Geralt said drily. “Stop running around the castle in search of sensation, go keep Milva company. She is in a terrible mood and should not be left alone.”

“Right. Auntie has her period and because of it is more angry than a wasp. I think…”

“Angoulême!”

“I’m going, I’m going.”

Regis and Geralt stopped before a bed of slightly wilted Centifolias. Yet they

were unable to continue their conversation. From behind a greenhouse emerged a man dressed in an elegant coat of sienna.

“Good morning,” he bowed and wiped his knee with his biretta. “Can I ask which of you gentlemen, praise be, is the witcher named Geralt, famous in his trade?”

“I am.”

“My name is Jean Catillon, I am the steward of the Castel Toricella vineyards. The thing is that we could use a witcher in the cellars. I wanted to inquire if you were willing to…”

“What is it?”

“Well,” began Catillon, “because of this damn war, merchants rarely come, so inventories increase, and there are no new places in the cellars for the new barrels. We thought that the various caves and tunnels below the castle which are said to stretch across our country could be expanded. We found a suitable cave – large, vaulted, neither too wet or dry, it would have been good for the wine…”

“So what?” The witcher could not stand it.

“It appears that there is a monster prowling in the cave. It burned two people, reducing one to bones and the other one was left blind, sir, the monster spits or vomits some kind of caustic lye or something…”

“A solpuga,” said Geralt. “Also called a venenosera.”

“Here,” smiled Regis. “You can see for yourself, Sir Catillon that you are dealing with a professional. A professional, it seems who has fallen from heaven. And have you asked for help from the famous local knights? The Duchess has a whole regiment of them and this is precisely their kind of mission, their reason for being.”

“That is not their reason,” Steward Catillon shook his head. “Their reason is to protect the highways, routes and passes, because if the merchants don’t reach here, we would soon be broke. In addition, our knights are brave and warlike – but only on horseback. They wouldn’t go underground for anything. And plus they are expensive…”

He stopped and was silent. He had the look of a man who wanted to spit but couldn’t. And a look of regret.

“They are expensive,” Geralt finished for him, but not particularly scathing. “Take note, my good man that I am even more expensive. It’s a competitive market. But if we have a contract, I’ll dismount from my horse and go underground. Think about it, but do not think about it too long, because I will not be in Toussaint long.”

“You surprise me,” Regis said, as soon as the steward had walked away. “Has the witcher in you suddenly been revived? Do you accept the contract? Are you going to hunt the monster?”

“I too am surprised,” Geralt admitted frankly. “I reacted unconsciously, impulsively. Somehow I felt pulled to it. But a bid can be rejected as too low. Let’s get back to our conversation.”

“Wait a minute,” Regis said looking over his shoulder. “Something tells me that you’re about to have more business.”

Geralt cursed under his breath. On a path lined with cypress, two knights were walking towards them. He instantly recognised the first one; the enormous bull’s head on a field of white snow could not be confused with any other shield. The second knight, tall, grey, with nobly angular features, like they were carved from granite, had a cross with golden lilies on a blue background. Stopping at the prescribed distance of two steps, the knights bowed. Geralt and Regis bowed back; the four of them remained in orderly silence by the tradition of chivalry for the count of ten heartbeats.

“Allow me, gentlemen,” said the man with the bull’s head shield, “to introduce, Baron Palmerin de Launfal. And I, as you can remember am called…”

“Baron de Peyrac-Peyran. As if it was possible to forget.”

“We have a case for the witcher,” said Baron de Peyrac-Peyran. “Relative, so to speak, to his professional work.”

“Speak.”

“In private.”

“I have no secrets from Mister Regis.”

“But the noble lords have them,” the vampire smiled. “Therefore, if I may, I will take a look at that beautiful pavilion, which is probably a secluded toilet. Lord de Peyrac-Peyran… Lord de Launfal…”

Bows were exchanged.

“I’m listening,” Geralt broke the silence without thinking for a moment about waiting ten heartbeats.

“It’s,” Peyrac-Peyran lowered his voice and looked around fearfully, “the succubus… The spirit that haunts the night. The Duchess and ladies have asked you to destroy. May I ask how much you have been promised to kill the monster?”

“I’m sorry, gentlemen, but it is a professional secret.”

“We understand, we understand,” said the knight with the cross of lilies. “It is

clear that we are dealing with an honourable man. Verily, I fear that such a man will find insult with our proposal, but I must give it. Renounce this contract, Sir Witcher. Please leave the succubus alone. We will not say anything to the Duchess and the ladies. And on my honour, we men of Toussaint, will exceed the amount of the ladies. You would be amazed by our generosity."

"Your proposal," said the witcher in a cold voice, "is in fact not too far from an insult."

"Mister Geralt," Palmerin de Launfal's face was hard and serious. "I'll tell you what we dare to propose. Ergo, there is a rumour about you. Saying that you only kill those monsters that are a threat. A real threat. Not from imagination, or from ignorance or prejudice. Let me tell you that the succubus does not threaten or harm anyone. Oh, she visits sleeping men… from time to time… And mortifies a little…"

"But only to adults," Peyrac-Peyran quickly added.

"The ladies of Toussaint," Geralt said looking around, "would not be very happy if they knew of this conversation. Nor would the Duchess."

"We fully agree with you," murmured Palmerin de Launfal. "We recommend the utmost discretion. There is no need to irritate the bigoted guardian of decency."

"Open an account for me with one of the local dwarven banks," Geralt said slowly and quietly. "And amaze me with your generosity. But be advised that it is not easy to amaze me."

"We are still going to try," Peyrac-Peyran said confidently.

They exchanged farewells.

He returned to Regis, who of course had heard everything with his vampire hearing.

"Now," he said without smiling, "you can argue that it was an involuntary reflex and inexplicable impulse. But how do you explain that to an open bank account?"

Geralt looked somewhere high above the tops of the cypress trees.

"Who knows," he said. "Maybe we'll spend a few days here. Given Milva's broken ribs, it may even be more than a few days. Maybe a couple of weeks? It would not hurt if during this time we gained some financial independence."

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"So that's were there bank account with Gianfanelli came from," Reynart de Bois-Fresnes shook his head. "Well, if the Duchess finds out, it will mean new changes in rank, there would be a new distribution of patents. Ha, maybe I'd

even get promoted? On my honour, it's a shame you do not have the qualities of a snitch. Tell me now of the famous banquet that caused you so much joy. I longed to take part in it, to eat and drink! But they sent me to the border, to a watchtower, in the cold and grey mountains. What despair, the fate of a knight…!"

"The large and highly anticipated banquet," Geralt said, "was prepared with great care and diligence. We mainly had to find Milva, who had holed up in the stables and convince her that her attendance at the banquet was essential and upon it depended the fate of Ciri and nearly the whole world. We almost forcibly compelled her to wear women's clothes. Then we had to get Angoulême to promise to behave as a well-behaved young lady, and to especially avoid words like 'fuck' and 'ass'. And when we finally got everything ready and to ensure our success we downed a cup of wine, your confectioner Le Goff appeared. Smelling like frosting and puffing like a pig's bladder."

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"By virtue of my office," Le Goff said through his nose. "I want to assure you that at the festive board, Her Highness has few places of honour and importance, therefore no one can feel prejudice to the place allocated to him. But because here, in Toussaint, we pay special attention to traditions and customs…"

"Get to the point, sir."

"The banquet is tomorrow. I organise all guests according to their origin and status."

"Sure," the Witcher said seriously. "The most important of us is Dandelion. Both in origin and status."

"Viscount Julian," the Chamberlain said, wrinkling his nose, "is an extraordinary guest of honour. As such, he will sit at the right hand of Her Serene Highness."

"Sure," repeated the Witcher, with all seriousness. "And he has failed to clarify what our ranks, titles and honours are?"

"He revealed," the Chamberlain coughed, "but only that the noble gentlemen and maidens are travelling incognito, and therefore cannot reveal their names, ranks and titles."

"That is correct. What is the problem?"

"I have to know! You are guest and companions of the Viscount, so you will be sitting near the head of the table… Among the Barons. But it is still possible that you gentlemen and ladies maybe of a higher rank, which would entitle you to sit closer to the Duchess…"

“He,” said the witcher, pointing to the vampire without hesitation, who was not far away admiring a tapestry which took up most of the wall, “is an Earl. But not a word about it. It is a secret.”

“I understand,” gasped the fat man with excitement. “In those circumstances… I will seat him next to Countess Notturna, the noble and gracious aunt of the Duchess.”

“You will not regret it, neither you nor the aunt,” Geralt assured him with a straight face. “The Earl has no equal in the ways of art and conversation.”

“I am pleased to hear it. For your part, Lord of Rivia, I will sit you next to the venerable Lady Fringilla. As is the tradition. You carried her to the vat, you are her… hmmm… knight, as it…”

“I understand.”

“Excellent. Ah, Earl…”

“What?” The vampire said surprised, having just moved away from the tapestry, representing the battle with a Cyclops.

“Nothing, nothing,” Geralt smiled. “We were just talking.”

“Aha,” Regis nodded. “I do not know if you gentlemen have noticed… But the Cyclops in the tapestry, the one with the club… Look at the toes on his feet. I’m afraid to say that he has two left feet.”

“Indeed,” Chamberlain Le Goff confirmed without a trace of amazement. “There are more of these tapestries in Beauclair. The weaver who wove it was a true master. But he drank a lot. But he was an artist.”

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“It’s time,” said the witcher, avoiding the eyes of the wine tipsy girls peering at him from the other table, who were amusing themselves with divination. “Let’s go, Reynart. Pay up, get the horses and lets go to Beauclair.”

“I know why you are in such a hurry,” the knight showed his teeth. “Don’t worry, green eyes will be waiting. It is hardly midnight. Tell me about the banquet.”

“I’ll tell you and we’ll go.”

“Let’s go.”

***

The sight of the huge horseshoe shaped banquet table clearly reminded them that autumn was finished and winter was approaching. Among the food bowls and trays, were platters of venison and all possible types of game. There were whole quarters of wild boar, deer, hams and pink slices of smoked meat and pies. All decorated with seasoned mushrooms, cranberries and rowanberries. There

were autumn birds – grouse, pheasant, quail, served with decorative wings and tails, roasted in hazel and mistle. They also served fish – trout and pike, fished from the mountain streams.

Even in autumn they did not lack the festive greens. It included a salad of lettuce, which must have been harvested while still under the snow. Flowers had been substituted with mistletoe.

In the middle of the horseshoe table at the place of honour, where the Duchess Anarietta and her guest would sit, was a large silver tray filled with decorations. Among the flowers, lemon slices, artichoke hearts and truffles, stood an enormous sturgeon on whose back stood a heron. In its raised beak it held a golden ring.

“I swear by the heron!” Peyrac-Peyran the well-known Baron with the bull’s head coat of arms cried, standing up and raising his cup. “By the heron I swear to defend the honour of knighthood, and to never leave the field to anyone!”

The vow was rewarded with tumultuous applause. They began to eat.

“I swear by the heron,” shouted another knight with a twisted aggressive moustache like a broom. “I swear to defend to the last drop of my blood the borders of Her Excellency Anna Henrietta! To prove my loyalty, I swear to paint on my shield a heron and for a year to fight incognito and shall be called the Knight of the White Heron! Health to Our Lady the Duchess!”

“Health! Happiness! Cheers! Long live the Duchess!”

Anarietta thanked them with a slight nod of her diamond tiara decorated head. She was wearing so many diamonds, that if she was to walk past a window she would scratch the glass. Dandelion sat beside her and smiled stupidly. A little further on, between two matrons, sat Emiel Regis. He was dressed in a black velvet jacket which made him look like a vampire. He served the matrons with conversation and they listened fascinated.

Geralt took a platter covered in a perch and parsley and offered it to Fringilla Vigo who was sitting to his left. She wore a gown of blue satin and a gorgeous amethyst necklace. She looked at him from under her long eyelashes, lifted her cup and smiled mysteriously.

“Your health, Geralt. I’m glad that we sat next to each other.”

“Do not praise the day before sunset,” he said returning her smile, because he was in a good mood. “The banquet has barely begun.”

“On the contrary. It has lasted long enough, you haven’t given me a compliment. How long must I wait?”

“Your beauty so dazzles me that I lack the words.”

“Slow down, slow down,” she laughed, and he swore that it was honest. “I fear to think how far we would go at this rate before the end of the banquet. Start from… Well, say I have an elegant dress and blue suits me.”

“The colour blue suits you. But I have to admit that I liked you more in white.”

He recognised a challenge in her emerald eyes. He feared to accept it. His good humour did not reach that far.

Cahir and Milva sat on the opposite side of the table. The young man was sitting between two noble young ladies, probably baronesses that kept talking to him. Meanwhile, the archer kept company with an older gentleman, dark and silent, his stone face scarred from smallpox.

A little further on sat Angoulême, leading yarns and the uproar of young knights. “What is this?” She squeaked, waving around a silver knife. “A blunt knife? Are they afraid that we will start a fight at the banquet?”

“These knives,” explained Fringilla, “have been used in Beauclair since the days of Princess Caroline Roberta, Anna Henrietta’s grandmother. Karoberta hated when the guests at the table picked their teeth with knives and blades with rounded tips were introduced so there was no way of picking.”

“No way,” agreed Angoulême, smiling impishly. “Fortunately, they gave me a fork!”

She pretended to put the fork in her mouth, but a menacing glare from Geralt stopped her. The knight who sat to his right laughed with a vibrant falsetto.

Geralt took a pot of duck in aspic and served it to Fringilla. He saw two young Baronesses religiously looking at Cahir, and how he honestly tried to divide among them equally his attention. He saw the young knights bustle around Angoulême, getting her food and laughing at her silly jokes.

He saw Milva crumbling bread and staring at the tablecloth.

Fringilla seemed to read his thoughts.

“It’s too bad,” she whispered, leaning towards him, “about your tight-lipped friend. Well, such things happen when laying out the table. Chivalry is not Baron de Trastamara’s strong point.”

“Maybe it’s better,” Geralt said quietly, “a slobbery and willing courtier would have been worse. I know Milva.”

“Are you sure?” She looked at him quickly. “Could it be you measure her with your own staff? Which, frankly. Is pretty grim.”

He did not answer, instead he poured wine. And he recognised it was time to clarify a certain issue.

“You’re a sorceress, right?”

“I am,” she said, deftly hiding her total surprise. “How did you know?”

“I can feel an aura,” he did not enter into details. “I have had experience.”

“To be clear,” she said. “I did not intend to deceive anyone. On the other hand, I am under no obligation to show off my profession or to impose a pointy hat and black cloak. Why should they have to scare children with me? I have the right to be incognito.”

“I do not deny it.”

“I am in Beauclair because here is the largest and richest library in the known world. Besides the university, that is. But universities guard access to their shelves and here I am a relative and friend to Anarietta and can do anything I want.”

“An enviable position.”

“During the audience the duchess suggested that in the library or archive you may find some useful information. Do not be fooled by her exaltation, she’s like that. But you may find something in the local books. You just have to know where to look.”

“As simple as that.”

“Your enthusiasm is really contagious and encourages me to continue the conversation,” her green eyes flashed. “I guess the reason is because you do not trust me, correct?”

“Would you like more hazel grouse?”

“I swear by the heron!” A young knight from the end of the horseshoe got up and tied a sash that was held out by a neighbour at the table around one eye. “I vow to not take off this sash until all the bandits in the passage of Cervantes are killed!”

The Duchess nodded at him with her sparkling tiara.

Geralt hoped Fringilla would not pursue the subject. He was wrong.

“You do not believe or trust me,” she said. “You have caused me a painful double blow. Not only do you doubt the sincerity that I want to help, but you do not believe that I can. Oh, Geralt! You have hurt my pride and lofty ambition.”

“Listen…”

“No!” She raised her knife and fork as if threatened them. “Do not explain yourself. I cannot stand men who are justified.”

“What kind of man can you stand?”

Her eyes narrowed, but she still held the cutlery like knives ready to strike.

“The list is long,” she said slowly, “and I do not want to bore you with the

details. I will mention only those men occupied by distinguished positions who are willing to follow a loved one to the end of the world and do not succumb to fear and despise danger. And do not give up even when it seems there is no chance."

"What about other positions on the list?" He could not contain himself. "Are their men who you do like? Are they also crazy?"

"What is real masculinity," she mockingly shook her head, "but the right mixture of crazy and style?"

"Ladies and gentlemen, barons and knights!" Cried the Chamberlain Le Goff as he rose and stood with both hands on a gigantic glass. "Under these circumstances I would make a toast to the health of our most serene Ladyship, the Duchess Anna Henrietta!"

"Health and happiness!"

"Hurray!"

"Long live the Duchess!"

"And now ladies and gentlemen," the Chamberlain set down the glass and gestured towards the servants, "Now… Magna beast!"

On a tray resting on the shoulders of four strapping servants was a gargantuan roast being brought into the hall.

"Magna beast!" The rest of the guest cried in chorus. "Hurray! Magna beast!"

"And what fucking beast is that?" Angoulême expressed her concern aloud. "I won't eat it until I find out what it is."

"It's a deer," Geralt said. "A roast deer."

"And not just any deer," Milva spoke, clearing her throat. "The deer weighs about seven hundredweight."

"Close. It is seven hundredweight and forty pounds," said the baron sitting next to her hoarsely. They were the first words that he had spoken since the beginning of the banquet.

Maybe it would have been the beginning of a conversation, but the archer blushed, fixed her eyes on the tablecloth and resumed crushing her bread.

But Geralt took to heart, Fringilla's words.

"Were you perhaps, Lord Baron," he asked, "the happy hunter, who took down this beast?"

"No," he replied. "My nephew, an excellent marksman. But these are men's interests, so to speak… I'm sorry, I did not mean to bore the ladies present…"

"From what bow?" Milva asked, still staring at the tablecloth. "I'm sure from at least a seventy?"

“The double bent zefar,” the Baron said slowly, visibly surprised. “Laminate, Layers of yew, acacia, ash and bonded tendons. Seventy-five pounds of force.”

“And tension?”

“Twenty-nine inches,” the Baron spoke more slowly, he seemed to almost spit out the words.

“A nice piece,” Milva said happily. “It can shot a deer from perhaps a hundred paces. If the shooter is really good.”

“I,” growled the Baron somewhat indignantly, “at a quarter of a hundred paces, hit a pheasant.”

“At a quarter of a hundred paces,” Milva lifted her head, “I hit a squirrel.”

The Baron, clearly flustered, quickly started on his food and drink.

“A good bow is half the success,” he stammered. “But equally important, so to speak, are quality arrows. To me the best…”

“To the health of Her Excellency Anna Henrietta! To the health of Viscount Julian de Lettenhove!”

“Cheers!”

“…And she kicked him in the ass,” Angoulême finished another silly joke. The young knights rolled with laughter.

The Baronesses whose names were Queline and Nique, listened to Cahir with open mouths, wide eyes and burning cheeks. At the head of the banquet table could be heard Regis and the higher aristocracy. For Geralt – even with his witcher hearing – could only make out a few buzz words here and there, but they seemed to be talking about ghosts, strigas, succubi and vampires. Regis gesticulated with a silver fork and argued the best remedy for vampires are silver, whose lightest touch is absolutely deadly to a vampire. *What about garlic?* Asked one of the ladies. *Garlic is also effective;* Regis went on, *but socially awkward, because of the awful smell.*

In the gallery an orchestra played softly, fiddles and flutes, and jugglers and fire-eaters boasted their arts. Jesters tried to entertain the company, but Angoulême raked over the top of them. Then came a bear – which to everyone’s amusement did a pile on the floor. Angoulême became sad – she could not compete with something like that.

The Duchess suddenly fell into a rage – with some reckless word, one of the barons fell out of favour and went under escort to the tower. No one but the victim showed any sorrow.

“Don’t leave here so quickly,” Fringilla Vigo said suddenly, sipping from a cup. “Even if you prefer to run away, none of this will.”

“Please, do not read my thoughts.”

“Sorry. They were so strong that I read them involuntarily.”

“I don’t know how many times I have heard that.”

“I myself don’t know how many times I know. Please, eat the artichokes, they are healthy and are good for the heart. The heart is an important organ in the male, the second when it comes to validity.”

“I thought the most important were rank and madness.”

“Qualities of the mind should go hand in hand with qualities of the body. This gives perfection.”

“Nobody is perfect.”

“This is not an argument. You have to try them. You know what. I *will* have that hazel grouse.”

He cut the bird on her plate so fast and suddenly that the witch trembled.

“Do not leave here so fast,” she said again. “First, because you do not have too. And you are not in danger…”

“Of course not,” he burst out. “Nilfgaard will be frightened of a protest note from the Duchess. And if they did risk coming here, they’d be expelled by knights with sashes binding their eyes and vows made to herons.”

“Nothing threatens you here,” she said, ignoring his sarcasm. “Toussaint is considered the land of fairy tales, silly, clueless and thanks to its sustained economic focus in a state of constant drinking and recklessness. As such, it is not taken seriously by anyone, but is permitted to enjoy certain privileges. In the end we are the most prominent producer of wine and as we know, life without wine would be very unstable. In Toussaint there are no spies, agents or secret service. Toussaint doesn’t need an army, just wandering knights wearing blindfolds because Toussaint is never attacked. By the look of you, I guess I have not convinced you.”

“Not at all.”

“A pity,” Fringilla squinted. “I hate half-measures or half-promises. Neither of these things should be done by half. So I’ll tell you – Fulko Artevelde, the prefect of Riebrune, thinks you are dead, some fugitives told him that the druids burned you alive. Fulko is doing his best to cover up the matter. If the case came to light, it could trigger an investigation that could cost Fulko his career at best. And when he sees you alive it will be too late – what he said in the reports will be binding.”

“You know a lot.”

“I do not deny it. So the argument about the persecution from the

Nilfgaardians disappears. And now nothing forces your rapid departure."

"Interesting."

"But true. From Toussaint you can leave by four passes that lead to four different parts of the world. The Druids did not tell you anything and refused to cooperate. The mountain elf has disappeared…"

"You really do know a lot."

"You already said that."

"And you want to help."

"And you refuse my help. You do not believe in the sincerity of my intentions. You don't trust me."

"Listen, I…"

"Do not explain yourself. Eat some more artichokes."

Again someone made a vow to the heron. Cahir spoke to the baronesses giving them compliments. Angoulême, tipsy, could be heard throughout the whole room. The pockmarked and flushed baron, mesmerized by discussions about archery and hunting, even started flirting with Milva.

"Please, my lady, try the wild boar ham. So to speak… They are from my manor forest, where a whole herd of them reside."

"Oh."

"There are among them some outstanding boars to hunt… Maybe sometime… you could come and we can, so to speak, go hunting together…"

"But we will not be staying here long," Milva looked pleadingly at Geralt. "More important tasks than hunting lie ahead."

But when she saw how disappointed the Baron looked, she hastily added, "Under other circumstances, I would be happy to go hunting boars."

The Baron immediately cheered up.

"If not for hunting," he said elated, "at least for a visit. I would honestly like to invite you all to my manor. I can show you, so to speak, my collection of hunting trophies, bows and sword…"

Milva looked down at the tablecloth. The Baron grabbed a tray of fowl and served her then filled her cup.

"Excuse me, graceful maiden," he said. "I'm not, so to speak, an entertaining companion. I do not control courtly manners and smooth words are foreign to me…"

"I," Milva shyly confessed, "I was raised in the woods. I can appreciate peace and silence."

Fringilla found Geralt's hand under the table and held it tightly. Geralt looked

into her eyes. He could not guess what was hidden in them.

“I trust you,” he said. “I believe in the sincerity of your purpose.”

“You do not lie?”

“I vow by the heron.”

***

The City guard must have had the chance to celebrate Yule because he walked unsteadily, banging his halberd into signs and through a slurred proclamation announced that it was the tenth of the clock, when in fact it was well after midnight.

“You’ll have to go to Beauclair alone,” Reynart de Bois-Fresnes said soon after they left the tavern. “I shall stay in the city. Good night, Geralt.”

The Witcher knew that his friend had a love affair with a certain lady. Whose husband is often on the road for business. He never talked about it because men do not talk of such things.

“Good night, Reynart. Take care of the skoffin. Don’t let it spoil.”

“It’s freezing.”

It was freezing. The streets were empty and dark. The moon shone on the roofs, shining like diamonds on the ice that hung from the eaves. Roach’s horseshoes rang against the pavement.

Roach, thought the witcher as he headed towards the palace of Beauclair, *a graceful grey mare, a gift from Anna Henrietta. And Dandelion.*

He urged his horse forwards. Hurrying up.

***

The next day after the banquet they all met for breakfast, and they soon became accustomed to going straight to the castle kitchen. For some reason, they were always welcome and always found something for them in the pots, pans or grills, usually bread, bacon, cheese or maybe pickled mushrooms. They never missed a jar or two of red or white from the famous local vineyards.

They went there every morning for the two weeks they spent in Beauclair – Geralt, Regis, Cahir, Milva and Angoulême. Only Dandelion had breakfast elsewhere.

“He,” Angoulême slathered some bread with butter, “has his bacon brought to him in bed! With everyone bowing to him!”

Geralt was willing to believe that the girl was right. And this morning decided to check it out.

***

He found Dandelion in the Knights Hall. The poet wore a crimson beret as

big as a loaf of bread and was wearing a doublet of the same colour richly embroidered with gold thread. He was sitting on a stool with his lute on his knees and his head was nodding carelessly in answer to the flattery of the courtiers and ladies who circled around him.

Anna Henrietta was thankfully not in sight, so Geralt unhesitatingly violated etiquette and headed straight for his friend. Dandelion saw him coming, swelled and with an imperious gesture said, “Ladies and gentlemen, please leave us in private. Also the servants are allow to leave.”

He clapped his hands and before the echo of his clap returned from the vaulted ceiling of the hall, only the two of them stood there – and the smell of perfume, which hovered in the air after the ladies left.

“Pretty fun.” Geralt said without exaggeration, “this is the chase, huh? It must be a nice feeling to give orders or clap or a monarchical frown. See how they retreat, like crabs, bending before you in reverence. Pretty fun, right? Sir Favourite?”

Dandelion scowled.

“Are you here for something specific,” he said gruffly, “or just this crap?”

“About something very specific.”

“Speak, I’m listening.”

“I need three riding horses. For me, Cahir and Angoulême. And two wagons, loaded with rations and feed. Can you ask for them from your Duchess? You have served long enough, I hope?”

“No problem,” Dandelion tuned his lute not looking at the witcher. “But I’m surprised by your haste. I would say it surprises me as much as your silly sarcasm.”

“My urgency surprises you?”

“Just so you know. October is over and the weather deteriorates noticeably. Snow will be falling in the passes any day now.”

“And you wonder at my hurry,” the witcher nodded. “But that reminds me, get more warm clothing. Fur.”

“I thought,” Dandelion said slowly, “that we would wait out the winter here. That we would be here…”

“If you like,” Geralt said without thinking, “you can stay.”

“Yes,” Dandelion put his lute aside and stood up. “I think I will stay.”

The witcher gasped audibly. He was silent. He looked at the tapestry, which depicted an imaginary fight between a titan and a dragon. The titan was standing on two left feet, trying to break the dragon’s jaw, and the dragon did not look too

thrilled.

“I’m staying,” Dandelion repeated. “I love Anarietta. And she loves me.”

Geralt remained silent.

“I will arrange the horses,” Dandelion promised. “For you, I’ll prepare a thoroughbred mare named Roach, of course. For the journey you will also get food, equipment and warm clothing. But honestly, I advise you to wait until spring. Anarietta…”

“Do I hear you correctly?” The Witcher finally regained his voice. “Are my ears deceiving me?”

“Your reason has certainly failed,” snapped the troubadour, “How are your other senses, I don’t know. But to be safe I will repeat – Anarietta and I love you. Abide in Toussaint. With her.”

“Like what? A lover? A favourite? Or maybe the Prince Consort?”

“Formal and legal status doesn’t mean anything to me,” Dandelion admitted frankly. “But you can’t rule out anything. Marriage or not.”

Geralt was silent again, contemplating the titan’s battle against the dragon.

“Dandelion,” he said finally. “If you’ve been drinking, sober up quickly. If you haven’t been drinking, then let’s have a drink. Then we’ll talk.”

“I don’t quite understand,” Dandelion said frowning. “What are you saying?”

“Think a minute.”

“Are you embarrassed about my relationship with Anarietta? Are you asking me to reconsider it? Don’t worry, I’ve thought about it. Anarietta loves me…”

“Have you ever heard a saying,” said Geralt, “that princesses leap after love like hares? Even if Anarietta is not so frivolous, forgive my candour, it seems to me, that…”

“What?”

“That it is only in fairy tales that Duchesses marry musicians.”

“First of all,” snapped Dandelion, “Even such an ignoramus like you should have heard of morganatic marriages. Do I have to get out some examples from ancient and recent history? Secondly, it may surprise you, but I am not of insignificance. My family, de Lettenhove, are derived from…”

“I’m listening to you,” Geralt cut him off again, “and I don’t believe my own ears. Is this really my friend Dandelion, who is speaking such crap? If it is indeed my friend, Dandelion, has he lost all shred of reason? Is it really Dandelion, whom I had known to be a realist, who is now living in a sphere of illusion? Open your eyes, you idiot!”

“Oh,” the troubadour said slowly, clenching his lips. “The roles are reversed.

I am blind, but you have become a sober and factual observer. It used to be the opposite. And what is this curious thing that I cannot see? Huh? What have I, according to you, closed my eyes to?”

“Most of all,” said the witcher, “that your chosen duchess is arrogant and ridiculous and spoiled. She is a big child for whom you are nothing but a toy, which she will discard without reproach as soon as a new musician appears with a fascinating new repertoire.”

“What you say is low and vulgar. I hope you realise?”

“I realise that you have gone completely mad, Dandelion.”

The poet was silent, stroking the neck of his lute. It took some time before he spoke again.

“We came out of Brokilon on a joy expedition. Without the slightest chance of success, we followed a mirage, a dream, a desire, an unattainable ideal. We set off in pursuit like crazy fools. But I, Geralt, I did not say a word of complaint. I did not call you crazy or ridicule you. Because you were filled with hope and love. They guided you on this insane mission. And me too. But I have caught up with a mirage, and I was lucky enough that the dream came true. My mission has ended. I have found what is hard to find. And I cannot give it up. Is that supposed to be madness? I’d be a fool if I left.”

Geralt was silent for as long as Dandelion had been before.

“Poetry,” he said. “In that you have no equal. I do not have anything to say, you have convinced me with your arguments. Farewell, Dandelion.”

“Farewell, Geralt.”

***

The library of the palace was indeed huge. The room which housed it was at least twice the size of the Knights Hall, where he had left Dandelion. The library had a glass ceiling, through which sunlight poured. Geralt imagined, however, that in summer it would heat up like hell.

The passages between the shelves were so narrow that they had to walk very carefully to avoid knocking over stacks of books.

“Here I am,” He heard a call.

The centre of the library disappeared among piles of books. Many lay completely disordered, one by one or in clusters.

“Here, Geralt.”

He found here between the bookish canyons and gorges. She was kneeling among scattered books, fanning them and sorting. She wore a modest grey dress pulled up slightly for comfort. Geralt saw that the view was very attractive.

“Do not be scared of this mess,” she said wiping her forehead with her forearm, because her hands were covered in thin silk gloves, dirty from dust. “They are performing inventory and cataloguing. But they have stopped at my request. I wanted to be alone in the library. I cannot work when a stranger is gazing at the back of my neck.”

“I’m sorry. Do you want me to leave?”

“You’re not a stranger,” she narrowed her green eyes. “Your gaze does not bother me… On the contrary, it makes me happy. Don’t just stand there. Sit down here on the books.”

He sat down on a hardcover encyclopaedia.

“This is a mess,” Fringilla made a sweeping gesture around her, “but it is going to make my job easier. I can get to the volumes that would normally lie at the bottom of a pile and would be impossible to move. The court librarians moved mountains of papers and parchments, so some of the real jewels of literature can see the light of day, some true rarities. Look. Have you ever see this?”

“*Speculum Aureum?* I’ve seen it.”

“I forgot, sorry. You’ve seen a lot. That was a compliment, not sarcasm. But look at this one, *Gesta Regum*. From this we begin to understand who your Ciri really is and what blood flows in her veins… You know, you look even more sour than usual. What is the reason?”

“Dandelion.”

“Will you tell me about it?”

He spoke. Fringilla listened, sitting with her legs crossed on the pile of books.

“Hmmm,” she said when he had finished. “I admit that I expected something similar. I have noticed Anarietta showing unmistakable signs of falling in love.”

“Falling in love?” He raised his eyebrows. “Or a noble whim?”

“Do you not believe,” she looked at him sharply, “of a pure and sincere love?”

“My belief or disbelief,” he said, “has nothing to do with it. It is Dandelion and his obsessive…”

He suddenly lost confidence and did not finish.

“With love,” Fringilla said, “it is like nervous cramps. You cannot even be effected until they attack, and you cannot even imagine something like that. And when you describe it, nobody would believe it.”

“Some part does,” agreed the witcher. “But there are also differences. Against nervous cramps common sense won’t protect you. And there is no cure.”

“Love mocks sense. That is part of its charm and beauty.”

“Stupidity rather.”

She got up and approached him while taking off her gloves. Her eyes gave the feeling of being deep and dark behind the curtain of her lashes. She smelled of amber, roses, the dust from the library, aging paper and printing ink. Those smells had nothing to do with aphrodisiacs – and yet for him they worked.

“You do not believe,” her voice changed, “in love at first sight? Fatal attraction? The collision of celestial bodies?”

She reached out and put her hands on his shoulders. He grabbed her around the waist. Her face approached reluctantly, wary, as if afraid to frighten some very timid creature.

And then the celestial bodies collided and the earth moved.

They fell in a pile of parchment that scattered everywhere under their weight. Geralt stuck his nose into Fringilla’s neckline. He hugged her and grabbed her knee. He rolled up her skirt to her waist knocking over several books, including *Lives of the Prophets*, full of mysterious illustrations, as well as *De Haemorrhoidibus*, an interesting, though controversial medical treatise. The witcher pushed aside volumes and pulled at the dress impatiently. Fringilla eagerly raised her hips.

Something pushed against her shoulder. She turned her head. *Learning the Art of Midwifery*. Quickly, so as not to tempt the devil, she looked in the other direction. The *Sulphurous Hot Springs*. In fact it was getting warmer. From the corner of her eye she saw an open book which rested by her head. *Reflections on Inevitable Death*. Even better, she thought.

The witcher struggled with her panties. She raised her hips, but this time only slightly, so that it looked like a random movement and not defiant help. She did not know him and did not know to respond. Whether he prefers that a woman knows what she wants, or does he like a woman who pretends she doesn’t know. And if he would be discouraged by panties that offered resistance.

The witcher, however, seemed to show no signs of discouragement. You could say the contrary. Seeing that it was time, Fringilla eagerly spread her legs, bringing down books and pamphlets stacked in piles, which poured over them like an avalanche. A heavy, leather bound copy of *Mortgage Law* painfully struck her in the ribs and the *Codex Diphmaticus*, adorned with brass fittings, fell on Geralt’s wrist. Geralt assessed and took advantage of the situation – placing the large tome where it was necessary. Fringilla squeaked because the fittings were cold. But only for a moment.

She gasped loudly, letting go of the witcher's hair and throwing her hands out, grasping both hands into the surrounding books, he left hand hold a book on geometry and her right hold a book about reptiles and amphibians. Geralt, who held her by the hips, unwittingly knocked over another pile of books, he was too preoccupied to worry about the pages that rained down on them.

Fringilla moaned uncontrollably, her head buried into the book *Reflections on Inevitable Death*.

Fringilla moaned again. The witcher did not hear it because her thighs were tightly squeezing his ears. He knocked over *The History of Wars* and *Sciences Needed for a Happy Life*. He fought with the buttons and hooks of her dress, inadvertently reading the inscriptions on covers and spines of books. At the level of Fringilla's waist lay *Breeding Animals*, in close proximity to her lovely breasts was a hard critical publication about useless and corrupt civil servants, and below that an economic study called *Economics and Science – How to create, distribute and consume wealth*.

Shelves swayed and columns of books collapsed like rocks in a strong earthquake. With a thud, from the shelf fell a first edition copy of *De Larvis Scenicis et figuris comicis*, followed by a conventional and well-known book about inventory release and commands of training troops and a book on the Heraldry of Jan de Attire adorned with the beautiful engravings.

The witcher moaned, dropping more volumes to the floor with a kick from his leg.

Fringilla leaned back and cried out, hitting with her heel a pile of books. A copy of *Reflections and Meditations for Every Day of the Year*, an anonymous and interesting work, somehow appeared on Geralt's back.

Geralt read over her shoulder, finding out whether he wanted to or not, notes that had been written by a doctor named Albertus Rivus, in a book called *Academia Cintensis*, printed by the master typographer Johann Froben Junior in the second year of the reign of His Majesty King Corbertt.

Suddenly there was a silence in which only the faint sound of rustling pages could be heard.

What should I do, Fringilla wondered, lightly touching the hard edges of Geralt's side and a copy of the *Reflections on the Nature of Things*. Make a suggestion? Or wait for him to make a suggestion? What would he think of me? But what if he doesn't make a suggestion?

"Let's find a bed," the witcher solved her dilemma. "It's not right to treat books this way."

***

We found a bed, Geralt remembered, he rode straight into an alley and with a kick spurred Roach into a gallop. We found the bed in her chambers in the alcove. We made love to each other as if obsessed, eagerly, greedily, as if after years of celibacy and as if celibacy was threatening again.

We talked of many things. We told about ourselves very trivial truths. We told ourselves very beautiful lies. But those lies, even though they were lies, were not meant to be calculated or to deceive.

With a strong kick, he forced Roach into a gallop directly towards a clump of roses covered by snow and forced her to jump.

We made love. And we talked. And our lies were becoming more beautiful and increasingly false.

Two months. From October to Yule.

Two months of furious, greedy, violent love.

Roach's horseshoes clattered on the palace courtyard of Beauclair.

***

Quickly and quietly he walked through the corridors. No one saw him or heard him.

Neither the Guardsmen quenching their boredom with chatter or the tired butlers. He did not even make the candle flames waver as he passed by them.

He walked around the castle kitchens. But he did not stop or go in to join his companions, who at this late hour, had developed a taste for a jug of wine and something to eat. He stood in the darkness and listened.

Angoulême was speaking.

"This city is under a spell, all of Toussaint. A charm that hangs over the whole valley. And now on this particular palace. I wondered about Dandelion, I wondered about Geralt, but now it makes me kind of dizzy to be here and I feel a strange tingling… I've even found myself… Fuck, what did I tell you! We have to get out of here as quickly as possible!"

"We must talk to Geralt," muttered Milva. "We must talk to him."

"Yes, talk to him," Cahir said sarcastically, "in one of those rare moments, where he is available. Hunting witches and monsters are the only activities that he has performed in the last two months."

"And you," Angoulême snorted, "can only be caught while walking in the park playing with the baronesses. This is what happens in spell-bound Toussaint. Regis vanishes at night; my aunty had her Baron…"

"Shut up, brat! And don't call me your aunty!"

“Come, come!” Regis stepped between the two ladies. “Girls, be at peace. Milva, Angoulême, don’t argue. Hostility ruins, friendship builds. It is said that Her Ladyship the Duchess likes Dandelion, her country, the palace, bread, and pickles. Would you like some wine?”

Milva released a heavy sigh.

“We have been here too long! Too long, I tell you, sitting here in idleness. Fooling around.”

“Nicely put,” said Cahir. “Very nice.”

Geralt carefully moved away. As noiselessly as a bat.

***

Quickly and silently he walked down the corridors. No one saw or heard him. Neither the guards nor the valets. Not even the candle flames flickered as he passes the chandeliers. A rat heard him and poked out its bearded nose. But it was not scared. He was known here.

He went this way often.

The bedroom smelled of spells, amber, rose and a woman sleeping. But Fringilla was not asleep. She sat on the bed and tossed back the covers; the sight charmed him and made him lose control.

“You’ve finally arrived,” she said, stretching. “Undress and come here quickly. Very, very quickly.”

***

She went through the halls quickly and quietly. No one saw or heard her. Neither the soldiers who gossiped lazily with the guards or the footmen or the pages. Not even the candle flames flickered as she passed the chandeliers. A rat heard her and lifted up its hairy nose and followed her with its beady eyes. But it was not frightened. She was known here.

She passed this way often.

***

In the castle of Beauclair was a secret passage behind a door at the end of a chamber, which nobody knew about. Neither the current lady of the castle, the Duchess Anarietta, nor her ancestor, Ademarta, First Lady of the Castle. Neither the famous architect, Pierre Faramond who renovated the building from top to bottom, nor the master masons who worked on Faramond’s project. The existence of the passage was not even known by the Chamberlain Le Goff, who was thought to know everything about Beauclair.

The passage and the room, masked by a powerful illusion, were only known by the castles builders – Elves. Later, when the elves left the castle and were

replaced by people, only a handful knew about the secret which was guarded closely by a small group of wizards from the princely family. Most knowledgeable of them all was Master of the Arcane, Artorios Vigo, a respected specialist in all kinds of illusion, whose young niece, Fringilla inherited her uncle's talent and also became a witch.

Fringilla stopped in front of a bare wall between two columns decorated with a floral motif. With a whisper and a quick gesture, a false wall disappeared. Beyond was revealed a corridor which seemingly led to a dead end. At the end of the corridor, however, was another door masked by illusion. And behind this door was a dark room.

Fringilla entered and without wasting time, started the tele-communicator. Oval mirrors which had stood dark started to brighten up the dark room. Through the mirror was revealed a hall, in which sat a round table surrounded by women. Nine women.

"We are listening, Fringilla," said Philippa Eilhart. "Do you have any news?"

"Unfortunately not," replied Fringilla. "Nothing since the last report. Nothing from any attempt at scanning."

"This is bad," said Philippa. "We expected you to find something. Tell us, has the witcher calmed down, at least? Can you keep him in Toussaint until May?"

Fringilla was silent for a moment. She had not the slightest intention of telling the lodge that during the last two weeks the witcher had called her Yennefer twice – and at times, when she had every right to be called by her own name. However the lodge had a right to expect from her the truth. Sincerity. And some useful findings.

"No," she said at last. "Probably not until May. But I will do everything in my power to keep him as long as possible."

Korr, a monster from the species-rich family of Strigiformes (qv), depending on the area, also called Kourican, Korreds, Rutterkin, Rumpelstiltskin, Whirlers, or Mesmers. You can say one thing about it - that it is a fiend beyond compare. Such devilishly filthy and abhorrent carrion is it that we will neither remember nor write of its customs or even its appearance, for verily we say unto you: Any word is too good for this son of a bitch.

Physiologus

CHAPTER FOUR

The smell in the great pillared hall of Castle Montecalvo was a mix of old tapestries, smoky candles, and ten different kinds of perfume - ten specially compiled types of perfume that were used by the ten women around the oak table, seated in chairs with arms carved in the shape of sphinxes.

Opposite Fringilla Vigo sat Triss Merigold in a bright blue, high-necked dress. Next to Triss sat Keira Metz, who remained in the shadows. Her large earrings held faceted citrines that flashed again and again with a thousand twinkles, attracting the eye.

“Please continue, Miss Vigo,” urged Philippa Eilhart. “We are in a hurry to hear the end of your story. And to take urgent steps.”

Philippa was - for once - not wearing any jewellery except a large cameo made of sardonyx that was fastened to her vermilion dress. Fringilla had heard the rumours already, she knew who had given her the cameo and whose profile it represented.

Seated next to Philippa was Sile de Tancarville, in a dress of all black that sparkled with little diamonds. Margarita Laux-Antille wore burgundy coloured satin and thick gold, without stones. Sabrina Glevissig, on the other hand, displayed a necklace, earrings, and her beloved finger rings - the onyx colour matched her eyes and clothing.

Closest to Fringilla were the two elves - Francesca Findabair and Ida Emean aep Sivney. The Daisy of the Valley usually looked regal, but today exceptionally so. Though neither her hair nor crimson gown displayed excessive pomp and her little tiara and necklace were made not of rubies, but modest, yet tasteful shells. Ida Emean, however, wore a dress of muslin and chiffon, which was decorated in autumnal shades and so fine and light that it waved around in the hardly noticeable breath of air the central heating produced like an anemone.

Assire var Anahid aroused admiration, as usual in recent times, with her modest but distinguished elegance. Over the small, narrow neckline of her dark-green dress, the Nilfgaardian sorceress wore a gold chain and a single, gold framed emerald cabochon. Her manicured nails, which were painted a very dark

green, gave the composition a truly magical touch of extravagance.

"We are waiting, Miss Vigo," Sile de Tancarville said. "Time is short."

Fringilla cleared her throat. "December came," she continued. "Then Yule, then the New Year. The witcher calmed down to the point where Ciri's name no longer showed up in every conversation. The monster hunting expeditions, which he regularly undertook, seemed to completely avail him. Well, maybe not completely…"

She trailed off. She thought she had seen Triss Merigold's blue eyes flash with hatred. But perhaps it had just been a reflection of the flickering candle flames. Philippa snorted and played with her cameo.

"Please, there is no need for so much modesty, Miss Vigo. Here, you are among us. Among women who know that sex acts have purposes other than pleasure. We all use these means, when necessary. Please continue."

"Even though he maintained the appearance of reticence, patience, and pride during the daytime," continued Fringilla, "at night he was completely under my power. He told me everything. He paid homage to my femininity, and extremely vigorously for his age, I must confess. And then he fell asleep. In my arms, with his lips on my breast. Looking for a replacement for the mother's love that he had never experienced."

This time, she was sure it was not a reflection of the candle flame. Very well. Envy me if you please, she thought. Envy me. You have every reason to do so.

"He was," she repeated, "completely under my power."

***

"Come back to bed, Geralt. It is not even properly bright, damn it!"

"I have an appointment. I have to ride to Pomerol."

"I do not want you to ride to Pomerol."

"I have an appointment. I've given my word. The steward of the estate will be waiting for me at the gate."

"Your monster hunts are foolish and pointless. What do you want to prove by killing another monster from some cave? Your manhood? I know a better way. Come on back to bed. Do not you ride to Pomerol. At least not so soon. The steward can wait, is that not what stewards do? I want to make love to you."

"Forgive me. I do not have time. I have given my word."

"I want to make love to you!"

"If you want to keep me company at breakfast, put something on."

"You probably don't love me any more, Geralt. Do you love me? Answer me!"

“Wear that pearl-gray dress with the mink trim. It suits you very well.”

***

“He was completely under my spell, fulfilled my every wish,” repeated Fringilla. “He did everything I asked of him. It was so.”

“We believe it was so,” said Sile de Tancarville extremely dryly. “Please continue.”

Fringilla coughed into her fist. “The problem,” she continued, “was his companions. The strange band that he named his company. Cahir Mawr Dyffryn aep Ceallach, who had seen me before and tormented himself to remember where. But he could not remember, because when I was last in Darn Dyffra, the ancestral home of his family, he was six or seven years old. Milva, who seemed to be a daredevil and proud girl, but who I twice caught hiding in a corner of the stables and crying. Angoulême, a moody child. And Regis Terzieff-Godefroy. One type that I could not see through. The whole company had an influence on the witcher, one which I could not stop.”

Well, well, she thought, Look at them draw up their eyebrows. Look at them twist their mouths. Just wait. This is not the end of my story. You will hear of my triumph.

“Every morning,” she continued, “this whole company met in the kitchen, which was located in the basement of the palace of Beauclair. The chef liked them - who knows why. He always had something in store for them, so plentiful and so tasty that breakfast was usually two, sometimes even three hours long. I ate with them many times, alongside Geralt. So I know what kind of absurd conversations they used to hold.”

***

Two chickens walked around the kitchen, one black and the other colourful, gently scratching the floor with their clawed feet. They blinked at the breakfast company and picked up crumbs from the floor.

Like every other morning, the company had gathered in the palace kitchen. The chef liked them, who knows why, and he always had something tasty for them. Today there were scrambled eggs, flour soup, stewed eggplant, rabbit pate, and veal sausages with red beets and goat cheese to top it all off. All of it was excellent and they ate quickly and quietly. Apart from Angoulême, who only whetted her tongue.

“I’m telling you, we should open a brothel here. After we’ve done what we need to do, we should come back here and set up a House of Pleasure. I’ve had a look around the city. They have everything. I counted nine barbers alone, and

eight pharmacies. But they only have one whorehouse, and it's so small and shitty that I wouldn't even call it a whorehouse. No competition. We'll make it a luxurious brothel. Buy a multi-storey house with garden…"

"Angoulême, have mercy."

"… exclusively for wealthy customers. I will be the Madame. I'm telling you, we will make the big money and live like the great masters. In the end, I will eventually be elected to the council, and then I will certainly not forget about you, because if they elect me, they elect you, and before you can provide yourselves…"

"Angoulême, please. Here, eat some bread with pate."

For a moment there was silence.

"What are you hunting today, Geralt? Hard work?"

"Eye witnesses" - the witcher looked at his plate - "give conflicting descriptions. So it depends on whether it is a Molding, which is pretty hard work, or a Delichon, which is moderate, or Dudel, which is easy. Perhaps the work will even be too easy, because the last time the monster was seen was last year's Lammas. It may have absconded from Pomerol over the mountains."

"If so, I wish him all the best," said Fringilla while gnawing on a goose bone.

"What is up with Dandelion?" The witcher said suddenly, "I haven't seen him for so long that I draw all my knowledge of his activities from the satirical songs they sing in the city."

"We know no more than you." Regis smiled with his mouth closed. "All we know is that our poet is on such familiar terms with the Princess Anarietta that he grants her, even in the presence of witnesses, a fairly familiar cognomen. He calls her his Little Weasel."

"And he's right!" Angoulême said with her mouth full. "That princess woman actually does kind of have a weasel nose. Not to mention all those teeth."

Fringilla narrowed her eyes. "No one is perfect."

"Forsooth."

The chickens, one black and the other colourful, had become so bold that they began to peck at Milva's boots. The Archer swore and knocked them away with a powerful kick.

Geralt watched her for a long time. Then he decided. "Maria," he said gravely, almost sternly. "I know that our conversations are not particularly serious and that jokes are not ordained. But you do not need to show us such a sour face. What is wrong?"

"It's clear what's wrong," said Angoulême. Geralt silenced her with a sharp

look. Too late.

“What the hell do you know then, eh?” Milva stood up abruptly, almost overturning her chair. “Damn you! You can kiss my ass, all of you, you understand me?”

She grabbed her cup from the table, drank it, and then threw it to the floor without hesitation.

Then she ran out of the room and slammed the door.

“This is serious…” Angoulême began after a moment, but this time the vampire silenced her.

“The matter is very serious”, he confirmed. “I would not, however, have expected such an extreme reaction from our archer. Such as one typically reacts when they get split up with, not when they do the splitting.”

“What are you talking about, damn it?” Asked Geralt, unnerved. “Hey? Would someone mind telling me what this is about?”

“The Baron Amadis de Trastamara.”

“The pockmarked hunter?”

“The very same. He made a request of Milva. To join him on a three day hunt. He has invited her again and again for months…”

“The hunt” - Angoulême brazenly flashed her teeth - “lasted two days. With overnight accommodations in a little hunting lodge, you know what I mean? I put my hand…”

“Be quiet, girl. Tell me, Regis.”

“He has formally and solemnly asked for her hand. Milva has rejected, apparently in fairly strong terms. The Baron, with the reason of youth, took her rejection to heart, was offended, and left Beauclair immediately. Milva has been running around ever since like she was poisoned.”

“We’ve been sitting here too long,” muttered the witcher. “Too long.”

“And who says this?” The previously silent Cahir spoke up. “Who says this?”

“Excuse me.” The witcher stood up. “Let’s talk about it when I get back. The steward of the Pomerol estate is expecting me. And punctuality is the courtesy of the witcher.”

***

After Milva’s stormy departure, and after the witcher had also left, the rest of the company ate breakfast in silence. The two chickens ran around in the kitchen, one black and the other colourful, gently scratching the floor with their clawed feet.

“I”, Angoulême finally broke the silence, as she lifted and passed a plate of

toast to Fringilla, “I have got a problem.”

The sorceress nodded. “I understand. It will be okay. How long ago did you have your last menstrual period?”

“What makes you say that?” Angoulême stiffened with a jerk that startled the chickens. “Nothing like that! It’s about something completely different!”

“So, go on.”

“Geralt wants to leave me here when he sets off again.”

“Whoa.”

“He says”, snorted Angoulême, “that he cannot bring me into danger, or some such nonsense. But I want to go with him…”

“Whoa”.

“Don’t interrupt me, okay? I want to go with him, with Geralt, because with him I’m not afraid of being caught by the One-Eyed Fulk again, and here in Toussaint…”

“Angoulême,” Regis interrupted her. “You are speaking in vain. Miss Vigo will listen to you, but she will do nothing about it. Only one thing you’ve said upsets her: the departure of the witcher.”

“Whoa.” Repeated Fringilla, turning to face him and narrowing her eyes. “Is that your favourite subject to allude to, Mr. Terzieff-Godefroy? The departure of the witcher? And when is he departing? May I ask that?”

“Maybe not today or tomorrow,” the vampire replied in a soft voice. “But certainly one day. Without hurting anyone.”

“I am not hurt,” Fringilla parried coldly. “Assuming, of course, that you had me in mind. But what concerns you, Angoulême, also concerns me. So I assure you that I will discuss the issue of leaving Toussaint with Geralt. I guarantee that the witcher will know my opinion on this matter.”

“Yes, of course you will,” snorted Cahir. “How did I know that you would say just that, Miss Fringilla.”

The sorceress looked at him for a long time.

“The witcher,” she finally said, “should not leave Toussaint. And no one who is well disposed towards him should persuade him to leave. Where could he go that is better than here? He swims in luxury. He has his monsters, which he hunts, earning quite a bit of money. His friend and companion is the favourite of the ruling Princess here, and the Princess herself also values him. Mainly because of the succubus that had plagued the alcoves. Yes, yes, gentlemen. Anarietta and all the well-born ladies of Toussaint are extremely pleased with the witcher. Because the succubus has indeed stopped its visits, as if cut off. The

ladies of Toussaint have also put together a special bonus that will be deposited into the witcher's account with the Cianfanelli Bank in the near future. And multiply the small fortune that he already has there."

"A very nice gesture on the part of the ladies." Regis did not lower his eyes. "And the reward is well deserved. It is not easy to cause a succubus to stop its visits. Trust me, Miss Fringilla."

"Oh, I believe you. Speaking of which, are you aware that one of the palace guards claims he saw the succubus. At night, on the battlements of the Karoberta Tower. In the company of another ghost. Probably a vampire. Both demons were walking there, swears the guard, and they seemed friendly. Perhaps you know something of it, Mr. Regis? Can you explain it?"

"No." Regis did not flinch. "I cannot. There are things between the heavens and earth that even philosophers cannot dream of."

"Undoubtedly, there are such things," Fringilla confirmed with a nod of her black-haired head. "But with regards to the fact that the witcher is supposedly ready to leave - you must know more than me? Because, you see, he has not mentioned any such thing to me, and he usually tells me everything."

"Sure," muttered Cahir.

Fringilla ignored him. "Mr. Regis?"

"No," the vampire said after a short silence. "No, Miss Fringilla, please rest assured. The witcher by no means gives us more affection and confidence than you. He does not whisper any secrets into our ears that he would hide from you."

"How then," - Fringilla was quiet as granite - "can you make these declarations about his departure?"

Once again, the vampire did not flinch. "Because it is like the youthful, charm filled expression of our lovely Angoulême says: 'Eventually, there comes a time when you either have to shit or get off the toilet.' In other words…"

"Don't bother with the other words," Fringilla interrupted him sharply, "It was charming enough already."

For a while there was silence. Both chickens, the black and colourful, walked around and pecked at what was left. Angoulême wiped a smudge of red beet from her nose with her sleeve. The vampire played thoughtfully with a sausage link.

"Thanks to me," Fringilla finally broke the silence, "Geralt has learned what few people know - Ciri's family tree and the secrets of its origin. Thanks to me, he knows these things that he had no idea about a year ago. Thanks to me he has information, and information is a weapon. Thanks to me and my protection from

magical detection, he is protected from the enemy, including assassins. Thanks to me his knee no longer hurts and can bend again. Around his neck, he wears a medallion of my craftsmanship, which might not be as good as his original witcher's medallion, but nevertheless… Thanks to me and only me, he is ready for the spring and summer - he is informed, fed, healthy, and prepared to fight the enemy. If anyone of you here has done more for Geralt, given more to him, then he should say so. I'll willingly pay him tribute."

No one spoke up. The chickens pecked at Cahir's boots, but the young Nilfgaardian ignored them.

"Indeed," he said pointedly, "none of us has given more to Geralt than you, my lady."

"How did I know that you would say just that?"

"It's not about that, Miss Fringilla", the vampire began. The sorceress did not let him.

"What's it about then?" She asked aggressively. "About the fact that he and I are together? About the fact that we have an emotional connection? About the fact that I do not want him to leave now? That I do not want him to decide based on guilt? The same feelings of guilt and atonement that drive you to depart?"

Regis was silent. Cahir also said nothing. Angoulême looked around; she had obviously not understood much.

"If it is written in the books of providence", the sorceress said after a while, "that Geralt will find Ciri, then it will happen. Regardless of whether the witcher sets off into the mountains or sits in Toussaint. Predestination overtakes humans. Not vice versa. Do you understand that? Do you understand, Mr. Regis Terzieff-Godefroy?"

"Better than you think, Miss Vigo." The vampire turned the sausage link in his fingers. "However, you must excuse me, I do not accept that predestination is in some book, written by the hand of a great Demiurge, or the will of heaven, or the unalterable judgment of any providence. Rather, it is the result of many seemingly unconnected facts, events, and actions. I tend to agree with you that the predestination overtakes humans… and not only humans. However, I accept much less the view that it could not also be reversed. Because this view is a convenient fatalism. It is a paean to apathy and baseness on a feather bed and the charming warmth of a woman's womb. In short, to live in a dream. Life, Miss Vigo may be a dream, may end in a dream… But it's a dream that you must actively dream. Therefore, Miss Vigo, the road awaits us."

"Go ahead." Fringilla stood up, almost as violent as Milva had recently. "As

you wish! Snow, cold, and predetermination await you on the passes. And the atonement that you so urgently seem to need. Go ahead! But the witcher is staying here. In Toussaint! With me!”

“I believe,” the vampire replied calmly, “You are mistaken, Miss Vigo. The dream you dream with the witcher is, I confess with a bow, magical and beautiful. However, any dream that we dream for too long becomes a nightmare. And from it we awake with a scream.”

***

The nine women who were seated at the large table in Castle Montecalvo stared fixedly at Fringilla Vigo. At Fringilla, who had suddenly begun to stutter.

“Geralt rode on the morning of January eighth to the Pomerol estate. And he came back… well… on the eighth night, or on the ninth morning… I do not know… I’m not sure…”

“Keep it together,” Sile de Tancarville gently requested. “Please, keep it together, Miss Vigo. And if any detail of the story is too embarrassing, then just move on.”

***

The colourful chicken ran around the kitchen, gently scratching the floor with its clawed feet.

It smelled broth.

The door opened with a bang. Geralt stormed into the kitchen. His windswept face displayed a blue bruise and purplish-black stripes of dried blood.

“Come on, people, pack up,” he announced without any unnecessary preliminaries. “We’re leaving! In one hour, and not a moment later, I will see you all on the hill outside the city, where the column stands. With bags and baggage, in the saddle, ready for a long and difficult path.”

That was enough. It was as if they had been waiting for this message and had been ready for a long time.

“Immediately,” Milva cried, jumping up. “I’ll be done in half an hour!”

“Me too.” Cahir let his spoon fall, stood up, and looked at the witcher carefully. “But I’d like to know what this is. A whim? A lover’s quarrel? Or are we truly leaving?”

“Really. Angoulême, why are you making that face?”

“Geralt, I…”

“Don’t worry. I’m not leaving you behind. I’ve changed my mind. But you must be careful, brat; you must not leave my sight. Go on, I said, grab your saddlebags and pack. And individually, in order not to attract attention from the

city to the column on the hill. We meet there in one hour."

"Absolutely, Geralt," exclaimed Angoulême. "Damn, finally!"

In no time Geralt and the colourful chicken were all that remained in the kitchen. And the vampire, who was quietly stirring his broth with noodles.

"Are you waiting for a special invitation?" Asked the witcher coldly. "Why are you still sitting here? Instead of packing the mule Draakula? And saying goodbye to the succubus?"

"Geralt," Regis said calmly, taking a spoonful of soup from the tureen. "It will take me just as long to part with the succubus as it will for you to part with your black-haired girl. Assuming that you intend to say goodbye to her. But just between you and me: you can send the young people out to pack up their things with shouting and noise, but I deserve something more, for reasons of age. Please, grant me a few words of explanation."

"Regis…"

"A statement Geralt. The sooner you start, the better. I'll help you. Yesterday morning, you met the steward of the Pomerol Winery at the city gate as agreed…"

***

Alcides Fierabras, the black-bearded steward of the Pomerol Winery, who the witcher had met in the 'Pheasantry' on the night before Yule, was waiting at the city gate with a mule; He, however, was dressed and equipped as they were travelling far, far away to the end the world, beyond the Solveiga Gate and the Elskerdeg Pass.

"It really is not close," he replied to a snappy remark Geralt had made. "You, sir, come from the big wide world and think of our small Toussaint as a little hamlet; you think you could throw a hat from one boundary to the other. But you are wrong. The Pomerol Vineyard, where we indeed want to go, is a good ways away and we can be happy if we are there by lunch."

"Perhaps," the witcher said dryly, "we shouldn't have arranged to leave so late."

"Yeah, maybe." Alcides Fierabras stared at him and blew into his moustache. "But I didn't know you were one of the early birds. Because that is rare in nobles."

"I'm not a noble. Let's be on our way, sir, we needn't lose any time in idle talk."

"You took the words right out of my mouth."

They rode through the city to shorten the path. Geralt initially wanted to

protest - he was afraid of getting stuck in the crowded streets known to him. However, the steward Fierabras, as it turned out, knew both the city better and the days when there was no crowding on the streets. They rode easily and quickly.

They rode into the market and passed the scaffold. And the gallows, decorated by a hanging body.

“It’s a dangerous thing,” - the steward pointed out with a nod – “to forge rhymes and sing ditties. Especially in public.”

“Severe.” Geralt instantly recognized what he meant. “In other places, the maximum penalty for libel is the pillory.”

“It depends on whom the libel is about, and if it is true”, said Alcides Fierabras soberly. “And how it was rhymed. Our princess is kind woman and is loved by the people, but if someone provokes her…”

“Songs, as one of my friends likes to say, you cannot suffocate.”

“Songs, you cannot suffocate. But the singer, you can suffocate perfectly well.”

They crossed the city and rode out the Cooper’s Gate, straight into the valley of the Blessure River, which cheerfully splashed and foamed in rapids. On the fields, snow lay only in gullies and depressions, but it was quite cold.

A troop of knights passed them, certainly on their way to Cervantes Pass, to the border fortress of Vedette. The front of their shields and coats were very colourfully painted and embroidered with griffins, lions, hearts, lilies, stars, crosses, and other heraldic nonsense.

Their hooves thundered, their banners fluttered, and their powerful voices sung an idiotic song about a thing or two that happens to a knight when he is awarded a bride.

Geralt followed the party with his eyes. The sight of the knight-errants left him thinking of Reynart de Bois-Fresnes, who had just returned home from the service and was restoring his strength in the arms of his middle-class woman. Her husband, a merchant, hadn’t returned home for days, probably held back by foaming rivers, forests full of wildlife, and other natural forces. The witcher could by no means imagine tearing Reynart from the arms of his mistress, but he honestly regretted that the contract with the Pomerol Winery wasn’t set on a later date. He liked the knight and missed his company.

“Let’s ride, Mr. Witcher.”

“Let’s ride, Mr. Fierabras.”

They followed the road up the river. The Blessure River twisted and

meandered, but there were plenty of bridges, so they didn't need to make any detours.

Steam rose from the nostrils of the horses and the mule.

"Do you think the winter will last long, Mr. Fierabras?"

"There was frost on Saovine. And the saying goes: 'Frost on Saovine – better put your warm pants on.'"

"I see. And your vines? Doesn't the cold harm them?"

"It's been colder."

They rode on in silence.

"Look there," Fierabras pointed. "There in the valley lies the village of Fox Hollow. It's hard to believe, but their fields grow pots and pans."

"What?"

"Pots and pans. They arise from the bosom of the earth, of course, entirely naturally, with no human intervention. Pots and pans grow in Fox Hollow, as potatoes or beets grow elsewhere. All kinds and shapes."

"Really?"

"May I drop dead if it's not true. That's why Fox Hollow established a partnership with the village of Dudno in Maecht. For there, the earth blossoms with lids."

"All kinds and shapes?"

"You, Mr. Witcher, hit the mark."

They rode on. Silently. The Blessure River roared and foamed over the stones.

***

"And look there, Mr. Witcher. Those are the ruins of the ancient fortress of Dun Tynne. That castle has witnessed terrible things, if you believe the legend. Waltharius, called the Heavy Handed, tortured and viciously murdered his unfaithful wife, her lover, her mother, her sister, and her brother. And then he sat down and cried, no one knows why…"

"I've heard of it."

"Have you been there then?"

"No."

"Ha. The legend has travelled far and wide."

"You, Mr. Steward, hit the mark."

***

"And there," - the witcher pointed - "the pretty little tower behind the terrible castle? What is that?"

“That? That is a temple.”

“For what god?”

“Who remembers a thing like that.”

“Indeed. Who does nowadays.”

***

Around noon, they saw the winery. It was situated on the slopes of the valley of the Blessure River and covered by evenly cropped vines, now wizened and bald. On the summit of the highest hill, windswept towers rose towards the sky, belonging to the thick and round Castle Pomerol.

Geralt noted with interest that the path leading to the castle was churned up by hooves and carriage wheels just as much as the highway. It was clear someone had been heavily using the road to the castle. He bit back his curiosity up to the moment that he saw a dozen huge, robust, canvas-covered wagons, like those used for long distance transport.

“Merchants,” said the steward in reply to his question. “Wine merchants.”

“Merchants?” Geralt was surprised. “How so? I thought the mountain passes are blocked by snow and Toussaint is cut off from the outside world. So how have the merchants reached here?”

“For merchants”, the steward Fierabras said profoundly, “there are no blocked passes or bad roads - at least not for those who take their job seriously. They, Mr. Witcher, have such a principle: When a goal beckons, a way must be found.”

“Indeed,” Geralt said slowly, “an admirable principle, one which we should emulate. In all situations.”

“Without a doubt. But in truth, the fact of the matter is that some of the merchants have been stuck here since fall and cannot get out. But they don’t hang their heads; they say ‘Pah, now we will be the first ones here in the spring, before the competition shows up’ They call this principle: ‘positive thinking.’”

Geralt nodded. “One can hardly object to this principle. Though one thing still amazes me, Mr. Steward. Why are these merchants sitting out here and not in Beauclair? Is the princess not willing to grant them the right to hospitality? Does she perhaps have something against these merchants?”

“Not at all”, replied Fierabras. “The princess increasingly extends invitations to them, and they increasingly and politely reject them. And stay at the winery.”

“Why?”

“They say that Beauclair is home to perpetual banquets, balls, feasts, revelry, and flirtation. They say those activities are just lazy, stupid, and a waste of time

that could be spent thinking about business. They say you have to focus on what is really important. On the goal that beckons you, constantly. Incessantly. Without wasting any thoughts on frippery. Then and only then can you reach your goal."

"Truly, Mr. Fierabras," the witcher said slowly. "I'm thankful for our common journey. Our conversations were very beneficial to me. Really."

***

Contrary to the expectations of the witcher, they rode not to Castle Pomerol, but a little further onto the ridge behind the valley, where the next castle stood, a little smaller and much more neglected. This was Castle Zurbarràn. Geralt was looking forward to the prospect of getting to do something soon, because the dark, serrated battlements of ruined Zurbarràn looked like a textbook example of a haunted ruin, which was no doubt swarming with magic, marvels, and monsters.

When they reached the courtyard however, instead of marvels and monsters he saw a dozen people at such magical pursuits as rolling barrels, planing boards, and nailing these boards together. It smelled of fresh wood, fresh mortar, a few less fresh cats, sour wine, and pea soup. The pea soup was served immediately.

The wind and cold during their journey had made them hungry, and they ate quickly and silently. One of Steward Fierabras' subordinates in the company made it for them. It was served by two light-haired girls with braids a good three feet long. Both stared at the witcher so provocatively that he decided to eat as quickly as possible and get to work.

Simon Gilka had not seen the monster. He knew its appearance exclusively from second hand stories.

"It was black, ha, pitch black, and when it crawled across the wall, you could see the bricks through it. It was like a jelly, you know what I mean, Mr. Witcher, or maybe something like a glob of snot. But it had long legs, and a lot of them, eight or even more. And Yontek stood there, stood there and watched, until he finally wised up and screamed, 'Get away, Get yourself away!' And an exorcism too: 'Thee shalt croak, you son of a bitch!' And then the monster went darting! Whoosh, whoosh, up and away. Into the depths of the abyss and was gone. And the boys says: If there's a monster here, we want hazard pay, and if we don't get it, we'll complain to our union. Your union, I tell them, can go and…"

"When", interrupted Geralt, "was the monster was last seen?"

"Three weeks ago. So just before Yule."

The witcher looked at the steward. “You told me it hasn’t been seen since Lammas.”

Alcides Fierabras blushed at the points that weren’t covered by his beard.

Gilka snorted. “Well, well, Mr. Steward, if you want to manage, you have to be around more often, you can’t just sit at the office in Beauclair, polishing the chairs with your butt. I think…”

“I’m not interested,” Fierabras cut him off fiercely, “in what you think. Tell the story of the monster.”

“I’ve already told it. That’s all there was.”

“There have been no victims? No one has been attacked?”

“No. But last year a servant disappeared without a trace. Some said the monster dragged him to the depths and killed him. Others said that it certainly wasn’t any monster, but that the servant had killed himself, because of debts and payments. The fact is that he played dice like the devil, and then he had a child with the miller’s daughter, and she has since gone to court and the court ordered the servant to make support payments…”

“So,” Geralt interrupted, “the monster hasn’t attacked anyone? And no one has seen it since?”

“No.”

One of the local girls pouring wine brushed Geralt’s ear with her breast and winked encouragingly.

“Let’s go,” Geralt said quickly. “There’s no reason to dawdle and talk. Lead me to the cellar.”

***

Unfortunately, it turned out that Fringilla’s amulet could not fulfil the hopes he had placed in it. Geralt had not believed for a moment that the polished chrysoprase could replace his silver, witcher’s wolf medallion. Fringilla had not promised anything like that at all. However, she had assured him - with great conviction - that the amulet, once attuned to the mind of the wearer, could do different things, including warning the wearer of danger.

But either Fringilla’s magic had failed, or Geralt and the amulet had different views of what was dangerous and what was not. On his way to the cellar, the chrysoprase shrugged almost imperceptibly when a large orange cat ran in front of him, lifted its tail rebelliously, and defiled the yard. The cat must have received some signal from the amulet, because it jumped away and gave a penetrating meow.

But when the witcher entered the cellar, the medallion started vibrating

annoyingly, over and over, in the dry, neat, clean storage rooms where the only danger emanated from the large wine casks. Someone who lay down with no self-control and his mouth open under the casket might have been threatened with severe intoxication. But nothing more.

On the other hand, the medallion did not flinch when Geralt left the still used part of the cellar, descended the stairs, and entered the long, deep tunnels. The witcher had long since realized that most of the vineyards of Toussaint had old mines below them. No doubt as the planted vines began to bear fruit and yield better profits, the exploitation of mines had been abandoned to create tunnels and corridors that could be used as wine cellars. The castles Pomerol and Zurbarràn stood on top of an old slate mine. It was swarming with tunnels and holes; it would only take a moment's inattention to end up at the bottom of a hole with broken bones. Some of the holes were covered by rotten boards that were so thoroughly coated in layers of shale dust that they were indistinguishable from the ground. The area was very dangerous so he needed the medallion to warn him. It didn't.

It didn't even warn him when an indistinct gray figure jumped out from a pile of slate rubble ten steps in front of Geralt, kicked up dust with its claws and wildly wringing legs, gave a piercing wail, ran down the tunnel whistling and giggling, and disappeared into a gaping hole in the wall.

The witcher cursed. The magic trinket reacted to orange cats, but it didn't respond to Gremlins. I'll have to talk with Fringilla about it, he thought as he walked towards the hole where the little creature had disappeared.

The amulet twitched vigorously.

A bit late, he thought. But immediately afterwards he thought better of it. Perhaps the medallion was not so stupid. The usual tactic of Gremlins was to flee and then ambush their pursuers with a blow from its sickle-sharp claws. The Gremlin waiting in the dark - that was what the medallion signalled.

He waited and waited, holding his breath, pricking his ears alert. The amulet was quiet and lifeless on his chest. A dull, unpleasant odour emanated from the hole. But it was dead silent.

And no Gremlin would have stayed silent for so long.

Without thinking, he ducked into the hole and crawled on all fours, scraping his back against the rough rock. He did not travel very far.

Something began to creak and snapped. Then the floor gave way and down fell the witcher -along with several hundred pounds of dust and debris. Luckily he didn't fall for long - it was not a bottomless pit, but a normal dungeon. He

shot out like shit from the sewer pipe and smashed into a pile of rotten wood. He spit something out, shook the dust from his hair, and swore very blasphemously. The amulet shook incessantly, it trembled on his chest like a sparrow inserted under his shirt. The witcher resisted the impulse to tear it off and throw it away into the darkness, never to seen again. First, Fringilla would have been furious. Second, the chrysoprase was supposed to have other magical properties. Geralt hoped it would be more reliable at the others.

As he started to stand, he groped a round skull. And he realized that what he had crashed into was by no means a pile of wood.

He stood up and quickly studied the pile of bones. They were all human. All these people were in chains at the moment of their deaths, and had most likely been naked. Their bones were crushed and chewed. They might have already been dead when they were bitten. But he was not sure.

A corridor led out of the tunnel, long and straight. The slate wall had been processed very smoothly – it no longer looked like a mine.

It ended suddenly in a huge cavity, whose ceiling sank in the obscure darkness. The centre of the cavern was a huge, black, bottomless pit, above which hung a dangerous, delicate looking, stone bridge.

Water dripped from the walls, echoing. A cold stench blew from the abyss. The amulet was quiet. Geralt stepped onto the bridge, alert and focused, trying to stay away from the crumbling balustrades.

After the bridge came another corridor. On the smooth processed walls, he noticed rusted torch brackets. There were also niches here; some were filled with small statues made of sandstone, but over the years the dripping water had worn them down to shapeless boulders. Plates and reliefs had also been inserted into the walls. He was able to identify this sturdier material better. Geralt saw a woman with a horned moon, a tower, a swallow, a boar, a dolphin, and a unicorn.

He heard a voice.

He stopped and held his breath.

The amulet twitched.

No, it was no illusion; it wasn’t the crunch of slate rubble or the echo of dripping water. It was a human voice. Geralt closed his eyes and strained his hearing. He tried to pinpoint the noise.

The witcher could have sworn that the voice came from the next niche, from behind a statue that was worn down, but not so much that it had lost the rounded shape of a woman. It stood equal to the height of his medallion. It flashed, and Geralt suddenly noticed a reflection in the wall. He vigorously hugged the

woman with his arms, and sharply turned her. It creaked, then the whole niche turned on a steel hinge and revealed a spiral staircase.

The voice sounded again, from the top of the stairs. Geralt did not hesitate.

At the top he found a door that opened without any resistance, not even squeak. Behind the door was a small room with a vaulted ceiling. Four enormous brass tubes towered on the walls, their ends were expanded like trumpets. In the middle, between the openings of the tubes, stood an armchair, and on that armchair sat a skeleton. On its skull, slid down to its teeth, hung the remains of a beret. Its body carried fragments of once-rich clothes, now eaten away. Around its neck hung a gold chain. Its feet rested in high topped boots, strongly corroded by rats.

From one of the tubes came a sneeze, so loud and unexpected that the witcher almost jumped. Then someone blew their nose, and the amplified sound from the brass tube was downright hellish.

“Bless you”, came out of the tube. “That was some sneeze, Skellen.”

Geralt moved the skeleton out of the chair, without forgetting to first remove its gold chain and stick it in his pocket. Then he sat down at the listening space. At the opening of the tube.

***

One of the men Geralt was eavesdropping on had a bass voice, deep and booming. When he spoke, the brass tube actually vibrated.

“That was some sneeze, Skellen. Where did you get such a cold? And when?”

“Not worth talking about”, said the sneezer. “Some damned disease has caught me and adheres. As soon as I get rid of it, it comes right back. Not even magic helps.”

“Maybe you should change magicians?” Said the next voice, creaking like a rusty hinge. “Truly, this Vilgefortz can’t yet point to any particularly great successes. I think…”

“Forget it,” interjected one who stretched his syllables in a characteristic way. “That is not the reason we have organized this meeting here in Toussaint. In the middle of nowhere, in the ass of the world.”

“This ass of the world,” said the sneezer, “is the only country I know of that does not have its own security service. The only corner of the empire that is not riddled with agents of Vattier de Rideaux. This principality is seen by all as a hilarious and perpetually drunken state operetta, which nobody takes seriously.”

“Such little countries,” said the syllable stretcher, “have always been havens

for spies, and their preferred venues. Therefore, they attract counterintelligence service and spies, eavesdroppers, and all sorts of private detectives."

"That may have once been the case." Said the sneezer. "But not under the rule of a woman, which has lasted for almost one hundred years in Toussaint. I repeat, we are safe here. Here, no one will track us down or overhear us. We can act as merchants and calmly discuss the questions that are of vital interest for your princely graces. For your personal assets and estates."

"Truly, I hate private interests!" Ranted the creaking. "We are not here for personal reasons! I am concerned solely about the good of the Empire. And the good of the Empire, gentlemen, is in a strong dynasty! Therefore, it would be a great evil and harmful for the kingdom if any mongrel, any spoiled scion of bad blood ascends the throne, a descendant of the physically sick and morally inferior kings. No, gentlemen! I, a de Wette of the family de Wette, will not stand by idly and watch! In addition, my daughter was promised…"

"Your daughter, de Wette?" Roared the booming bass voice. "And what about me? I, who at the time supported Emhyr in the fight against the usurper? It was my residence from which the cadets launched their assault on the palace! And what did that earn me! At that time, the swindler looked at my little Eilan, smiled graciously at her, complimented her, and took her behind a curtain, I know, to feel her tits. And now what - another empress! Such an affront? Such shame? The emperor of the eternal empire, who prefers the daughters of Cintra to those of the ancient families! What? He sits on the throne by my grace and dares to reject my Eilan? No, I will not tolerate it!"

"Nor I," cried another voice, high and exalted. "He has disrespected me, too! Leaving my wife for this Cintran nobody!"

"By a lucky coincidence," said the syllable stretcher, "the nobody has been promoted into the afterlife. As follows the report of Mr. Skellen."

"I've listened to this report very attentively," said the creaky, "and I've concluded it follows that the nobody has simply disappeared. And if she has simply disappeared, then she may yet reappear. Because she disappeared and reappeared several times last year! Truly, Mr. Skellen, you have disappointed us. You and your magician, this Vilgefortz!"

"But now is not the right moment, Joachim!" Said the bass. "Now is not the time to blame each other and to accuse, to drive wedges between us! We must be strong and united. And determined. Therefore, it is unimportant whether the Cintran is alive or not. An emperor who insults the old families with impunity once, will continue to do so in the future! The Cintran has disappeared? Then in

a few months he can present an empress of Zerrikanian or Sangwebarian origin! No, by the Great Sun, we cannot let him!”

“Truly, we cannot! Right you are, Ardal!” Said the creaky. “The Emreis dynasty has been a disappointment ever since they took the throne. Each moment Emhyr sits on the throne does the empire harm, truly. And there is someone else who could sit the throne. The young Voorhis…”

A loud sneeze rang out like a trumpet.

“Constitutional monarchy”, said the sneezer. “It is high time for a constitutional monarchy, a progressive order. And then democracy… a government of the people…”

“Emperor Voorhis,” repeated the bass voice with emphasis. “Emperor Voorhis, Stefan Skellen. He will be married with my daughter Eilan, or with one of Joachim’s. And then I will be the Chancellor of the Crown and de Wette will be the Field Marshal. And you, Stefan -the Foreign Minister and a count. If you abandon your idea of granting titles and offices to the peasants. What?”

“Forget about historical development,” the sneezer’s voice said soothingly. “For the moment, at least. First, let me draw Your Excellency Chancellor aep Dahy’s attention to the person of Prince Voorhis - mainly the fact that he is a man of iron character, proud and stubborn, who will be difficult to influence.”

“If I can make a comment,” the syllable stretcher came forward to speak. “Prince Voorhis has a son, the little Morvran. He is a far better candidate. First, he has a better claim to the throne, both on his fraternal side and maternal side. Second, he is a child, so the Regency Council will rule in his place. So, us.”

“Nonsense! We will deal with the father! We will find a way!” Said the bass.

“We push,” suggested the exalted, “my wife under him!”

“Be still, Count Broinne. That is not what we are talking about.” Said the creaky “Gentlemen, we should discuss other matters, truly. I would like to point out that Emhyr var Emreis still prevails.”

“Of course”, agreed the sneezer and trumpeted into his handkerchief. “He lives and reigns. He is at his peak, both physically and mentally. The latter, especially, cannot be disputed, after he has gotten rid of both your highnesses - along with any troops that would have been faithful to you. How will you accomplish a revolution, my Lord Prince Ardal, if you have to spend each moment overseeing the Eastern Division of the army in battle? And Prince Joachim will probably have to be with his troops in the Verden Special Operational Group.”

“Spare me the tips, Stefan Skellen.” Said the creaky. “And pulling that face

only makes you look similar to your magician Vilgefortz in your imagination. And you should know, Owl, that if Emhyr really does get suspicious, it will be because of you - you and Vilgefortz. Admit it, you tried to catch the Cintran and buy Emhyr's favour with her? Now that the girl is dead, you no longer have anything to offer, right? Emhyr would quarter you, truly. You will not raise your hand against us, neither you nor the magician with whom you have allied yourself!"

"No one of us will raise our hands, Joachim," put in the bass. "We need to look the truth in the face. We are in no better position than Skellen. The circumstances have brought us together. We are all in the same boat now."

"But the Owl was the one who put us in this boat!" Shouted the creaky. "Why do we have to act secretly now? Emhyr knows everything! Vattier de Rideaux's agents search the whole empire for the Owl. And he has gotten rid of us, truly, sent us to war!"

"Exactly", the syllable stretcher, "And you should take advantage of that. I can assure you gentlemen, everyone is fed up with the war currently underway. The army, the common people, and especially the merchants and entrepreneurs. The mere fact that the war is over will cause joy throughout the entire empire, regardless of how the war ends. Gentlemen, military leaders influence the course of the war, so, if I may say so, the end is always within reach. What is easier than to taking credit as heroes for ending an armed conflict in victory? And in case of defeat, as men who, sent by providence, negotiated an end to the bloodshed?"

"True," said the creaking after a while. "By the Great Sun, that is true. You're right, Mr. Leuvaarden."

"Emhyr," said the bass, "wrapped the rope around his neck when he sent us to the front."

"Emhyr," said the exalted, "is still alive, my lord Prince. He is alive and doing well. We do not want to split the skin of the bear."

"No," said the bass. "Not before we kill the bear."

***

The silence lasted a long time.

"So an assassination attempt. Death."

"Death."

"Death!"

"Death. It is the only solution. Emhyr has followers as long as he lives. When Emhyr dies, everyone will support us. The aristocracy will side with us, because we are part of the aristocracy, and the power of the aristocracy lies in solidarity.

A significant part of the army will be on our side, especially the officer corps, who still remember Emhyr's purges after the defeat of Sodden. The people will be on our side…"

"Because the people are ignorant, stupid, and easy to manipulate," Skellen finished the sentence, after he had himself a sneeze. "You need only 'Hurrah!' And make a speech from the senate steps promising to open the prisons and cut the taxes."

"You are absolutely right, Owl," said the syllable stretcher. "Now I know why you shout so loudly for democracy."

"I warn you," creaked the man they called Joachim, "that everything will not go as smoothly as it sounds, gentlemen. Our whole plan is based on the death of Emhyr. But we must not close our eyes to the fact that Emhyr has many followers, he has the units in the main army, and he has a fanatical guard. It will not be easy to pass through the Imperial Guard and strike at the Emperor, because, have no illusions, they will fight to the death."

"And here," declared Stefan Skellen, "Vilgefortz offers us his help. We will not have to besiege the palace, and we will not have to fight through the Imperial Guard. The thing can be done by a single assassin with magical protection. As in Tretogor, just before the mages' coup on Thanedd."

"King of Radovid of Redania."

"Yes."

"Vilgefortz has as an assassin?"

"Yes. To prove our trust, gentlemen, I will tell you who it is. The sorceress Yennefer, who we've imprisoned."

"Imprisoned? I've heard that Yennefer worked with Vilgefortz willingly."

"She is his prisoner. Bewitched and hypnotized, programmed like a golem, she will execute the assassination. Then she will commit suicide."

"Some magical witch doesn't quite suit me," said the one who extended the syllables, extending them even more out of sheer disgust. "A hero would be better, a blazing champion of an idea, an avenger…"

"An avenger", interrupted Skellen. "Fits like a glove, Mr. Leuvaarden. Yennefer will avenge the suffering that was inflicted by the tyrant. Emhyr has persecuted and driven to death her girl, an innocent child. This cruel tyrant, this pervert, has persecuted and murdered children instead of taking care of empire. Therefore, he will be overtaken by the avenging hand…"

"I", announced Ardal aep Dahy's bass voice, "I like it very well."

"Me too," agreed to Joachim de Wette.

“Wonderful!” Shouted the eccentric Count Broinne. “For the rape of foreign women, the avenging hand will overtake the tyrant and pervert. Wonderful!”

“One more thing,” said Leuvaarden, stretching his syllables. “To guarantee your trust, Lord Skellen, I’ll ask you to please betray to us the whereabouts of Mr. Vilgefortz.”

“Gentlemen, I… I cannot…”

“That is why it would be a guarantee. A pledge of the sincerity and devotion to the cause.”

“You need not fear betrayal, Stefan,” added aep Dahy. “None here will betray you. This is a paradox. In other circumstances, someone among us might even try to buy his life by betraying the rest. But all of us know only too well that they would buy nothing with the betrayal. Emhyr var Emreis does not forgive. He cannot. Instead of a heart he has a lump of ice. And therefore, all will be killed.”

Stefan Skellen no longer hesitated. “Okay,” he said. “As a pledge of sincerity. Vilgefortz is hidden at the…”

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The witcher sat at the opening of the tube and clenched his fists until they hurt. He strained his hearing. And his memory.

***

The witcher’s doubts concerning Fringilla’s amulet were unjustified and vanished in a moment. When he returned the great cavern and approached the stone bridge over the abyss, the medallion began to jerk on his neck and struggle, not like a sparrow, but more like a large and powerful bird. Let’s say, a crow.

Geralt froze. He calmed the amulet. He did not make the slightest movement, so that no rustle, not even a breath, could deceive his hearing. He waited. He knew that on the other side of the abyss, beyond the bridge, there was something, something that was lurking in the dark.

He did not rule out that it could also be concealed behind his back, and that the bridge might be a trap. He was not going to walk into this trap. He waited. And not in vain.

“Hail, Witcher,” he heard. “We are waiting for you here.”

The voice that came out of the darkness sounded strange and alien. But Geralt had heard voices like it more than once, he knew them. Thus spoke beings that were not used to communicating with the aid of articulate speech. Although they were able to use the apparatus of the lungs, diaphragm, trachea, and throat, these creatures could not use completely the articulation apparatus, even though

their lips, palate, and tongues were built very similar to humans. Such beings accentuated their spoken words not only strangely and proudly, but also with sounds that are uncomfortable to the human ear - hard and ugly barking or soft and slimy hissing.

“We are waiting for you here,” repeated the voice. “We knew that you would come if we fed you with rumours. That you would come crawl under the earth, to search, to hunt, to track, to kill. But you will not leave here. You will never again see the sun that is so dear to you.”

“Show yourself.”

In the darkness beyond the bridge, something moved. The darkness seemed to aggregate in one place and took on an almost human form. The creature seemed to never remain in the same position or at the same location for a moment; it changed it by using faster, more nervous, blurred motion. The witcher had seen such creatures before.

“A Korr,” he stated calmly. “I should have expected to see the likes of you here. It’s a miracle that I didn’t find you earlier.”

“Take a look at you.” The unnatural voice of the creature sounded mocking. “In the dark, and still you recognized me. And do you recognize that? And that? And that?”

From the darkness emerged three more creatures, silently as ghosts. One, who had been hiding behind the Korr’s back, also had the general shape and appearance of a humanoid, but it was more stocky, hunched, and ape-like. Geralt knew it was a Killmouli.

The other two monsters were hiding, as he had correctly guessed, behind the bridge, ready to cut off his retreat if he had stepped onto the bridge. The first, on the left, resembled a giant spider, it stood in place while flexing its many legs. It was a Molding. The last creature reminded him of a candelabra, it liked something that had jumped straight out of the broken slate wall. Geralt could not say what it was. No such monster was recorded in the witcher books.

“I want no quarrel with you,” he said, and putting a little hope in the fact that the creatures had begun with conversation, rather than just going for his jugular in the dark. “I want no quarrel with you. But if it comes to that, I will defend myself.”

“We have taken that into account,” the Korr said, hissing. “That is why we are four. That is why we have lured you here. You poison our lives, fucking witchers. The most beautiful holes in this part of the world, wonderful places to hibernate. We’ve spent the winter here almost since the beginning of time. And

now you show up here to prey on us, you wretch. In order track us, hunt us, and kill us for money. But no more. Not from you."

"Listen, Korr…"

"Politely," snarled the creature. "I do not tolerate insolence."

"So how am I to address you…?"

"Mr. Schweitzer."

"Well, Mr. Schweitzer," continued Geralt, seemingly obedient, "here is the thing. I have, I will not hide it, come here as a witcher with a witcher's job. I propose to let that subject rest. However, something happened in this cave, something that has changed the situation diametrically. I've learned something unusually important for me. Something that can change my whole life."

"And what will follow from this?"

"I need," - Geralt was a model of composure and patience - "to immediately get to the surface and to immediately set off for a long journey, without the slightest delay. A journey from which there might be no return. I do not think I will ever… return to this area…"

"Trying to buy you your life, witcher?" Hissed Mr. Schweitzer. "No use. You ask in vain. We've got you in a bind and will not let you out. We will kill you and think not only of ourselves, but also of our other comrades. We will kill you, if I may say so, for both our and their freedom."

"I'll not only never come back to this area", Geralt continued patiently, "but will give up all my work as a witcher. I will never kill any of you…"

"You're lying! You lie in fear!"

"But," - Geralt could not be interrupted this time - "I must, as I said, get outside, immediately. So you have two choices. The first: You believe in my sincerity, and I get out of here. The second: I leave behind your corpses."

"The third," growled the Korr, "your corpse is left behind."

The witcher removed his sword from the scabbard on his back with a hiss.

"It will not be the only one," he said, unmoved. "Certainly not the only one, Mr. Schweitzer."

The Korr was silent for a while. The Killmouli, who still stood behind his back, rocked back and forth and growled a little. The Molding bent and stretched its legs. The Candelabra had changed shape. Now it looked like a crooked little tree with two large, phosphorescent eyes.

"Give us," finally said the Korr, "proof of your sincerity and your good will."

"How?"

"Your sword. You claim that you will cease to be a witcher. A sword makes a

witcher. Throw it into the abyss. Or break it. Then we let you out."

Geralt stood there motionless for a moment, only the water dripping from the ceiling and walls broke the silence. Then he slowly placed the sword vertically and deeply into a crevice. And broke the blade with a powerful kick of his boot. The sword burst with a sighing sound that echoed in the depths.

The water dripped from the walls, ran them down like tears.

"I cannot believe it," the Korr said slowly. "I cannot believe that someone could be so stupid."

They all rushed at him, instantly, without a cry or a command. Mr. Schweitzer was the first to over the bridge - with stretched claws and bared fangs, which even a wolf would not have been ashamed of.

Geralt approached it, whereupon he turned and struck it in the hip, the lower cheek, and its neck, renting its throat. The next moment he was on the bridge and slashed off one of the Killmouli's wrists with a blow. He doubled over and threw himself on the ground, just in time, because the Candelabra flew over him, grazing his jacket with its paws. The Molding jumped in front of witcher, thin legs whirling like a windmill. A swipe from one of its paws hit him on the side of the head; Geralt danced, made a feint, and hit with a sweeping blow.

However, the Molding jumped again, but missed him. It landed on the railing and he pushed it, along with a hail of stones, into the abyss. Until then it had not made the slightest sound, but now that it fell into the abyss, it howled. It was a long time before the howling ceased.

They attacked from two sides - the Candelabra on one, and the blood soaked Killmouli on the other, which had managed to stand up in spite of its injuries. The witcher jumped on the small stone railing, shaking the whole bridge. He balanced out and was now located beyond the reach of the Candelabra's clawed paws, and behind the Killmouli. The Killmouli had no neck, so Geralt gave him a blow to the temple. But the monster's head was like iron, so he had to strike a second time to finish it. It took him a split second too long.

He received a blow to the head, pain flared in his skull and into his eyes. He spun around, covered himself with a large display of defence, and felt his blood gushing beneath his hair, trying to understand what had happened. After he avoided - miraculously - the second blow of the claws, he understood. The Candelabra had changed shape - it now attacked with almost impossibly long legs.

That brought a disadvantage. Namely, imbalance and a shifted centre of gravity. The witcher ducked under its feet and shortened the distance. The

Candelabra saw what was going on, threw itself back like a cat, and stretched up on its hind paws, which were also reinforced with claws. Geralt jumped over it, cutting it mid-jump. He felt his blade cut through the body.

He ducked, spun around, struck again, and sank to one knee. The creature screamed violently and quickly lowered its head, full of teeth, to the height of the witcher's chest. Its large eyes glowed in the dark. Geralt pushed it back with a sharp blow of his sword pommel, and made a strike at close range that separated half of its skull. Even without that half, this strange creature not recorded in the witcher books snapped at him with its teeth for another dozen seconds.

Then it died with a horrible, almost human sigh.

The Korr lay in a pool of blood and twitched convulsively.

The witcher stopped in front of him. "I cannot believe," he said, "that someone could be so stupid to fall for such a simple illusion as the broken sword."

He wasn't sure whether the Korr was conscious enough to understand him. But basically, he didn't care.

"I warned you," he said as he wiped the blood trickling down his cheek. "I warned you that I needed get out of here."

Mr. Schweitzer began to tremble violently. He gasped, whistled, and creaked. Then he was quiet and did not move again.

Water dripped from the ceiling and walls.

***

"Are you satisfied now Regis?"

"Now, yes."

"Well, then." The witcher stood up. "Go on and pack your things. But be quick."

"It will not take me long. *Omnia mea mecum porto.*"

"What?"

"I do not have much luggage."

"All the better. Meet me in front of the city in half an hour."

"I'll be there."

***

He had underestimated her. She had caught him. He only had himself to blame. Instead of hurrying, he should have ridden Roach out of the back of the palace, from the larger stables that were used by knights-errant, servants, and the staff, where his company had their horses. He had rushed and by habit had used

the Princess' stable. And he should have guessed that she would be waiting in the royal stables.

She paced from wall to wall, churning up the straw. She wore a short lynx fur, a white satin blouse, a black skirt, and high riding boots. The horses snorted, they could feel the anger radiating from her.

"Oh, please," she said, grabbing the riding whip in his hand. "You are leaving! Without saying goodbye. Because a letter on a table is certainly not a goodbye. Not after what's united us. I can just imagine how your behaviour is explained and justified by unusually weighty arguments."

"It will be explained and justified. Sorry, Fringilla."

"*Sorry, Fringilla*." She repeated, twisting her mouth furiously. "How scarce, how cautious, nearly laconic - what sense of style. I bet the letter you left for me is edited just as elegantly. Without undue waste in terms of ink."

"I must go," he squeezed out. "You can imagine why. And for whom. Please forgive me. I was planning to sneak away in secret, quietly, because… I do not want you trying to ride with us."

"There you worried needlessly," she said emphatically as she bent the whip into a loop. "I would not ride with you, even if you begged me from your knees. Oh no, witcher. Ride alone, die alone, freeze to death in the passes alone. I have no obligation to Ciri. And to you? Do you know how many people beg for this, what you have? What you now shove aside, throw away with contempt?"

"I'll never forget you."

"Oh," she hissed. "You have no idea how much I desire to make sure of that. If not with magic, then with this whip!"

"You wouldn't."

"You're right, I wouldn't. I couldn't. I'm behaving like an abandoned and spurned lover. Classic. I'll accept it with my head held high. With pride and dignity. I'll bite back my tears. Then I'll cry into my pillow. And then I let myself be with another!"

Towards the end she almost shouted.

He said nothing. She was also silent.

"Geralt," she finally said in a very different voice. "Stay with me."

"I think I love you," she said when she saw that he hesitated before answering. "Stay with me. I beg you. I've never asked that of someone and do not think I'll ever do it again. I beg you."

"Fringilla…" he replied after a while. "You're a woman that a man could only dream of. It is my fault, entirely my fault, that I am not a dreamer by

nature.”

“You,” she said, biting her lip, “are like a fish hook, which, once stuck, can only be uprooted together with blood and flesh. Well, I myself am guilty, I knew what I was doing when I began this dangerous game. Luckily I also know how to deal with the consequences. In this regard, I have more than other women.”

He said nothing.

“Besides,” she added, “a broken heart, while it hurts much more than a broken arm, also heals much, much faster.”

Again he said nothing.

Fringilla looked at the bruise on his cheek. “What about my amulet? Does it work well?”

“It is simply fabulous. Thank you.”

She nodded.

“Where do you ride?” She asked in a completely different voice, in a very different tone. “What did you learn? You know where Vilgefortz is hiding, don’t you?”

“Yes. Please do not ask me to tell you. I will not.”

“I’ll have that information. One way or the other.”

“Really?”

“I have a message”, she stated, “that is very valuable. And for you, simply priceless. I will sell it to you in exchange for…”

“For a clear conscience,” he finished the sentence for her. He looked into her eyes. “For the trust that I have given you. A moment ago you spoke of loving me. And now we begin to talk of exchanges?”

She was silent for a long time. Then they fought fiercely for the whip they both were holding.

“Yennefer.” She said quickly. “The one whose name you’ve mentioned a few times to me at night, in moments of ecstasy, has not ever betrayed you or Ciri. She was not an accomplice to Vilgefortz. She fearlessly undertook an unprecedented risk to save Cirilla. She suffered a defeat and fell into Vilgefortz’s hands. She was surely forced by torture to perform the magical detection that took place last year. Whether she still lives is not known. That’s all I know. I swear it.”

“Thank you, Fringilla.”

“Go.”

“I trust you,” he said without leaving. “And I will never forget what happened between us. I trust you, Fringilla. I will not stay with you, but I think I

loved you too… in my way. I ask that you keep secret what you are about to hear. Vilgefortz's hiding place is…"

"Wait," she interrupted. "Tell me later, after you say goodbye to me. A proper goodbye. Not with a note, not with stammering apologies. Say goodbye to me, as I want."

She took off her lynx fur and laid it on a pile of straw. With a violent movement she tore open her blouse, she wore nothing underneath. She plopped down on the fur, taking Geralt with her. Geralt grabbed her neck, pulled up her skirt, and suddenly realized that there was no time to take off his gloves. Fortunately, Fringilla was not wearing any gloves. Or underwear.

He was even more fortunate that she was not wearing spurs, for immediately afterwards the heels of her riding boots were literally everywhere – there was no telling what might have happened if she had been wearing spurs.

When she cried, he kissed her. Stifling her cry.

The horses, sensing both of their raging passions, neighed, stomped, and pushed against the walls, swirling the dust and hay.

***

"Castle Rhys-Rhun, in Nazair, on the shores of Lake Muredach!" Fringilla Vigo concluded triumphantly. "That is Vilgefortz's hideout. I got it out of the witcher before he rode away. We have enough time to pre-empt him. He cannot possibly be there before April."

The nine women gathered in the great pillared hall of Castle Montecalvo nodded, looking at Fringilla with appreciative eyes.

"Rhys-Rhun…" repeated Philippa Eilhart while she bared her teeth in a predatory smile and played with the sardonyx cameo pinned to her dress. "Rhys-Rhun in Nazair. See you soon, Mr. Vilgefortz… See you soon!"

"If the witcher gets there," hissed Keira Metz, "he will find debris that won't even smell burnt any more."

"And neither will the dead bodies." Sabrina Glevissig smiled charmingly.

"Bravo, Miss Vigo!" Sile de Tancarville gave her a nod - a gesture that Fringilla would never have expected of the famous magician. "Perfect Work."

Fringilla bowed her head.

"Bravo," repeated Sile. "About three months *Toussaint*… But it was well worth it."

Fringilla Vigo let her eyes wander around the sorceresses sitting at the table. Around Sile, Philippa, and Sabrina Glevissig. Around Keira Metz, Margarita Laux-Antille, and Triss Merigold. Around Francesca Findabair and Ida Emean,

whose intensely painted elven eyes expressed nothing. Around Assire var Anahid, whose eyes were restlessness and full of anxiety.

“That it was,” she admitted.

Perfectly sincere.

***

The dark blue sky was gradually turning black. A strong, icy wind blew through the vineyards. Geralt buttoned up his wolf’s fur clothing and wrapped a wool scarf round around his neck. He felt very well. The lovemaking had, as usual, brought him up to peak physical, mental, and spiritual condition, wiping out all traces of doubt, making his mind clear and lively. He regretted only that he would not experience this wonderful panacea again for a long time.

The voice of Reynart de Bois-Fresnes tore him from his thoughts.

“Bad weather is coming,” the knight-errant said as he stared into the east, from whence the wind blew. “Hurry. If this wind brings snow, if it manages to catch you on the passes, then you are sitting in a trap. The only thing you can do then is pray to the gods - both those that you worship and those you’ve only heard of - for the snow to thaw.”

“We understand.”

“The Sansretour will lead you the first few days, keep to the river. You will ride past a trapper trading post and come to a point where a tributary flows into the Sansretour from the right. Do not forget, from the right. Its course will show you the way to Malheur Pass. If, with the help of the gods, you manage to conquer the Malheur, do not rejoice too much, you still have the Sansmerci and Mortblanc passes in front of you. You have to overcome both, then you can descend into the Sudoth Valley. Sudoth has a warm micro-climate, almost like Toussaint. But the soil is so poor, no wine will grow there…”

He broke off embarrassed, as he noticed the disapproving glances.

“Okay,” he croaked. “To the point. The town of Caravista is located at the end of the Sudoth. My cousin lives there, Guy de Bois-Fresnes. Visit him and refer to me. If it turns out that he has died, or is an imbecile, then remember that the next step of your journey is towards the plains of Mag Deira and the valley of the Sylte River. From there, Geralt, follow the map you had the cartographers in town draw you. While we are discussing cartography - I do not quite understand why you asked him about the castles…”

“Forget it, Reynart. Nothing like it happened. You heard nothing and saw nothing. Even if they tighten you up on the rack. Do you understand?”

“I understand.”

“A horseman,” warned Cahir, subduing his erupting stallion. “A rider approaches from the palace, at a gallop.”

“If there is only one” Angoulême said with a big smile, stroking the axe hanging from her saddle, “it will hardly be a problem.”

The rider on the galloping horse turned out to be Dandelion. And, wonder of wonders, the horse turned out to be Pegasus, the poet’s gelding, who was not used to the sharp galloping and did not appear to enjoy it.

“Well,” the troubadour said, so out of breath that it looked like he had carried the gelding instead of the other way around. “Well, I did it. I was afraid I wouldn’t be able to catch you.”

“Don’t tell me you’re coming along with us now.”

“No, Geralt” - Dandelion bowed his head - “I’m not coming along. I’m staying here in Toussaint, with Weasel. That is, with Anarietta. But I had to say goodbye to you. Wish you luck on your way.”

“Thank the princess for everything. And find a justification for us leaving so suddenly, and without saying goodbye. Explain it somehow.”

“You took a chivalrous vow, and now you must fulfil it. Everyone in Toussaint, including Little Weasel, will understand that. But here… take this. This will be my contribution.”

“Dandelion” - Geralt took a bag from the poet - “we do not suffer lack of money. It isn’t necessary…”

“This will be my contribution,” repeated the troubadour. “Cash never hurts. Plus, it’s not mine - I took these ducats from Little Weasel’s privy purse. Why are you looking at me like that? Women don’t need money. And why should they? They don’t drink, don’t roll dice - women are condemned, they do it to themselves. So, it’s all good! Now ride off, before I start to cry. And when it’s over, you have to stop by Toussaint, come back to tell me everything. And I will paint Ciri. Do you promise, Geralt?”

“I promise.”

“Well, it’s all good.”

“Wait.” Geralt turned his horse, rode close to the poet, and removed a secret letter from his jacket. “See that this letter comes to the right place…”

“Fringilla Vigo?”

“No. Dijkstra.”

“Why, Geralt? And how am I supposed to do that?”

“Find a way. I know you can do it. And now, take care. Give me a hug, old fool.”

“Give me a hug, friend. I’ll keep my eye out for you!”

They watched him leave, riding at a trot towards Beauclair.

The sky was dark.

“Reynart.” The witcher turned in the saddle. “Ride with us.”

“No, Geralt,” replied Reynart de Bois-Fresnes after a moment. “I am a knight-errant. But I am not crazy.”

***

In the great pillared hall of Castle Montecalvo they were in unusually high spirits. Here the usually dominant light of the candelabra had now been replaced by the milky light of a large, magical screen. The image on the screen wavered, flickered, and disappeared from time to time. All this increased the tension and excitement. And nervousness.

“Ha,” said Philippa Eilhart with a predatory smile. “What a shame that I cannot be there. A little action would do me good. And a little adrenaline.”

Sile de Tancarville gave her a disapproving look, but said nothing. Francesca Findabair and Ida Emean stabilized the image with spells and enlarged it so that it occupied the entire screen. They could clearly see black peaks against the backdrop of deep blue sky, filled with stars, which also reflected on the surface of a lake situated by a dark and edgy profile of a castle.

“I am still not sure,” Sile said, “whether it was proper to transfer the management of this task force to young Sabrina and Metz. Keira had her ribs broken on Thanedd, she will probably want to take revenge. And Sabrina… well, she likes the action and adrenaline a bit too much. Isn’t that so, Philippa?”

“We talked about this already”, snapped Philippa, her voice was as sour as a plum. “We’ve laid down the rules. No one is killed if it can be avoided. Sabrina and Keira’s group will enter Rhys-Rhun on tiptoe, quiet as a mouse, psst. They will take Vilgefortz alive, without a scratch, without a bruise. Those are the rules we set. Although I am still of the opinion that we should have made an example. So that the few in the castle who would have survived the night would have woken up crying, and would have dreamed of this night for the rest of their lives.”

“Revenge,” the sorceress from Kovir said dryly, “is the joy of mediocre, weak, and petty minds.”

“Maybe,” agreed Philippa with a seemingly indifferent smile. “But it is still a joy.”

“Enough of that,” Margarita Laux-Antille lifted a glass of sparkling wine in the air. “I suggest we drink to the health of Miss Fringilla Vigo, through whose

efforts Vilgefortz's hideout was discovered. Really, Miss Fringilla, good work, very good work."

Fringilla bowed and raised her glass in reply. She noticed a hint of mockery in Philippa's black eyes. There was indignation in Triss Merigold's blue-eyed gaze. She could not decipher the smiles of Francesca or Sile.

"It begins," said Assire var Anahid, pointing to the magical image.

They sat down comfortably. In order to see better, Philippa dampened the candlelight with a spell.

They watched as black figures flew by the mountains, as silent and agile as bats. As they broke formation and descended to the battlements and ramparts of Castle Rhys-Rhun.

"It must be a hundred years ago," murmured Philippa, "since I've had a broom between my legs. Soon I will forget how to fly."

Sile, eyes fixed on the screen, silenced her with an impatient hiss.

The windows of the black castle flashed briefly with fire. Once, twice, three times. They knew what it was. Locked doors and locking chains being shattered under the blows of ball lightning.

"They're inside," Assire var Anahid said quietly, the only one not looking at the screen, but instead into a crystal ball lying on the table. "The task force is inside. But something is wrong. Something is not as it should be."

Fringilla's heart was pounding and her stomach felt queasy. She knew that everything was not the way it should be.

"Miss Glevissig," reported Assire again, "will open a direct communicator."

The space between the pillars of the hall suddenly flared up and an oval materialized into Sabrina Glevissig - dressed in men's clothes, her hair held back by a chiffon scarf around her forehead, her face blackened with strips of camouflage. Behind the sorceress' back, they could see dirty stone walls and shredded rags that had once been tapestries.

Sabrina's hand stretched out towards them, her glove displaying the hanging remains of long strips of cobwebs.

"Just these!" She said, gesturing violently, "There are plenty of these here! Just these! Hell, what a stupid… What a disgrace…"

"Coherent, Sabrina!"

"What, coherent?" Shouted the magician from Kaedwen. "How should I make it more coherent? Can you not see? This is the castle of Rhys-Rhun! It is empty! Dilapidated and empty! It is a damned empty ruin! There's nothing here! Nothing!"

Keira Metz appeared standing behind Sabrina's back, looking like the purest hell with camouflage painted on her face.

"No one," she confirmed quietly, "has been in this castle. For about fifty years. For fifty years, there has not been a living soul, except for spiders, rats, and bats. We have raided the entirely wrong place."

"Have you verified that this is not an illusion?"

"Do you think we are children, Philippa?"

"Be careful, both of you." Philippa Eilhart nervously ran her fingers through her hair. "Tell the mercenaries and novices that this was an exercise. They should return to be paid. Return immediately. And put a good face on it, you hear? A very good face!"

The communication oval went out. Only one image remained on the screen. The castle of Rhys-Rhun against the black, glittering stars of the heavens. And the lake where the stars were reflected.

Fringilla Vigo looked at the table. She felt as though the pulsating blood in her cheeks would come bursting out at any moment.

"I really…" she said, as she could no longer endure the silence that prevailed in the great pillared hall of Castle Montecalvo. "I really… do not…"

"I do," said Triss Merigold.

"This castle…" Philippa said thoughtfully, ignoring the others. "This castle… Rhys-Rhun… We will have to destroy it. Completely lay it to ruins. And any records of this whole affair – legends or traditions, will be required to submit to a careful censorship. Do you ladies know what I mean?"

"Very well." Findabair Francesca, who had been silent until then, nodded. Ida Emean, who had also been silent, allowed a very eloquent snort.

"I…" Fringilla Vigo was still stunned. "I really do not understand how… how this could happen…"

"Ah," Sile de Tancarville said after a very long silence. "There is nothing further to say, Miss Vigo. No one is perfect."

Philippa snorted softly. Assire var Anahid sighed and looked up at the ceiling.

"Ultimately," Sile added with pursed lips, "it is something that each of us has already experienced at some point. Each of us, as we sit here, has at some time been betrayed, exploited, or made a mockery of by a man."

“I love thee, thy beauty I covet and choose;
Be willing, my darling, or force I shall use”
“Dear father, oh father, he seizes my arm!
The Alder King, father, has done me harm!”

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe

Everything has already been done once, everything will eventually happen again. And everything has already been described before.

Vysogota of Corvo

CHAPTER FIVE

A hot and stuffy afternoon fell on the forest, the lake's surface, until recently was dark as polished jade, now gleamed like gold. The reflection off of the surface from the sun was so blinding that Ciri had to shade her watery eyes with her hand.

She ran through the bushes that grew on the shore and forced Kelpie into the lake, the deep water reached above the knees of the mare. The water was so clear that, even from the height of her saddle, Ciri could see the shadow of the horse on the colourful mosaic floor, the seaweed and the shells. She saw a small crab moving very quickly among the pebbles.

Kelpie whinnied. Ciri jerked the reins and moved into the shallows, but not all the way to the shore because it was sandy with many stones which would hinder fast travel. She directed the mare closer to the edge of the water, where she could run on reasonably firm gravel. She let the mare trot, but after a while the trot became slower. With a cry she kicked her heels into Kelpie's side and spurred her into a gallop. Water sprayed up on all sides, flashing in the sun like molten silver.

She did not slow down, even when she saw the tower in front of her. They literally flew through the shallow water. An ordinary horse would have certainly slowed down. But Kelpie's breathing was deep and regular, and her canter was still fast and lightweight. They ran into the courtyard in full momentum, making a great noise as the horseshoes struck the cobblestones, she slowed the mare sharply so that for a moment the shoes slipped on the cobbles. She stopped right in front of the elves that waited at the foot of the tower. Before their very noses. She felt satisfaction when two of the usually steady and dispassionate elves, recoiled involuntarily.

"Don't be alarmed," she snorted. "I won't hit you! Unless I wanted to."

The elves quickly recovered, smoothing their faces to calm again, their indifferent eyes started back at her with nonchalance. Ciri jumped, or rather flew from the saddle. In her eyes was a challenge.

"Bravo," said the blond elf with a triangular face, emerging from the shadows

of an arcade. “A nice performance, *Loc’hlaith*.”

He had greeted her the same as when she entered the Tower of the Swallow and found herself in the middle of blooming spring,. But that was a long time ago and it no longer produced any impression on Ciri.

“I am not the Lady of the Lake,” she protested. “I am a prisoner here! And you are my jailors! Why not admit it?”

“Please!” She threw the reins to one of the elves. “The horse needs to be rubbed down. And given a cool water to drink. And take good care of her!”

The blond elf smiled.

“Indeed,” he said, looking at the elf leading Kelpie to the stable. “You’re an imprisoned here and mistreated by cruel jailors. It is visible at a glance.”

“They get what they deserve!” She put her hands on her hips and glared into his clear aquamarine eyes. “I treat them like they treat me. A prison is a prison.”

“You astonish me, *Loc’hlaith*.”

“And you treat me like a stupid kid. And you have not even introduced yourself.”

“Sorry. My name is Crevan Espane aep Caomhan Macha. And I am an *Aen Saevherne*, if you know what that means.”

“Yes I do,” she had no time to hide her admiration. “A Knowing one. Elven wizards.”

“You could call it that. For convenience, I use an alias, Avallac’h, so you can call me that.”

“And who told you,” Ciri frowned, “that I have any intention of talking to you? A Knowing one or not, you are my jailor, and I am…”

“A prisoner,” he finished sarcastically. “You already said that. Also that you are a prisoner that is ill-treated. The riding trips are undoubtedly forced, you wear a sword on your back under pressure and as punishment you have to wear those garments, which are so much more tasteful, newer and cleaner than the one in which you were discovered. However, despite the harsh conditions, you do not give up. The wrong that we have committed again you, you repay with rebellion. You also broke with great courage some mirrors that were true works of art.”

She flushed with anger and shame.

“Oh,” he added hastily. “You can break what you want. They are only things – even if they were made by artist several hundred years ago. Will you walk with me to the lake?”

The wind had risen and it somewhat eased her embarrassment. Additionally

the tall trees around the tower provided shade.

The water in the lake was a murky green colour, the abundant water lilies that adorned it's surface, with their yellow flowers, made it seem like a meadow. The sandpipers, squawking and shaking their red beaks, move quickly away at their approach.

"That mirror…" Ciri stammered, her heels digging into the wet gravel. "I'm sorry about that. I was in a rage. That was all."

"Oh."

"They were ignoring me. The elves. When I speak to them, they pretend they don't understand. And they speak to me on purpose so that I do not understand them. Just to humiliate me."

"You speak our language perfectly. However," he explained calmly, "it's still a foreign language to you. Besides, you are using *hen llinge*, and they use *ellylon*. The differences are not great, but they are there."

"You understand. Every word."

"I'm speaking to you using *hen llinge*. It is the language the elves speak on your world."

"And you?" She turned away. "From what world are you? I'm not an ignorant child. At night I look up at the sky. There is not a single constellation that I know. This world is not my own. It's not my place. I came here by accident… I want to get out. To leave."

She bent down and picked up a stone, and made a motion as if to throw it at the sandpipers on the edge of the lake. She stopped when she noticed his stare.

"When I go riding," she said indignantly, "I always end up back at the lake and the tower. Whether I head out on either side, whether I change direction, no matter what I do, every time I end up at the lake and the tower. Every time. I cannot get away from this place. So it is a prison. It's worse than a dungeon with bars on the windows. Do you know why? Because it is humiliating. *Ellylon* or not, it angers me when they make fun of me and show their disdain. Don't pretend that you're not laughing at me and despising me. Are you surprised when I get angry?"

"I am surprised, in fact," his eyes widened. "Extremely."

She sighed and shrugged.

"I went into the tower over a week ago," she said, making an effort to stay calm. "And when I came out I was in a different world. You were waiting for me, sitting and playing a flute. You said that you were surprised that I had taken so long in coming. You addressed me by my name, but later you gave me that

nonsense about the Lady of the Lake. After that you disappeared without an explanation. Leaving me in this prison. Call this what you please. I call it contempt and malicious wounding."

"It has only been eight days, Zireael."

"Ah," she frowned, "So, I've been lucky? Because it could be eight weeks? Or eight months? Or eight…"

She paused.

"Much you have strayed away," he said quietly, "from Lara Dorren. You have lost your inheritance, the bond with her blood. It is not surprising that people do not understand you, or you them. You don't just talk differently, but think differently too – in completely different ways. What is eight days or eight weeks? Time is not important."

"I confess," she shouted back angrily. "I'm not a wise elf, I'm just a silly mortal. For me, time is important, so I count the days and even hours. And I figure it has been a lot of some and more of others. I do not want anything from you, I do not want you to explain why it is spring in these woods or why unicorns live here, and I do not care why the constellations in the sky are not known to me. I do not care how you knew my name or how I came here. I just want one thing – to go home! To my world! To my people! To those who think just like me! In the same way!"

"You can go back to them. After a period of time."

"I want it now!" She cried. "Not after a period of time, dammit! Since time here takes forever! Why can I not leave now? I came here alone, by choice! So what right do you have holding me here?"

"You did come alone," he said seriously. "But not by choice. Fate has brought you here and we helped a little. Long have we been awaiting you. Even by the standards of our time."

"I do not understand any of this."

"We have been waiting a long time," he said not paying any attention to her objection, "fearful of one thing – that you would not be able to get here. But you did it. You have confirmed your origin, your blood. And that means that here, and not among the *Dh'oine* is your place. You are the rightful daughter of Lara Dorren aep Shiadhal."

"I am the daughter of Pavetta! I do not even know who this Lara of your is!"

He paused. Almost imperceptibly.

"In that case," he reconsidered, "It would be best if I explain who Lara is. But time is short, so I would prefer to use the most popular explanations along the

way. But from you recklessness and defiance you have harassed your mare…”

“Harassed my mare? Ha! You do not know what my mare can handle. Where are we going?”

“If you’ll excuse me, I’ll also tell you that along the way.”

***

Ciri slowed Kelpie from her mad gallop.

Avallac’h had not lied. There, in the open, in the grasslands and heaths from which protruded menhirs, worked the same force that surround Tor Zireael. No matter which direction she rode or how fast, and invisible magic force pulled her back in a circle.

Kelpie snorted and Ciri patted her neck, looking calm at the bunch of elves. A moment ago, when Avallac’h finally told her what they wanted from her, she took off at a full gallop, to get away from them, leaving them as far behind as possible. To escape them and their arrogant and unusual request.

But there they were back in front of her. She had rode a mile, more or less. But Avallac’h had not lied. There was no escape.

The only good thing about the gallop was that it had cooled her head and soothed her nerves. She was calmer. But she was still shaking with anger.

I’ve fallen in deep, she thought. *By the gods, why did I enter that tower?*

She shivered as she remembered Bonhart speeding up behind her on a lathered horse on the cracking ice. She controlled herself. *I’m alive,* she thought. *So it’s not the end of the fight. The fight only end with death, everything else is just an interruption. So they taught me at Kaer Morhen.*

She walked Kelpie slowly, but when she saw the mare proudly raise her head she encouraged her to a trot. She rode around the menhirs. The grass and heather reached to her stirrups.

Soon she caught up to Avallac’h and the three elves. The Knowing one was smiling mysteriously and watched her with his aquamarine eyes.

“Please Avallac’h,” she said hoarsely. “Say it was a joke.”

“A shadow crossed his face.

“I’m not in the habit of making jokes like this,” he said seriously. “I will seriously reiterate that we want you to bear a son, Swallow, daughter of Lara Dorren. Once you give birth to the child, we’ll let you leave here and go back to your own world. Of course, the choice is yours. I imagine your wild ride will have helped you to make the decision. What is your answer?”

“My answer is no,” Ciri replied flatly. “Categorically, permanently, no. I’m not ready and that is that.”

“I confess,” he shrugged, “you disappointed me. But it’s your decision.”

“How can you even ask such a thing?” She said, her voice trembling. “How can you? By what right?”

He looked at her blankly. Ciri also noticed that the other elves were watching.

“It seemed to me,” he said, “that I already clarified the secret of your origin. It seemed to me that you understood me. Therefore your question surprises me. We have the right and we can demand, Swallow. Your father, Cregennan, took our child. You have to give one to us. To pay off the debt. It seems to me to be only logical and fair.”

“My father… I do not remember my father, but he was called Duny. Not Cregennan. I told you that already!”

“And I told you that a few ludicrously short human generations mean nothing to us.”

“But I won’t do it!” Shouted Ciri, startling the horses. “Do you not understand? I won’t! I hate the idea that you would try to implant a fucking parasite in me, it makes me sick to think that this parasite would grow in me, that…”

She stopped suddenly, seeing the faces of the elves. In two of them was reflected infinite amazement. In the third, an infinite hatred. Avallac’h intentionally coughed.

“Let’s go,” he said coldly, “a little ahead and talk face to face. Your views, Swallow, are a bit too radical to proclaim in public.”

She obeyed. They rode ahead for a time without speaking.

“I’ll escape,” Ciri broke the silence. “You will not be able to hold me against my will. I escaped from the island of Thanedd, I ran away from my captors and the Nilfgaardians, I escaped Bonhart and the Owl. I will also escape your hands. I will find a way with sorcery.”

“I thought,” he said, “that you rely more on your friends. On Yennefer. On Geralt.”

“You know about them?” She said. “Well, yes. You are a Knowing one! Therefore you know about them because I was thinking about them. In my world, they are both in danger right now, in this moment. And you want to keep me here… For, at least nine months. You see, I have no choice. I understand that it is important for you to have a child of the Elder blood, but I can’t. I just can’t.”

The elf rode so close that their knees touched.

“As I said, the decision is yours. We respect that, but we must take certain steps. You yourself will find that there is no escape, Swallow. If you refuse to

cooperate, then you will stay here forever and you will never see your world or friends again."

"This is blackmail!"

"Conversely," he ignored her protest. "If you will obey our request, we can tell you that time for us really does mean nothing."

"I do not understand."

"Here time passes differently than there. If you help us, we will reward you. Giving you back the time you will lose while among us. Among the People of the Alders."

She was silent, staring at Kelpie's black mane. *I have to think of a delaying tactic*, she thought frantically. *What did Vesemir use to say – When you are to hang, ask for a cup of water. You never know what is going to happen before they bring it.*

One of the elves whistled shrilly.

The horse ridden by Avallac'h whinnied and nervously stamped the ground. The elf mastered it, and shouted something back in elvish. Ciri saw one of the riders pull a bow from his saddle. She stood up in the stirrups and shadowed her eyes with her hands.

"Stay calm." Avallac'h said sharply. Ciri sighed.

About two hundred feet away rushing through the heath was a herd of unicorns. At least thirty of them. She had seen them before, sometimes at dawn they would come down to the lake under the Tower of the Swallow to drink. But they never let her approach them – they always disappeared like ghosts.

The leader of the herd was a strong stallion, a rust-red colour. He stopped and whinnied loudly, rearing. He stood on his hind legs with his front legs pawing at the air in a way no horse would be able to do.

Ciri noticed with astonishment that Avallac'h and his elves had started to softly chant some strange, monotonous melody.

Who are you?

She shook her head.

Who are you? The question resonated inside her head, pounding at her temples. Suddenly the song of the elves escalated. The unicorn whinnied and the whole herd replied. The earth shook as the animals ran off.

The elves' song stopped. Ciri saw Avallac'h wiping sweat from his forehead. The elf looked at her out of the corner of his eye, to see if she saw it.

"Not everything here is as nice as it seems on first sight." He said dryly. "Not everything."

“Are you afraid of unicorns? They’re wise and friendly.”

He did not answer.

“I’ve heard,” she did not give up. “That elves and unicorns love one another.”

He turned his head.

“Consider then,” he said coolly, “what you saw then was an argument between lovers.”

She asked no more questions.

She had enough of her own concerns.

***

The tops of the hills were crowned with menhirs and dolmens. The sight of them reminded Ciri of the stone in Ellander, where Yennefer had taught her magic. *Oh, that was a long time ago,* she thought. *Centuries ago…*

One of the elves screamed. Ciri looked in the direction that the woman was pointing.

Before she could properly realise that the herd had returned, led by the red stallion, another elf cried out. Ciri sat up in her saddle.

From behind the hill, on the opposite side, emerged a second herd. The unicorn guiding them was a bluish grey colour.

Avallac’h shouted a few words. They were in the Elvish dialect, *ellylon*, that she found incomprehensible, but the command seem to be for them to grab their bows. Avallac’h turned towards Ciri, and she felt her mind begin to hum. It was a sound quite similar to that of when you put your ear to a sea conch. But much stronger.

Do not resist - she heard a voice – *Do not defend yourself. I have to make a leap. I have to transfer us elsewhere. There is mortal danger here.*

Suddenly they heard a whistle and a shout. The rumble of shod hooves. From over the top of the hill galloped riders. A whole detachment.

The hill was covered with horses, and the riders wore helmets with crests. From their shoulders billowed cloaks, whose vibrant red, cinnamon and amaranth colours were reminiscent of the reflection of fire in the evening sky.

With whistles and shouts, the riders headed towards them.

Before they had made it half way, the unicorns had disappeared.

***

The leader of the horsemen was a black-haired elf sitting on a dark brown stallion, who looked like a dragon – he was huge and had trappings embroidered with golden scales and wearing a horned bukranion. All the other elves had black hair and red jackets under their armour which was made of incredibly

small steel rings that clung to the body like wool knitwear.

“Avallac’h,” he saluted.

“Eredin.”

“You owe me for the help. To be paid off when requested.”

“I will pay when you ask.”

The black-haired elf jumped to the ground. Avallac’h also dismounted and motioned for Ciri and the others to do the same. They climbed the hill between the upright stones surrounded by bushes and blooming myrtle. Ciri eyed her companions. Both were of the same stature – very tall. But Avallac’h’s face was modest, while the rider’s commanders face resembled a bird of prey. *Blond and black*, she thought. *Good and evil. Light and Dark.*

“Zireael, let me introduce to you this man – Eredin Breacc Glas.”

“Nice to meet you.” The elf bowed. Ciri replied with a clumsy bow.

“How did you know,” asked Avallac’h, “that something threatened us?”

“I didn’t know,” the elf looked at Ciri intently. “I patrol the plains, because news has spread that the unicorns have grown restless and aggressive. No one knows why. Now I know the reason. It’s because of her.”

Avallac’h did not confirm or deny. Ciri’s haughty eyes meet the black-haired elf’s. For a moment, they both looked at each other, and no one wanted to be the first to look away.

“She has to be of the Elder Blood?” The elf shook his head. “*Aen Hen Ichaer.* Lara Dorren aep Shiadhal’s legacy? This is hard to believe. She looks like an ordinary small *Dh’oine*, human female.”

Avallac’h remained silent. His face was impassive and indifferent.

“I assume,” Eredin continued, “that you have made a mistake. Bah! Rumour has it that you never make mistakes. In this creation, deeply hidden, lies Lara’s gene. When you look closely you can see some of the characteristics. Indeed, in her eyes I find something that awakens in me the memory of Lara Dorren. Am I right, Avallac’h? Who else, if not you, should know?”

Again Avallac’h remained silent. But Ciri noticed a shadow of a blush on his pale face.

She was very surprised and that gave her pause.

“Generally speaking,” sneered the dark-haired elf, “I can see something in the little Dh’oine. I can see it and appreciate it. Like I’ve found a nugget of gold on a pile of manure.”

Ciri’s eyes flashed angrily. Avallac’h slowly raised his head.

“You talk,” he said slowly, “just like a human, Eredin.”

Eredin Breacc Glas smiled showing his teeth. Ciri had seen such teeth – very white, very small, inhuman, all identical and with no canines. She had seen teeth like that in the elves lying dead, lined up in the courtyard of the guardhouse in Kaedwen. She had also seen such teeth in Sparks. But when Sparks smiled it looked nice, when Eredin did it, it looked ghastly.

“I wonder if this girl, who is trying to pierce my eyes, knows the reason why she is here?” He asked.

“Yes.”

“And is she ready to cooperate?”

“Not quite.”

“Not quite,” he repeated. “This is bad. The nature of the task requires cooperation for it to completely work. Unconditional. Otherwise it will not work. And because Tir Na Lia is barely half a day’s journey away, it is worth it to know where we stand.”

“You’re too impatient,” Avallac’h curled his lips. “What can we gain in such a hurry?”

“Eternity,” Eredin said soberly, but his strange green eyes flashed. “But this is your speciality, Avallac’h. Your speciality and your responsibility.”

“So you’ve said.”

“Yes, so I’ve said. And now if you’ll excuse me, duty calls. I’ll leave some of my men to escort you to safety. I’d advise spending the night here on this hill, if you leave at dawn, you will be in Tir Na Lia at the right time. *Va Faill.* Oh, one more thing…” he leaned down and plucked a blossoming twig of myrtle. He sniffed it and the handed it to Ciri with a bow. “Reconciliation,” he said shortly. “An apology for careless words. *Va Faill, luned.*”

He quickly left and soon the ground shook as the majority of his band left.

“Don’t tell me,” Ciri snarled, “that I would have to have… to have, with him… If it is, then never ever…”

“No,” Avallac’h said unhurried. “It will not be him. Calm down.”

Ciri moved the myrtle closer to her face, so that Avallac’h would not notice the excitement and fascination that enveloped her.

“I am calm.”

***

The dry heather was replaced with lush grass, green ferns and yellow buttercups. Soon they saw a lazily flowing river lined with poplars. The water in the river, although clean, had a brownish colour. It smelled of peat.

Avallac’h played on his flute a variety of lively tunes. Ciri rode frowning and

thinking hard.

"Who," she asked, "is to be the father of the child, for whom you care so much? Or maybe it does not matter?"

"It is important. Am I to understand that you have made a decision?"

"No, you do not understand. Just explain some things."

"I'm at your service. What do you want to know?"

"You know what."

For a time they rode in silence. Ciri saw some swans floating down the river.

"The father." Avallac'h said calmly and factually, "will be Auberon Muircetach. Auberon Muircetach is our… How do you say… Supreme leader?"

"King? King of the *Aen Seidhe?*"

"The *Aen Seidhe*, the People of the Hills, are the elves of your world. We are the *Aen Elle*, the People of the Alders. And Auberon Muircetach is, of course, our king."

"King of the Alders?"

"You can call him that."

They rode in silence. It was very warm.

"Avallac'h."

"Go ahead."

"If I decide, then… later… I'll be free?"

"You will be free and you can go where you want. If you decide you can stay. With the child."

"She snorted dismissively, but said nothing.

"So you have decided?" He asked.

"I'll decide when we get there."

"We are on the spot."

Through the branches of the weeping willows that hung down over the river, flowing like green curtains, Ciri saw a palace. She had never seen anything like it. As if it were not made of marble and alabaster, but of white lace – so delicate and light that it seemed ethereal, as if they were not buildings, but the ghosts of buildings. Ciri expected that at any moment the wind would blow and the palaces would disappear along with the rising river mist. But when the wind blew, the mist disappeared and moved the willow branches and wrinkled the river, but the palaces remained. Just more beautiful.

Ciri looked raptly at the wispy hanging terraces and balconies, the bridges over the river which were hung with festoons of ivy, the stairs, balustrades, the arcades and cloisters, the columns, the domes, and the slender asparagus-like

towers.

“Tir Na Lia,” Avallac’h said quietly.

The closer they move, the more fascinating the charm of the place became. Ciri’s heart pounded and her throat was tight as she passed fountains, mosaics and sculptures. Even the openwork structures whose use she did not understand. And so she was sure that they did not serve anything, they were just an addition to the aesthetics and harmony.

“Tir Na Lia,” Avallac’h repeated. “Have you ever seen anything like it?”

“Yes,” she said through her tight throat. “I saw the remains of such a thing. In Shaerrawedd.”

This time the elf was silent for a long while.

***

They crossed the river by a bridge, the arch looked so frail that Kelpie rebelled and snorted when she tried to cross.

Ciri was tense and restless, but carefully looked around, not wanting to miss anything, none of the views, that the city of Tir Na Lia had to offer. Firstly, from a burning curiosity. Secondly, she had not stopped thinking about the possibility of escape and diligently kept watch for such an occasion.

On bridges and terraces, in malls and colonnades, balconies and porches, she saw elves moving, with long hair, wearing tight jerkins and short layers, with fancy embroidery. Or in sheer flowing dresses or in tight clothes that emphasised the curves of their bodies.

Before the porch of one of the palaces, they were met by Eredin Breacc Glas. On his instruction small grey-clad elves ran quickly and quietly to handle their horses. Ciri watched him in some surprise. Avallac’h, Eredin and all the elves that she had met so far were extremely tall, so that to look them in the eye she had to bend back her head. These grey elves were smaller than her. Some other race, she thought, a race of servants. Even in this fairy-tale word, someone has to work for the lazy.

They entered the palace. Ciri sighed. She was a princess of royal blood and had been raised in a palace. But such marble, stucco, mosaics, stained glass, mirrors and chandeliers she had never seen. She felt in all that dazzling splendour, wrong, awkward, out of place… dusty, sweaty and tired from the trip.

Avallac’h by contrast, did not care at all. He dusted his pants with his gloves, ignoring the fact that dust was settling on the mirrors. Then with a stately gesture he gave the gloves to a young elf who bowed before him.

“Auberon,” he said briefly, “is expecting us?”

Eredin smiled.

“Yes, you are expected. He is anxious. He has demanded that the Swallow come to him immediately, without a moment’s delay. I have dissuaded him.”

Avallac’h frowned.

“Zireael,” Eredin explained, “should appear before the king, unhurried, without pressure, relaxed, calm and in good spirits. To ensure a good mood, a bath, new clothes, a new hairstyle and makeup. Auberon can probably endure that long.”

Ciri sighed deeply and looked carefully at the dark-haired elf. She was surprised at his sudden sympathy. Eredin flashed her a smile with his straight white teeth without canines.

“The only thing that concerns me,” he said, “our Swallow’s eyes – twinkling like a hawk, have not stopped glancing left and right, like a ferret looking for a hole in her cage. From what I can see, Swallow is far from an unconditional surrender.”

Avallac’h did not say anything. Ciri, of course, said nothing as well.

“I’m not surprised,” Eredin continued. “She could not be otherwise, since she is the blood of Lara Dorren aep Shiadhal. Listen to me very carefully, Zireael. There is no escape. You cannot break a Geas Garadh, a barrier of Magic.”

The look Ciri threw his way clearly said that would have to be proven to be believed.

“Even if by some miracle, you collapse the barrier,” Eredin was not distracted by her look, “you know that it would mean your doom. This world seems very beautiful. But it can also bring death, especially to strangers. A wound from the horn of a unicorn has no cure, not even magic. Know too, that you will get no help from your innate talents. Do not make any attempt to try and jump. If you did, know that my *Dearg Ruadhri* – my Red Horsemen, are able to cross the chasms of time and space.”

She did not really understand what he was saying. But it puzzled her that Avallac’h suddenly scowled and frowned, clearly unhappy with Eredin’s speech. As if Eredin had said too much.

“Let’s go,” he said. “With your permission, Zireael. I am going to leave you in the hands of the women. You’ll have to prepare quickly. First impressions are everything.”

***

Her heart pounded in her chest, her temples throbbed with blood and her hands trembled.

She mastered it by clenching her hands into fists. And calmed herself by breathing deeply.

She relaxed her shoulders and tried to move her stiff neck.

Once more she glanced into the big mirror. The sight was quite satisfactory. Her eyes and lips had been painted, after her bath her damp hair had been trimmed and combed, so that it at least partially obscured the scar on her face. She wore a silver skirt, open to mid-thigh, a red vest and a silk blouse. The neck scarf she had been given touched it off nicely.

She adjusted the scarf and then reached under her skirt to check with amazement the underwear she wore. Briefs as thin as gossamer and stockings, which inexplicably stayed on her thighs without suspenders.

She reached for the door handle. She hesitated, as if it was not a door handle, but a sleeping cobra.

The plague, she automatically thought in Elvish, *I've dealt with armed men. I can deal with…*

She closed her eyes and sighed. And entered the room.

No one was inside. On the table lay a book and an old malachite carafe. On the walls were strange bas reliefs, draped curtains and floral tapestries. In one corner stood a statue. And in the other corner, a bed with a canopy. Her heart started pounding again. She swallowed.

From the corner of her eye she saw movement. Not in the chamber. Out on the terrace.

He sat there, his back to her in a half profile.

Although she had learned that among the elves nobody looked like how she used to believe, Ciri was shocked. Every time they had spoken of a king, she had imagined someone like Ervyll of Verden, to whom she had been very close to becoming his daughter on one occasion. When thinking of the king she remembered him smelling of onions and beer, a smelly fat man with swollen eyes and a red nose stuck out from over his beard and wielding a sceptre in his hand covered in brown spots and bitten nails.

On the terrace sat quite a different king.

He was very thin and apparently very tall. He wore a black Jacket and traditional high elven boots with buckles across the length of the leg. His long, grey hair, fell down over sloping shoulders and down his back. His hands were white and narrow, with long fingers.

He was busy blowing bubbles. He held a bowl with soap and water and a straw, into which he blew again and again, as iridescent rainbow bubbles floated

down to the river.

Ciri coughed softly.

The King of the Alders turned. Ciri could not help but sigh. His eyes were extraordinary.

Clear as molten lead and huge. And full of indescribable sadness.

“Zireael,” he said. “Thank you for agreeing to see me.”

Ciri stood silently not knowing what to say. Auberon Muircetach blew into the straw again, and launched another bubble into the air.

To control her trembling hands, she clasped them together and cracked her fingers, then nervously smoothed her hair. The elf didn’t notice as all his attention was focused on the bubbles.

“Are you nervous?”

“No,” she blatantly lied. “I’m not.”

“Are you in a hurry?”

“Of course.”

She probably put too much defiance in her voice, she felt that she was teetering on the edge of civility. The elf gave no sign that he noticed, instead he inflated a huge bubble at the end of his straw. He admired his work for a long time.

“Would I be unduly curious, if I asked where you are in such a hurry to go?”

“Home,” she said, but then added in a gentler tone. “To my world.”

“To where?”

“To my world!”

“Ah. Sorry. I could have sworn you said – *‘My mule.’* It made me flustered. You speak our language perfectly, but you should pay more attention to intonation and pronunciation.”

“Is it important to intonate? It would not if you had not brought me here to talk.”

“Nothing hurts when aspiring to perfection.”

From the end of the straw emerged a new bubble which detached and began to float through the air, before exploding on impact with a willow branch. Ciri sighed again.

“So you are in a hurry to return to your world,” said King Auberon Muircetach. “Your world! You people really do not suffer from excessive modesty. Your hairy ancestors appeared with sword in hand latter than the chickens. And yet I have never heard a hen claim that it was *‘their world’*. Why are you fidgeting like a monkey? What I’m saying should interest you. After all,

it is your history. Oh, let me guess – you do not care about this story and you're bored."

The breeze carried another bubble away down the river. Ciri remained silent, biting her lip.

"Your hairy ancestors," the elf continued, shaking the straw in the bowl, "quickly learned to use their opposable thumb and rudimentary intelligence. With their help they did different things, usually as ridiculous as terrible. What I mean to say is that, if anything that your ancestors created was not terrible, then it was ridiculous."

Another bubble followed the first then another.

"We, *Aen Elle,* we cared very little about the deeds of your ancestors, we unlike the *Aen Seidhe,* our cousins, we left that world a long time ago. We chose another universe, more interesting. In that time, it will surprise you, it was possible to move freely from one world to another quite easily. With some talent and practice, that is. I have no doubt that you understand what I mean."

Ciri was intrigued, but remained silent, aware that the elf was teasing. She did not want to facilitate the task.

Auberon Muircetach smiled. He turned around. On his neck was a golden torc – a symbol of the ruler, known in the elder speech as a *torc'h.*

"*Mire, luned.*"

Again he blew lightly into the straw while gently swaying. A fan of smaller bubbles soared into the air.

"The worlds were like these bubbles," he hummed. "So, it was, so it was… We told ourselves, what's the difference, we will stay here a little while, then there a little while, so what if the stupid Dh'oine insist on destroying themselves and the world? We'll go somewhere else, to another bubble…"

Under his burning gaze, Ciri nodded and licked her lips. The elf smiled again, and blew his bubbles again, this time so that the straw formed a large cluster of smaller bubbles and joined to each other.

"Then came the Conjunction," the elf raised his straw laden with bubbles. "The number of worlds increased. But the door closed. It was closed to all but a handful of elected people. And the clock was ticking. We needed to open the door. Urgently. It was imperative. Do you understand that word?"

"I'm not stupid."

"No, you're not," he turned his head again. "You cannot be. You are *Aen Hen Ichaer,* the Elder Blood. Come."

He extended his hand and Ciri inadvertently clenched her teeth. But Auberon

only touched her forearm and then her hands. She felt a pleasant tingling. She dared to look into his incredible eyes.

“When I was told, I did not believe it,” he whispered. “But it is true. Your eyes are Shiadhal. Lara’s eyes.”

Ciri looked down. She felt stupid and insecure. The King of the Alders rested his elbows on the railing and his chin in his hands.

For a long time it seemed like her was only interesting in the swans swimming in the river.

“Thanks for coming,” he said finally, without turning his head. “Now go away and leave me alone.”

***

She found Avallac’h on a terrace by the river, just about to board a boat in the company of a beautiful elf with hair the colour of straw. The elf’s lips were painted a pistachio colour and her eyelids and temples were painted with gold.

Ciri was about to turn around and leave when a gesture from Avallac’h restrained her. With another gesture he invited her onto the boat. She hesitated. She did not want to talk in front of witnesses. Avallac’h said a few quiet words to the elf and kissed her hand. The elf shrugged and walked away. Only once did she glance at Ciri and her eyes show exactly what she thought of her.

“If you can, refrain from comment,” said Avallac’h as she sat on a bench in the bow. He sat down across from her, pulled out his flute and began to play, ignoring the boat completely… Ciri watched anxiously, but the boat slid perfectly into the middle of the river, without deviating an inch. The boat was very strange, Ciri had never seen anything like it, even in Skellige where one could see everything that could move through water. It had a high bow carved into the shape of a key, was very narrow and very shaky. Indeed, only an elf could sit in something like this and play carefree on a flute, instead of rowing and steering.

Avallac’h stopped playing.

“What is it that troubles you?”

He listened to Ciri’s story with a vague smile.

“You’re disappointed,” he did not ask. “Disappointed and disillusioned and above all outraged.”

“Not at all! I’m not!”

“You should not be,” the elf became serious. “Auberon treated you with reverence, as a native *Aen Elle*. Do not forget, we, the People of the Alders, do not ever hurry. We have time.”

“He told me something else.”

“I know what he said.”

“What he wanted, well, you know?”

“Certainly.”

She had learned a lot. She did not sigh nor gave a hint of impatience or irritability when he put the flute to his lips and started playing again. Melodic and wistful. The boat sailed and bridges passed overhead.

“We have very serious reasons for believing,” he said after the fourth bridge had passed, “that your world is in danger of disappearing. In a natural disaster on a massive scale. You do have some elementary education, so you must have heard of the *Aen Ithlinnespeath* – the Ithlinne’s Prophecy. She speaks of the time of the White winter. In our opinion, it will be a powerful ice age. It will be so extensive that it threatens the existence of most living creatures. They will simply die from the cold. Those who survive will fall into barbarism, killing each other in ruthless battles for food, they will become prey to predators mad with hunger. Remember the text from the prophecy – The time of contempt, the Axe and the Wolf’s Blizzard.”

Ciri did not interrupt him, afraid that he would start playing the flute again.

“The child, on which so much depends,” said Avallac’h as he played with his flute, “will be a descendant of Lara Dorren and a carrier of the gene, a gene that was specially built by us, it may save the inhabitants of your world. We have reason to think that the descendant of Lara and your child, of course, will have abilities a thousand times more powerful than those we have, the Knowing ones. The same as you yourself possess. Do you know what I mean?”

Ciri had learned that in the Elder Speech such rhetorical figures, although seemingly questions, do not require an answer, but simply prohibit a response.

“In short,” continued Avallac’h, “we will have the opportunity to travel between the worlds, and not for only a single person. We want to open *Ard Gaeth* – The Great Gate, which all will pass through. We could do this before the Conjunction, and we will achieve it now. We will evacuate the dying world and the *Aen Seidhe* who live there, our brothers, whom we are obliged to help. We do not neglect such a responsibility. We will take all of the world’s endangered, Zireael. Everyone, even the humans.”

“Really?” Ciri couldn’t contain herself. “Even the *Dh’oine?*”

“Yes. Trust me. Do you now see how important you are, how we care about you? It is imperative that you be patient. It is important that you return to Auberon and spend the night with him. Believe me, his behaviour has not been a

sign of reluctance. He knows, that for you this is not easy and does not wish to be inappropriately hasty. He knows many things, Swallow. You may have no doubt noticed."

"Yes, I've noticed," she snorted. "I've also noticed that the current has born us quite far from Tir Na Lia. Time to take the oars. Which, moreover, I do not see here."

"Because they are not here," Avallac'h raised his arm, turned his hand and snapped his fingers. The boat stopped. It stood in place, then began to move against the current.

The elf sat comfortably, put his flute to his lips and completely devoted himself to music.

***

That night, the King of the Alders invited her to dinner. When she entered, accompanied by the rustle of silk, he motioned her to sit down at the table. There were no servants. He served himself.

Dinner consisted of more than a dozen varieties of vegetables, there were also mushrooms, fried, stewed and dipped in sauce. Ciri had never tried that kind of mushroom.

Some were white and thin like leaves with a delicate and delicious flavour, others were brown and black, aromatic and fleshy.

The meal was washed down with rose wine, which was light and relaxed the tongue.

Before she knew it, she had told him things that she never thought she'd tell anyone. He listened patiently. And then she suddenly remembered what it was she had come here to do.

She frowned and stopped.

"As I understand it," Auberon said, offering her another kind of mushroom, greenish and smelling like apple pie, "you are convinced that destiny binds you to this man, Geralt?"

"That's right," she said, picking up a glass with lipstick marks around the edges. "Destiny. He, that is, Geralt, is predestined for me, and I him. Our fates are intertwined. Therefore it would be better if I left immediately. Do you understand?"

"I admit, not much."

"Destiny," she drank a little wine. "The power that is not advisable to resist. So I think… No, no, thank you, I do not want more, I am stuffed to bursting."

"What do you mean?"

“I think it is wrong for you to keep me here. And if you force me… Well, you know what I mean. I have to leave here, and hurry to their aid… Because my destiny…”

“Fate,” he interrupted, raising his cup. “Predestination. Something that is inevitable. The mechanism that causes a virtually infinite number of unforeseeable events to necessarily lead to one result and not another. Is that it?”

“Exactly!”

“So where and why do you want to go? Drink wine, enjoy the moment, enjoy life. What is to come, will come, if it is inevitable.”

“It’s not that simple.”

“Thus contradicting yourself.”

“That’s not true.”

“You deny the denial, that’s a vicious circle.”

“No,” she said shaking her head. “You can’t sit there and do nothing. Nothing comes by itself!”

“That’s a sophism.”

“You cannot mindlessly waste time! You’ll miss the right moment… There is often only one, unrepeatable. Time cannot go backwards.”

“Excuse me,” he said, getting up from the table. “Look at this.”

He pointed to a wall, which was decorated with an embossed relief depicting a giant scaly snake. The reptile was rolled into the shape of a figure eight with its teeth biting its own tail.

Ciri had seen a similar representation, but could not remember where it was.

“Here you see the snake Uroboros,” said the elf. “It is the symbol of infinity, eternal departure and eternal returns. It has neither beginnings nor ends. Time is like Uroboros. Time is the passing moments, like grains of sand in an hourglass. We try to measure acts and events, but Uroboros reminds us that every moment, in every deed and every event lurks in the past, the present and the future – in short, eternity. Every departure is also returning, every welcome is also a goodbye. Everything is simultaneously the beginning and the end.”

“And you…” the elf said, but did not look at the girl. “You’re the beginning and the end. And because there was a question of destiny, know that this is your destiny. Being the beginning and the end. Do you understand?”

Ciri hesitated a few seconds. But the vehement look from Auberon forced her to reply.

“I understand.”

“Take off your clothes,” he said it so casually and carelessly, she nearly

exploded with anger. With trembling hands, she began to unbutton her bodice. The bodice was tight, and she had trouble with the hooks and buttons with her clumsy fingers. Although Ciri was in a hurry to get it over with, it took her a long time to take off her clothes. But the elf gave no sense of hurry. As if, indeed, he had all eternity.

Who knows, she thought. Maybe he does.

Once she was naked, she shifted from foot to foot, the ground was cold. Auberon realised and wordlessly, he pointed to the bed. The bedspread were mink. Extensively formed by many skins sewn together. Warm, soft and comfortable.

He lay beside her, dressed from head to toe, even with boots on.

When he touched her, she could not help but stiffen and was angry with herself as she was determined to show him she was proud and distant to the end. Her teeth, needless to say, chattered slightly. But the elf's electrifying touch calmed her, and his fingers began to teach and give orders. To give directions. In time she began to assimilate so well to his indications she could almost anticipate them. She closed her eyes and imagined it was Mistle who was at her side. But it did not work because he was not at all like Mistle.

His hand taught her what to do. She obeyed. Even happily. Hastily.

He did not hurry. His touch was like soft silk. He made her moan. Biting her lip. He got her whole body to contract in a violent spasm.

What he did then, she did not expect.

He got up and walked away. Leaving her flushed, panting and trembling.

He did not even look at her.

Ciri's blood rushed to her face and forehead. She curled up on the mink bedspread. And began to sob in anger, shame and humiliation.

***

The next morning, she sought out Avallac'h and found him at the rear of the palace. He walked along the row of statues that depicted, to her surprise, elven children. In various, mainly playful poses. Especially the one with which the elf was interested in – a little boy with his mouth contorted in anger, with clenched fists, standing on one leg.

Ciri stared at it for a long time, she felt a dull pain in her stomach. Only when Avallac'h urged her, she told him everything. Fragmented and with frequent omissions.

"He," said the elf when she had finished, "has seen the smoke from the fires of more than six hundred and fifty Saovines. Believe me, Swallow, that's a lot

even for the People of the Alders."

"And what do I care?" She snapped. "We have a contract! Have your relatives the dwarves not told you what a contract is? I fulfilled my obligations! I surrendered! What does it matter to me if he cannot, or will not? What do I care if he had impotence or is not attracted to me? Maybe he abhors *Dh'oine*? What if like Eredin, when he see me he see a gold nugget in a pile of manure?"

"I hope," Avallac'h's face lost its usual calm and changed, "you didn't tell him something like that?"

"I did not say anything. And not for lack of desire."

"Be careful. You do not know what you risk."

"I do not care. We had an agreement and I am free."

"Be careful, Zireael," repeated Avallac'h, noting the enraged expression on the statue of the boy's face. "Do not behave like that here. Watch every word. Make an effort to understand. And if there is anything you do not understand, then do not use it as an excuse to act precipitously. Be patient. Remember that time is of no importance."

"For me it is!"

"I told you not to behave like a stubborn child. I'll repeat – be patient with Auberon. It is your only chance at freedom."

"Really?" She shouted. "I'm beginning to have my doubts! I'm beginning to suspect that you've tricked me! That you have all deceived me…"

"I promised," Avallac'h's face was a dead as the stone of the statues, "that you will return to your world. I've given my word. To doubt ones word is a very serious offence for the *Aen Elle.* To avoid you occurring such an offence, I propose that we settle this talk."

He went to leave, but Ciri blocked his way. He narrowed his aquamarine eyes and Ciri realised that she was dealing with a very dangerous elf. But it was too late to go back.

"It is typical of an elf," she hissed like a snake, "to offend someone and not allow the other to take revenge."

"Be careful, Swallow!"

"Listen to me," she lifted her head proudly. "Your King of the Alders is unable to comply, to me that is more than clear. No matter if it is his problem or if I'm guilty. That is not important. But I want to enforce the agreement. I want to get it over with. So let someone else get me with child, which you care so much about."

"You do not know what you're talking about."

“And if the problem is me,” she did not change her tone or expression, “that means you’ve made a mistake. Avallac’h. You’ve brought the wrong person to your world.”

“You do not know what you mean, Zireael.”

“If he abhors me, we’ll use the method that horse breeders use. Do you know how they do it? They take a mare to the stallion and then blindfold it and put a donkey in front of it.”

Avallac’h did not even deign to reply. He unceremoniously ducked and walked down the row of statues.

“Or maybe you?” She screamed. “Do you want me to give myself to you! What do you say? Are you not willing to make that sacrifice? But you say I have the eyes of Lara!”

He stood beside her in two leaps, his hands shot out like snakes and closed around her neck like steel tongs. She realised that if he wanted to, he could choke her like a little bird.

He released her. Then leaned over and looked into her eyes at close range.

“Who are you,” he asked very quietly, “to dare to so profane her name? Who are you to dare insult me with so miserable a pittance? Oh, I know, I can see who you are. You’re the daughter of Lara Dorren. You are the daughter of Cregennan, you are an inconsiderable, arrogant, narcissistic *dh’oine*, a representative example of a race that knows nothing, but that has to ruin and destroy everything, who can defile with a touch alone and befoul with a mere thought. Your ancestors stole my love from me, smug and ruthlessly took her away. But you, are worthy to be his daughter, I will not let you take my memories of her away.” He turned away. Ciri overcame the resistance from her squashed larynx.

“Avallac’h.”

He looked at her.

“Forgive me. I behaved stupidly and miserably. Forgive me. And, if you can, forget it.”

He walked over to her and hugged her.

“It’s forgotten,” he said kindly. “No more talk about the matter.”

***

That night, when she appeared in the royal apartments, freshly bathed, perfumed and with her hair combed. Auberon sat at a table, leaning over a chess board. Wordlessly, he invited her to sit in front of him.

He won in ten moves.

The second time they played, she was white, but he won in eleven moves.

Only then did he look up, showing his clear eyes, so unique.

“Undress, please.”

At least she had to acknowledge one thing – he acted with tact and never rushed.

When, as on the previous occasion, he rose from the bed and left without saying anything, Ciri took it calmly and resignedly. Although she could not fall asleep until almost sunrise.

But when the first rays of dawn lit the windows she fell asleep and had a very strange dream.

***

Vysogota was hunched over, washing algae from his muskrat traps. In the wind they dry reeds rustled.

“I feel guilty, Swallow. It was I who pushed you to the idea of this mad escapade. And I who pointed you the way to that cursed tower.”

“Do not feel bad, Old Crow. If not for that tower, Bonhart would have gotten me. Here at least I am safe.”

“You’re not safe here.”

Vysogota straightened up.

Behind him, Ciri could see a hill, bare and rounded, protruding from the grass like the bent back of a monster lurking in ambush. On the hill was a giant boulder. In addition to the rock, stood two figures. A woman and a girl. The wind tugged at the woman’s black hair.

On the horizon, lightning flashed.

“Chaos stretches its hand towards you, daughter. Child of the Elder Blood. You are entangled in movement and change, in Destruction and Renewal. Chaos wants this power and it does not know if it is a tool to be used or an object in its plans. Not knowing if chance will make you a grain of sand in the gears of the clock of Fate. Chaos is afraid, Child Surprise. He wants to make you afraid, too. Therefore he sends you dreams.”

Vysogota again hunched over and cleaned another trap. He is dead, Ciri thinks cooly. Does that mean that here in the afterlife, the dead are forced to clear muskrat traps?

Vysogota straightens up. Behind him, the sky glows from the reflection of burning fires.

Across the plains rush thousands of horsemen in red coats – Dearg Ruadhri.

“Listen carefully, Swallow. The Elder Blood that runs through your veins confers immense authority. You are the Lady of Space and Time. You have a vast

power. Do not let criminals and scoundrels snatch it and use it for their ignoble purpose. Fight back! Take it away from their thieving hands and wicked intentions!"

"It is easy to say! I am trapped here by some barrier or magical bond…"

"You're the Lady of Space and Time. Nobody can imprison you."

Behind Vysogota is a plateau, a rocky plain covered in the wrecks of ships. Dozens of wrecks. And looking back further, black, menacing, toothed battlements, rising over a mountain lake.

"They'll die without your help, Swallow. Only you can save them."

Yennefer's lips, broken, torn, move without making a sound, shedding blood. Her violet eyes burn within her haggard face, her matted black hair falls around her dirty face. In a hole in the floor is a stinking puddle, there are rats everywhere. The walls of stone are cold. Chains bind her wrists and ankles…

Yennefer's fingers are a mass of clotted blood.

"Mother! What have they done?"

Marble stairs led down. Three flights of stairs.

Va'esse deireadh aep eigean… Something ends…What?

Stairs. Below, a fire burns in braziers. Burning tapestries.

Come on, Geralt says. Down the stairs. We have to. Yes you have to. There is no other way. Only those stairs. I want to see the sky.

His lips do not move. They are bruised and stained with blood. Blood, blood everywhere… The stairs, covered in blood…

"There is no other way. There isn't, Star Eyes."

"How? How can I help them? I am in another world? I am a prisoner! I cannot do anything!"

"No one can imprison you. Everything has already been covered," says Vysogota. "Even this. Look at your feet."

Ciri sees with horror that she is standing in a sea of bones. Among skulls, tibias and bones.

"Only you can prevent this from happening, Star Eyes."

Vysogota straightens up. Behind him, winter and snow. The wind blows and whistles.

Before her, in a blizzard, on a horse is Geralt. Ciri knows it, But his head is covered in a fur cap and a woollen scarf covers his face. Behind him in the blizzard, loom other riders, their lines are blurred, so thickly bundled that it is impossible to discern what they are.

Geralt looks straight at her. But he does not see her. Snow pours into his eyes.

“Geralt! It’s me! Here!”

He does not see her. Cannot hear her over the howling of the storm.

“Geraaaalt!”

Sheep, Geralt says. It was probably just sheep. Let’s go back. The riders disappear, melting into the falling snow.

“Geraaaaaalt! Noooooo!”

She woke up.

***

In the morning she went straight to the stable, without breakfast. She did not want to run into Avallac’h, did not want to talk to him. She wanted to escape questioning, curious, intrusive elves and their glances. Unlike any other matter they were clearly not indifferent regarding the royal bedchamber. Elves did not know how to hide their curiosity and Ciri had no doubt that the palace walls had ears.

She found Kelpie in her stall and brought up her saddle and harness. Before she could start saddling the mare, there appeared the little grey elves two heads shorter than the *Aen Elle.*

With smiles and bows they went to work.

“Thank you,” she said. “I could have done it myself, but thank you. You are nice.”

The closest elf smiled and Ciri flinched. In her smile she saw canine teeth.

She approached her in a hurry. Then Ciri almost fell down in shock. She brushed the hair from the servants ear. An ear that did not end in a point.

“You’re a human!”

The servant fell to her knees on the swept floor. All the others knelt too. Bowing their heads. Expecting punishment.

“I…” Ciri began, while fingering the reins. “I…”

She didn’t know what to say. The servants were still kneeling. The horses snorted and stamped restlessly in the stables.

Even outside in the saddle at a trot she could not muster any ideas. Human females. As maids, servants, but no matter. The main thing was that even in this world there are *Dh’oine*…

Human, she corrected herself. I think as they do.

She was jarred from her thoughts by Kelpie’s loud whinny. She lifted her head and saw Eredin. He sat on his dark brown stallion, now free from his demonic combat gear. The rider, however, wore chainmail under his red jacket.

The stallion screamed a hoarsely welcome, shook his head and grinned at

Kelpie with yellow teeth. Kelpie, true to the principle that there are some issues that ventilate with the lords, not the servants, tried to put her teeth into the elf's thigh.

Ciri held the reins tightly.

"Be careful," she warned. "Keep your distance. My mare does not like strangers. And she bites."

"Those that bite," he measure her with a supercilious look, "should be curried with an iron brush. Until they bleed. This is the proven method for treating defiance. Not just for mares."

He jerked his reins so hard and violently, the horse grunted and backed away a few steps, from his mouth trickled foam.

"What's with the chainmail?" The girl measured the elf in return. "Are you going to war?"

"On the contrary, I long for peace. Your mares vices aside, does it have any virtues?"

"What kind?"

"Maybe speed. We'll have a race?"

"If you want, why not," she stood in the stirrups. "There, in the direction of those cromlechs…"

"No," he interrupted. "Not that way."

"Why not?"

"It is forbidden ground."

"To everyone, of course."

"Not for everyone, of course. Your company, Swallow, is too valuable to us to risk that you'll lose it. On your initiative or at the initiative of others."

"On the initiative of others? You're not thinking about unicorns?"

"I do not want to bore you with what I think. Nor be frustrated by the fact that you would not be able to understand my thoughts."

"I do not understand."

"I know that you do not understand. Evolution has not provided you with a sufficiently developed brain to understand. Listen, if you want to race, then I suggest we do so along the river. That way. To Porphyry Bridge, the third downstream, then to the other shore and further downstream to the mouth of the river. Ready?"

"Always."

With a cry, the elf spurred the stallion, which took off like a hurricane, before Kelpie had even started, they had the advantage. But, though the earth was

trembling in its wake, the stallion could not match Kelpie. The mare overtook him, just before reaching the bridge. The bridge was narrow. Eredin gave a cry and the stallion, incredibly, accelerated. Ciri immediately grasped what was going on. The bridge would not for anything in the world, fit two horses. One had to slow down.

Ciri had no intention of slowing down. She clung to the mane and Kelpie pulled forward like an arrow. Ciri brushed the stirrup of the elf and flew onto the bridge. Eredin's stallion screamed, reared up and struck an alabaster figure, it fell from its pedestal and smashed into pieces.

Ciri, giggling like a ghost, galloped across the bridge, without looking back.

At the mouth of the river she dismounted and waited.

He came at last, trotting, calmly, with a smile.

"My appreciation," he said, dismounting, "for the mare and its rider."

Although proud as a peacock, she careless spat.

"Ah! You should think about being combed with iron until you bleed."

"Unless you have consent," he smiled ambiguously. "There are mares who like strong caresses."

"Quite recently," she looked at him defiantly, "you likened me to a pile of manure. And now you're talking about caresses?"

Eredin approached Kelpie, rubbed and patted her neck and looked surprised to see that the mare was dry. Kelpie abruptly withdrew her head and let out a prolonged shriek. Eredin turned to Ciri. *If he also gives me a pat,* she thought, *He will regret it.*

"Come with me, please."

They walked along a stream, running down a steep, densely forested slopes, that led up to stairs made of rundown sandstone. The stairs were aged, cracked and torn by tree roots. All around them was forest, a primeval forest, where there were many old ash and hornbeam, yew trees, maples and oaks, there feet tangled in hazel bushes. It smelled of sage, nettle, wet stones, spring and mildew.

Ciri walked quietly, without haste and with easy breaths. She also had her nerves under control. She had no idea what Eredin wanted from her, but she did not have the best feelings.

Above the rock step, from which fell a narrow waterfall was a stone terrace. On it, shaded by elderberry bushes, was a gazebo wrapped in ivy. Below she could see the trees, the ribbon of the river and the roofs, terraces and colonnades of Tir Na Lia.

They were silent for a while, watching the scene.

“Nobody told me,” Ciri was the first to break the silence, “the name of the river.”

“Easnadh.”

“The Sigh? Nice. And this stream.”

“Tuathe.”

“Whisper. Also nice. Why did no one tell me humans lived in this world?”

“Because that information is completely irrelevant to you. Let’s go to the gazebo.”

“What for?”

“Let’s go.”

The first thing she noticed after entering was the wooden couch. Ciri felt her temples begin to throb.

Sure, she thought, it was to be expected. *I read a book in the temple about an affair, written by Anna Tiller. It was about an old king, the queen and the young duke from power hungry contenders. Eredin is ruthless, ambitious and determined. He knows that the one who is with the queen is the true king. A real man. He who possess the queen, possess the kingdom. Here, on this couch, starts a coup…*

The elf sat at a marble table, and pointed for Ciri to take a second chair. The view from the window seemed to be of more interest to him that she was, and he was not looking at the couch at all.

“Here you will stay forever,” he said, “my light butterfly. Until the end of your life.”

She said nothing. She looked into his eyes intently.

There was nothing in those eyes.

“You will not be allowed to leave here,” he continued. “They are unwilling to admit despite the prophecy and myth, you’re nobody, you’re nothing, only a creature without importance. Believe it, they will not let you go. They promised it to you, just to deceive you and to provide you your tractability. They never intended to make good on their promise. Never.”

“Avallac’h,” she said hoarsely, “he gave his word. Doubting an elf’s word is apparently an insult.”

“Avallac’h is *Aen Saevherne*. The Knowing ones have their own code of honour, which with many noble phrases conceal an old rule that the end justifies the means.”

“I don’t understand why you are telling me all this. Unless… You have something you want from me. You want to barter. What is it? Eredin? My

freedom… For what?”

He stared at her for a long time. And she vainly sought in his eyes some indication of a signal, a sign, anything.

“Undoubtedly,” he began slowly, “you already know little enough about Auberon. You certainly already noticed that he is ambitious. There are things that he’ll never accept, never take note of. He’d sooner die.”

Ciri was silent, biting her lip and glancing at the couch.

“Auberon Muircetach,” said the elf, “never uses magic or other means able to change a situation. But such means exist. Good, strong, guaranteed resources. Much more reliable than the pheromones that Avallac’h’s maids blend into your perfume.”

He quickly ran his hand over the veined marble table. When he removed his hand there was a bottle of grey-green jade.

“No,” Ciri gasped. “I will not. Absolutely not.”

“You did not let me finish.”

“Do not take me for a fool. I will not give him what is in this flask. I won’t do those kind of things.”

“You draw to hasty conclusions,” he said calmly, looking into her eyes, “in this race, you are overtaking yourself. Something like that always ends in a fall. A very painful fall.”

“I said no!”

“Think it over. Regardless of what the bottle contains, you always come out ahead, Swallow.”

“No!”

With a quick and smooth motion, like a magician, the elf make the bottle disappear from the table. The he looked again at the river Easnadh, which meandered thought the trees, gleaming.

“You’ll die here, butterfly,” he said. “They will not let you go. But the decision is up to you.”

“I’ve made a covenant. For my freedom…”

“Freedom,” he spat. “You are still talking about freedom. What would you do if you finally regained it? Where would you go? Do you realise that you are on our world at the moment, not only in space but time. Time flows differently here than there. Those whom you knew as children are now elderly, those who you once knew have long since died.”

“I do not believe it.”

“Remember your legends. Legends about people missing and returning after

a year, only to see the graves of their relatives covered by grass. Are you going to say that they were pure fantasy, things taken from stories? You are wrong. For centuries, people have been kidnapped, snatched by riders, by the Wild Hunt. Abducted, exploited and then thrown away like an empty shell once consumed. But do not expect to be that lucky, Zireael. You will die here, you will not see the graves of your friends."

"I do not believe what you say."

"That is your personal thing. You chose your destiny. Let's go back. I want to ask you something, Swallow. Would it be ok to have a meal together before going back to Tir Na Lia?"

For a few heartbeats, hunger, fought fascination and anger, fear of poising and a general dislike.

"I'd be happy to." She looked down. "Thank you for the invitation."

"Thank you. Let's go."

Upon leaving the gazebo, she looked back at the couch and thought that Anna Tiller was probably a fool and exalted graphomanic.

Slowly, silently, between the smell of mint, sage and nettle, they went down the stairs.

Down the banks of the stream, which was called Whisper.

***

That night, when she entered the royal apartments, perfumed, her hair still wet after bathing, she found Auberon on a couch leaning over a thick book. Without words, with a simple gesture, he invited her to sit beside him.

The book was richly illustrated. In fact, all that were in it were illustrations. Although Ciri tried to play the sophisticated lady, she felt her cheeks flush. In the temple library in Ellander she had seen similar works. But the book the King of the Alders had, those others could not compete in wealth or the variety of items, or the artistry of the imagery.

They viewed it in silence for a long time.

"Take off your clothes, please."

This time, he too undressed. His body was lean and boyish, almost like Giselher, Kayleigh or Reef, who she had often seen naked as they bathed together in rivers or lakes.

However, the Rats radiated youth, the joy of life around them sparkling like drops of water.

For him, the King of the Alders, throbbed cold eternity.

He was patient. Several times it seemed that he was about to. But nothing

came of it. Ciri was angry with herself, she thought her ignorance or inexperience was to blame. He recognised this and calmed her. As always, effectively. And she fell asleep.

In the morning her was not with her.

***

The next night, for the first time, the King of the Alders showed signs of impatience. Ciri found him leaning over a table, where there was a mirror set in a frame of amber. There was a white powder on the mirror.

Here we go, thought Ciri.

With a knife, Auberon was gathering the fisstech and distributing it into two strips. He took a tube of silver off of the table and inhaled the drug through the nose, first by his left nostril, then his right. His eyes, usually bright, seemed off and turbid and filled with tears. Ciri immediately realised this was not the first dose.

He made two new lines on the glass and with a gesture invited her over, passing the tube.

What does it matter, she thought, it will be easier.

The drug was incredibly strong.

For a while they sat side by side on the bed and stared at the moon with watery eyes. Ciri sneezed.

“Lacing night,” she said, wiping her nose with her silk sleeve.

“Magic,” he corrected her, rubbing his eyes. “*Ensh’eass not en’leass.* You have to pay attention to the pronunciation.”

“I’ll be careful.”

“Take off your clothes.”

At first it seemed that everything would be okay, that the drug had excited him the same way that she was excited. She came alive and took the initiative, while even whispering some indecent words. That made him react and the effect was tangible, and Ciri was sure that this time, surely…

Again, it did not work.

And then he became impatient. He got up and threw a sable fur around his shoulders. He stood there, turned towards the window and stared at the moon. Ciri sat up and wrapped her arms around her knees. She was frustrated and annoyed, but unusually vigorous.

Undoubtedly it was the effects of the strong narcotics.

“It’s my fault,” she said. “The scar has disfigured me. I know what you see when you look at me. There is not much elf in me. A gold nugget in a pile of

manure…”

He whirled.

“You are extraordinarily modest,” he said. “I would say, rather, a pearl in pig manure. A diamond on a rotting finger of a corpse. The language could devise other comparisons. Tomorrow I’ll ask about them, little *dh’oine*. A human in which there is absolutely nothing elven.”

He went to the table, picked up the tube and bent over the mirror. Ciri sat as if made from stone. She felt as if someone had spat upon her.

“I do not come here out of love!” She snapped angrily. “I come under blackmail and you know it! But I agreed to do it, for…”

“For who?” He interrupted hotly, unlike your typical elf. “For me? For the *Aen Seidhe* trapped in your world? You stupid girl! You do it for yourself, you come here in vain trying to give. Because it is your only hope, your only hope of salvation. I’ll tell you again – pray, pray fervently to your human god, idols or totems. Because if it is not me, then it will be Avallac’h and his laboratory. You cannot even imagine what it would mean for you to go there and submit to the alternative.”

“I don’t care,” Ciri said in a muffled voice, curling up on the bed. “I agreed to everything, just to regain my freedom. To be able to finally rid myself of you. To leave. To my world. To my friends.”

“Your friends!” He sneered. “Here is your friend!”

Suddenly he turned and threw the fisstech covered mirror.

“Here is your friend,” he repeated. “Look closely.”

He left the room, the sable fur trailing on the ground.

She looked into the mirror and saw only her blurred reflection. But almost immediately the mirror brightened and filled with smoke. And then an image.

Yennefer hanging in an abyss, her arms raised taunt above her head. The sleeves of her dress are like the outstretched wings of a bird. Her hair is wavy and fish swim among it. A whole school of fish flicker around her. Some start to nibble at the cheeks and eyes of the sorceress. From Yennefer’s legs a rope leads down to the bottom of a lake, trapped between the mud and seaweed, a large basket of stones. Above in the sky, the sun shines down on the face of the water.

Yennefer’s dress ripples around her like seaweed.

The smoke obscures the surface of the mirror, stained with fisstech.

Geralt, pale as glass, his eyes closed, is still frozen under some long icicles hanging from rocks, and will soon be buried by the blizzard. His white hair is now a mass of ice, a white frost envelops his eyebrows, eyelashes and lips. The

snow will not stop falling on Geralt, it surrounds him covering his legs and shoulders with a soft blanket.

The blizzard howls and whistles…

Ciri jumped up and slammed the mirror hard against the wall. The amber frame burst and the glass shattered.

She recognised these kind of vision, she remembered them and knew what they were. Her old dreams.

"This is not true," she cried. "You hear me, Auberon! I don't believe it! It's a lie! A deception! It's just your anger, helpless at yourself! It's your anger…"

She sat down on the floor and began to cry.

***

She suspected that the walls of the palace had ears. The next day, she could not endure the looks directed at her, she felt like they were laughing at her back. Avallac'h was nowhere to be found.

He knows, she thought, *what happened and is trying to avoid me. Before I got up, he probably got far away, by land or by river, with his gold makeup elf. He doesn't want to talk to me, doesn't want to recognise that all of his plans have collapsed.*

She could also not find Eredin. But that was quite normal – he was often out of the city accompanied by his Dearg Ruadhri, his Red Riders.

Ciri went and got Kelpie from the stables and went across the river. She was deep in thought and took no notice to anything around her.

I have to escape. It does not matter if those visions were true or false. On things is certain – Yennefer and Geralt are far away in my world and my place is with them. I have to get away, get out of here as quickly as possible. There must be some possibility. The same way I got here, O have to get myself out of here. Eredin suggested that I have a wild talent and Vysogota thought the same thing. I examined every corner of Tor Zireael, I found no portal, no exit. But maybe there is another tower somewhere…

She looked to the horizon and saw a remote hill, on whose summit towered against the sky, silhouettes of cromlechs. *A forbidden area,* she thought. *Ha, I can see that it is too far.*

The barrier will probably not let me get there. It would be pointless exertion. I'd rather head up the river, I've never been there…

Kelpie snorted, shook her head and stamped her feet. She did not turn around, instead she started trotting towards the hill. Ciri was stunned for a moment to the point that she did not respond and let the mare run. Only after a while did she

shout and pull on the reins. The result was that Kelpie reared, kicked and galloped onwards. Still in the same direction.

Ciri did not try and stop her, or try and control her. She was amazed. She knew Kelpie very well. The mare had quirks, but not like this. This behaviour must mean something.

Kelpie slowed to a trot. She went up the side of the hill crowned with the cromlechs. A league or so, Ciri thought. The magic barrier will start to work soon.

The mare walked into the circle of stones, formed by a series of monoliths, fallen and mossy, very close together, which arose though the brambles and suddenly sank into the ground. She did not move a muscle, except her ears, which stretched to hear better.

Ciri tried to turn her around and move. But it was in vain. If it wasn't from her neck veins throbbing hot, she would have sworn she was sitting on a statue of a horse.

Suddenly, she felt something on her shoulders, something sharp that went through her clothes and prodded her, hurting. Something was behind her. Emerging from behind some rocks, making no noise, appeared a unicorn with a red coat, with precise movements it thrust its horn under her armpit. Hard. Sharply. She felt blood trickle from her side.

From the other side emerged another unicorn. This one was completely white, from the tips of its ears to the end of its tail. Only his nostrils were pink and his eyes black. He approached her from the side, slowly, and very carefully put his head in her lap. The excitement was so strong that Ciri moaned.

I've grown up, a voice echoed in her head. *I've grown up, Star Eyes. Then in the desert, I did not know how to behave. Now I know.*

"Little horse?" She moaned, almost hanging from the two horns that were clicking together.

My name is Ihuarraquax. Do you remember me, Star Eyes? Do you remember how you healed me? How you saved me?

He stepped back and turned around. Ciri could see a trace of a scar on his leg. She recognised him. She remembered him.

"Little horse! It is you! But you had a different coat… You've grown up."

Suddenly then was confusion in her head, whispers, voices, shouts and whinnies. The horns drew back. She saw that the other unicorn behind her back coat was blue.

The older ones are learning from you, Star eyes. Through me, they are

learning from you.

A little more and they'll be able to speak for themselves. Soon they will tell you what they expect from you.

The cacophony in Ciri's head exploded in an indescribable riot. But soon it relented, and began to flow like a stream of thoughts, clear and understandable.

We want to help you escape, Star Eyes.

She was silent, but her heart pounded in her chest.

Where is the crazy joy? Where is the thanks?

"Where," she asked aggressively, "does this sudden urge to help me come from? Perhaps I failed to win your love?"

You have our love. But this is not your world. There is no place for you here.

She clenched her teeth. Although encouraged by the sudden hope, she shook her head dismissively. Little horse – Ihuarraquax – ears pricked up, stamped his hooves and stared at her with his black eyes. The red unicorn stamped until the earth trembled and shook menacingly. He snorted angrily and Ciri understood.

You do not trust us.

"I do not trust you," she said coldly. "Everyone here plays their game and I, who don't know the rules, am being used. Why should I believe you now? Between you and the elves apparently there is no friendship, I saw it there, in the wilderness, and there was almost a fight. I can safely assume that you want to use me to annoy the elves. I also do not like them, they imprisoned me and forced me to do something that I did not want. But I will not let you use me."

Red shook his head, his horn again made a dangerous move. Blue whinnied. Ciri's skull thudded and picked up their thoughts which were ominous.

"Oh, she said. "You're just like them. Be obedient and show humility, or violence and death! I'm not afraid. I will not be used!"

She felt chaos and confusion in her head. It lasted for a while, until from the chaos emerged legible thoughts.

That's fine, Star Eyes, you do not like being used. That is precisely our idea. What we want, no more no less, is to guarantee that. For you and for ourselves. And the entire world.

In all worlds.

"I don't understand."

You're a dangerous weapon, a threat. We cannot let that weapon fall into the hands of the King of the Alders, the Fox and Sparrowhawk.

"Who?" She said "Oh…"

The King of the Alders is an elder. But the Fox and Sparrowhawk cannot gain

mastery over the Ard Gaeth, the Gate of Worlds. Once they had it. And then lost it. Now all they can do is wander between the worlds as impotent ghosts. The Fox has reached Tir Na Bea Arainne, and Sparrowhawk and his riders can get to the Sprial. They do not have the strength to go anywhere else. That's why they dream of Ard Gaeth and power. We can show you how to use that power. I'll show you, Star Eyes, when you leave here.

"I can't escape from here. I can't get past the magic barrier – *Geas Garadh.*"

You cannot be imprisoned. You are the Lady of the Worlds.

"No. I have no special talent, I have no control over anything. And I renounced my powers a year ago, back in the desert. Little horse witnessed it."

In the desert you gave up only insignificant quackery. The power that is in your blood, you cannot give up. It is with you all the time. We will teach you how to use it.

"And it is not by chance, she cried, "that this power that gives dominion over worlds, you want me to give to you?"

Not so. We do not need to gain this power. For we have had it forever.

Trust them, Ihuarraquax requested. Trust them, Star Eyes.

"On one condition."

The Red unicorn abruptly raised his head, opened his nostrils and she could swear his eyes threw sparks. *They will not like it*, Ciri thought, *when I give them the condition, they do not even like the sound of the word. The Plague, I do not know what I'm doing… I hope this doesn't end in tragedy…*

We are listening. What is this condition?

"Ihuarraquax will come with me."

***

That evening the sky became cloudy and it became muggy, from the river rose a thick, stick mist. When it became dark, from afar came muffled thunder and lightning lit up the horizon.

Ciri had long been prepared. Dressed in black riding clothes, with her sword on her back, tense and impatient, waiting for the coming of night. When it came, she silently walked through deserted halls and stealthily took arcades and descended terraces. The willow rustled down by the River Easnadh.

In the sky distant thunder rolled.

Ciri got Kelpie from the stables. The mare knew what was expected of her and obediently trotted towards Porphyry Bridge. Ciri stared for a moment behind her, looking at the terrace where the boats were moored.

I can't, she thought. I have to see him again. Maybe it will succeed in

delaying pursuit.

It’s risky, But it cannot be helped.

At first, she thought he was not there, that the royal apartments were empty, the silence and stillness were absolute.

After a moment, she saw him. He was in a corner, sitting on a couch, with a white shirt that exposed his narrow shoulders. The fabric was so delicate that if clung to his body as if wet. The face and hands of the King of the Alders were almost as white as his shirt.

He looked up at her, those eyes were empty.

“Shiadhal?” He whispered. “Thank goodness you’re here. You know, they have been saying that you’re dead.”

He opened his hand and something fell to the carpet. It was the grey-green bottle.

“Lara,” the King of the Alders shook his head and touched his neck as if the golden royal torc’h was choking him. “*Caemm a me, Luned.* Come to me daughter. *Caemm a me, elaine.*”

His breath smelled of death.

“*Elaine blath, fainne wedd…*” he crooned. “Look, *luned*, you have untied your ribbon… Let me…”

He tried to raise his hand, but he failed. He sighed deeply, raised his hand abruptly and looked into her eyes. This time they were alive.

“Zireael,” he said, “*Lod’hlaith*, you are destined to be the Lady of the Lake, and mine as it turns out.”

“*Va’esse deireadh aep eigean.…*” he said after a moment and Ciri in horror realised that his movements and words had begun to slow.

“But,” he added with a sigh, “it is a good thing that, something also begins.”

Through the window came the lengthy sound of thunder. The storm was still far away.

But it was fast approaching.

“Yet,” spoke the king, “I have no desire to die, Zireael. And I find it terribly sad that it has to happen. Who would have thought. I thought that I would have no regrets. I have lived a long time, I have known everything. I’m bored of it all… However, now I feel regret. And do you want to know something else? Come closer, I whisper it. Let it be our secret.”

Ciri leaned forward.

“I’m afraid,” he whispered.

“I know.”

“Are you with me?”

“I am.”

“*Va Faill, Luned.*”

“Goodbye, King of the Alders!”

She sat beside him, still holding his hand after his breathing hushed and ceased. She did not wipe away her tears. She let them flow.

The storm was approaching. On the horizon lightning burned.

***

She ran down the marble staircase to the pier at which the boats bobbed. She untied one of them which she had set her eye on that evening. She left the pier, pushing off with a mahogany pole that had previously been used to hang curtains. She doubted the fact that the boat would obey her commands like it did Avallac’h.

The boat glided silently downstream. Tir Na Lia was dark and quiet. Only the status on the terraces gazed at her with dead eyes. Ciri was counting bridges.

The sky above lit up with a flash of lightning. After a second, thundered rumbled across the sky.

The third bridge.

Something flashed across the bridge, quiet, agile, like a big black rat. It rocked the boat when it jumped into the bow. Ciri dropped the pole and drew her sword.

“I see,” hissed Eredin Breacc Glas, “you want to deprive us of your company?”

He also drew his sword. During a brief lightning flash she was able to see the weapon.

The blade was single-edged, slightly curved, with polished finish and uniformly sharp. The hilt was long and the hand-guard was a circular plate. She could see right away that the elf knew how to use the sword.

Unexpectedly, he rocked the boat, stomping on the side. Ciri deftly balanced by tilting her hips with the movements of the boat, and in turn used the same trick when he jumped with both feet on the opposite side. He did not lose his balance either.

He attacked. She parried his lunge rather instinctively, because in the dark she could barely see. She returned his attack with a quick bottom cut. Eredin parried and struck out again, Ciri deflected the blow. From the blades, sparks flew.

Again he rocked the boat. Ciri spread her arms and balanced on the bench.

He stepped towards the bow and lowered his sword.

“Where did you learn all this, Swallow?”

“You’d be surprised.”

“I doubt it. The river can overcome the barrier. Did you figure this out yourself or did someone advise you?”

“I doesn’t matter.”

“Yes it does. And we’ll find out. We have our ways. But now, drop the sword and return.”

“Never.”

“We are going back, Zireael. Auberon is waiting. I guarantee that tonight he will be full of desires and requests.”

“I doubt it,” she said. “He overdosed on the stimulant you gave him. Or was it meant to do something else entirely?”

“What are you talking about?”

“He’s dead.”

He quickly shook off his surprise and lunged at her, rocking the boat. She balanced and exchanged a few angry cuts, the water carried the sound of the vibrant clash of steel on steel.

Lightning lit up the night. Another bridge passed overhead.

One of the last of Tir Na Lia’s bridges. Or is it the last?

“Surely you realise, Swallow,” he said hoarsely, “that you are only delaying the inevitable. I cannot let you leave.”

“Why? Auberon is dead. And I’m nobody and of no importance. It was you who told me that.”

“Because that is the truth,” he said raising his sword. “You mean nothing. You are a tiny moth, which I can crush between my two fingers into silver powder. But if left alone, you can do irreparable damage to the most precious fabric. You are nothing. Nothing but annoying.”

Lightning flashed again. In the light Ciri could see what she wanted to see. The elf had his sword raised and waving, pointing to the back of the boat. He had the height advantage.

She had to win the next attack.

“You dared to take up arms against me, Zireael. It’s too late to regret or forgive something like that. I will not kill you. But a few weeks in bed with bandages will do you good.”

“Hold on. I want to say something else. I want to reveal a secret.”

“What do you have to tell me?” He laughed. “What pathetic secret?”

“This, that you will not fit under this bridge.”

Without any time to react, he hit the bottom of the bridge, and flew forward, losing his balance completely. Ciri could simply throw him out of the boat, however, that was not enough and she was afraid that he would continue his pursuit. Moreover, he intentionally or by negligence killed the King of the Alders. And he had to feel pain.

She stabbed him in the thigh, just below the chainmail. He did not even scream. He jumped overboard into the river and the waters closed over him.

She turned back to see what was going to happen. It took a long time before he floated to the top. In a flash of lightning she watched him made his way to the shore and remain lying in the mud and blood.

“A few weeks in bed in bandages,” she muttered, “will do you good.”

She grabbed the pole and pushed hard. The Easnadh river was getting more rough, the boat ran faster. Soon she left the last of the buildings of Tir Na Lia behind.

She did not look back.

At first it was very dark, the boat sailed through the old forest, the trees and branches touched together above the river, creating a tunnel. Then it began to brighten. The forest ended and on both sides were alders, reeds and cattails. In the clear river appeared clusters of aquatic plants, drifting on the current. When the lightning flashed, she noticed circles on the water, and before the thunder drowned out all sound, she heard the splashing of startled fish.

Several times, not far from the boat, she saw big phosphorescent eyes, and the boat repeated collided with something big and alive.

Everything in this world seems beautiful, but to strangers it means death, she silently repeated Eredin’s words.

The river widened and islands and channels began to appear. She allowed the boat to sail on luck, along with the current. But she began to be afraid. *What happens If I make a mistake or flow the wrong branch?*

While she thought, she heard a whinny from Kelpie and hear an intense mental signal from the unicorn.

“There you are, Little horse!”

We must hurry, Star Eyes. Follow me.

“To my world?”

First I have to show you something. I was ordered to by the elders.

They rode firstly through the forest steppe, then through densely chopped ravines and gorges. Lightning flashed and thunder boomed. The storm was

getting closer and the wind raged.

The unicorn led Ciri to one of the gorges.

It is here.

“What is here?”

Go down and see.

She obeyed. The ground was uneven and she stumbled. There was a click and something rolled under her feet. There was a flash and Ciri gasped. She was in the middle of a sea of bones.

There had been a landslide probably because of the intensity of the downpours. And it had revealed what it had been hiding. A graveyard. A large mass grave. A huge pile of bones.

Tibiae, pelvis, ribs, femurs. Skulls.

Ciri picked one up.

Again the lightning flashed and she screamed. She knew whose bones were lying here. The skull which had been cleaved by a sharp blade had canines.

Now you know. Now you understand. They did this, the Aen Elle, the King of the Alders, the Fox and Sparrowhawk. This world was not originally their world. They made it theirs when they conquered it. When they opened the Ard Gaeth. With our help, because we had been used and abused and now they are trying to use and abuse you.

Ciri threw the skull.

“Rogues,” she cried into the night. “Murderers!”

Thunder rumbled. Ihuarraquax snorted, loudly, warningly. She understood. With a single jump she was in the saddle and spurred Kelpie to a gallop.

Following in their footsteps were pursuers.

***

This is not the first time this has happened, she thought, feeling the wind in her face as she galloped. *Not the first time. This wild ride in the dark, in the middle of the night, chased by ghosts, spectres and apparitions.*

“Forward, Kelpie!”

In the glow of the lightning, Ciri could see through her watering eyes willows and alders along the trails. But these were not trees. They were hunched monsters coming at her from both sides, with their twisted and gnarled limbs, rotten laughter coming from a black mouth cavity. Kelpie neighed shrilly and ran so fast it looked like her hooves did not touch the ground.

Ciri laid flat on the back of her neck. Not only to reduce air resistance, but also in order to avoid the alder branches that wanted to knock her off or pull her

from the saddle. The branches whipped and beat her, catching at her clothing and hair. The twisted trunks shook and the cavities snickered.

Kelpie neighed wildly. The unicorn responded. He was a bright white spot in the dark, showing her the way.

Ride, Star Eyes! Ride as fast as possible!

It became more and more difficult to dodge the alder's branches. Very soon they blocked the way.

Behind them they heard shouting. It was the voices of their pursuers.

Ihuarraquax neighed. Ciri received his signal. Understood the importance. She adhered herself to Kelpie's neck. She did not need to encourage her, the frightened mare ran at a breakneck gallop. And other signal from the unicorn roughly broke into Ciri's mind. A council or rather an order.

Jump, Star Eyes. You have to jump. To another place, another time.

Ciri did not understand, but struggled to. She made every effort to understand. She concentrated. Concentrated while whispers and blood pounded in her ears…

Lightning flashed. And then, suddenly it was dark, soft, black darkness, without a single beam of light.

Her head ached and there was a buzzing in her ears.

***

She felt a cool breeze on her face. Drops of rain. The smell of pine. Kelpie snorted and puffed. She was wet and hot. Ciri could see Ihuarraquax. He stood shaking his head and his horn. Pawing at the ground with his hooves.

"Little horse?"

I'm here, Star Eyes.

The sky was full of stars. Full of constellations. The Dragon. Lady Winter. The Seven Goats. And low on the horizon – the Eye.

"It worked," she sighed. "We have succeeded, Little horse. This is my world!"

His tone was so clear that Ciri understood everything.

No, Star Eyes. We escaped from them. But this is still not the right place, or the right time. You still have a long way to go.

"Don't leave me alone."

I will not leave. I owe you a debt. And I will repay it. Until the end.

***

The wind picked up and the clouds were swept to the west and gradually enveloped the constellations. The Dragon disappeared and after the Lady Winter

and the Seven Goats. The brightest and longest glowing was the Eye. Ultimately, however, it also was covered. On the horizon lightning flashed briefly followed by the sound of thunder. The wind picked up dust.

The storm was once again catching up.

The unicorn whinnied and sent another mental signal.

We must not waste time. Our only hope is a quick getaway. To the right place and the right time. Hurry, Star Eyes.

I am the Lady of the Worlds. I am of the Elder Blood. The blood of Lara Dorren, daughter of Shiadhal.

Ihuarraquax neighed again, prompting her to hurry. Kelpie replied. Ciri pulled on her gloves.

“I’m ready.”

There was a roar in her ears. A flash. Then darkness.

The majority of historians tend to award the process, conviction and execution of Joachim de Wett to the violent, cruel and tyrannical nature of Emperor Emhyr. Especially some works, whose authors have a fondness for literature about revenge and personal reckoning. The time has come to tell the truth, a truth that for a thorough researcher is obvious. The Duke de Wett commanded the Verden Operations Group to which the word 'ineffective' is extraordinarily delicate. Although having been arrayed against forces with at least twice their numbers, separated from the offensive in the north, he directed all of their activities to fighting the Verden guerrillas. The Verden Operations Group committed unheard of atrocities against civilians. The results were easy to foresee and inexcusable – in the winter the insurgent forces were calculated at about five hundred armed men, by the spring it was almost the entire country. King Ervyll, an imperial ally, was murdered and the uprising was led by his son, Prince Kistrin, a northerner sympathizer. Flanked by the pirate's ships of Skellige, in front from the Nordlings of Cidaris and from behind by the rebellion, de Wett engaged in chaotic battles, suffering defeat after defeat. Thus the offensive for the Centre Army Group was delayed. Instead of Verden being bound to the west flank of the armies 'Centre' to enable Menno Coehoorn's forces quick action, they in fact slowed down their campaign. So there was a delay and disruption of the offensive strategic plan. The Northerner immediately took advantage of the situation and went on the counterattack, undoing the siege around Mayenne and Maribor, destroying the chances of a rapid re-occupation of these important strengths.

The inefficiency and stupidity of de Wett also had a psychological importance. The myth of the invincibility of Nilfgaard vanished. The army of the northerners began to receive hundreds of volunteers…

Restif de Montholon

The Northern Wars: Myths, Lies and Propaganda

CHAPTER SIX

Jarre, needless to say, was disappointed. The education he received at the temple and his own outgoing personality had led him to have faith in human goodness, kindness and selflessness. Now there was not much left of that faith.

He had slept for two nights in the open on the remains of haystacks, and now it looked like he'd be spending his third night the same way. In each of the villages that he had sought shelter or a crust of bread, the gates had been closed up tight and the only responses he received were a deep silence or insults and threats. No matter how he explained who he was and where and for what purpose he was travelling.

He was very, very disappointed by people.

It soon grew dark. The boy walked quickly and briskly along a path though some fields. He looked around for a haystack, resigned and dejected at the prospect of having to stay another night out in the open. In fact, March had been unusually warm, but at night it was very cold. And he was afraid.

Jarre looked to the sky, which, like every night for almost a week, you could see a golden and red comet that swept across the sky from west to east, dragging behind it a line of fire. He thought about what could cause such a herald, a phenomenon mentioned in many prophecies. He took up the march. It was getting darker. The path led down a corridor of thick bushes that became dark terrifying shapes in the shadows of twilight. From below the bushes where darkness reigned blew the cold nasty smell of weeds in a state of putrefaction and something more. Something very bad.

Jarre stopped. He tried to convince himself that what was crawling on his back and shoulders was not fear, but cold. It had no effect.

Ahead a low bridge linked the banks of a canal, black and shiny as freshly poured tar, the banks were covered with reeds, willows and deformed ash. In places the bridge had rotten planks, and large holes gaped in the deck, the railing was broken and the rails were immersed in water. Around the bridge, willows grew densely. Although it was still far from real night, in the distant meadow behind the canal glowed the ragged bits of mist which clung to the grass, and

among the willows darkness reigned. Through the darkness Jarre caught a blurry glimpse of the ruins of a building, probably a mill or a shack.

I have to cross the bridge, thought the young man. *Nothing can be done. Although I can feel that something lurks on the other side, I have go to the other side of the canal. I have to cross the canal, as did the legendary leader, or was he a hero? Who I read about in the worn manuscripts at the temple of Melitele. Cross the canal and then… How was it? The cards will be laid out? No, I will cast the dice! Behind me is the past, before me is spread my future…*

He walked to the bridge and immediately saw that his premonition had not failed. Before he saw them, he heard them.

"Well," growled one of those who now stood in his way. "Did I not say? A little patience, and we have already encountered somebody."

"You were right, Okultich," replied the other. "You could set yourself up as a clairvoyant. Well, lonesome wanderer, relinquish to us everything you have… will you be good or do we have to help?"

"But I have nothing!" Screamed Jarre with all the force in his lungs, hoping that someone would hear and come to his aid. "I am just a poor traveller! I do not have a penny on me! What can I give you? This stick? My clothing?"

"That too," replied the other with a lisp, something in his voice caused Jarre to shudder. "So you know, poor traveller, we expected better loot. Or at least to have fun with a girl from the village. But soon it will be night and now nobody will come. But where there is no fish, crab must suffice. Take him, guys!"

"I warn you," shouted Jarre. "I have a knife!"

Indeed he did. He took it with him from the temple's kitchen before he fled and hid it in his bag. But he did not reach for it. He was paralysed by the knowledge that it would be an absurd gesture and no one would help.

"I have a knife!"

"Well, well!" Sneered the man with the lisp, approaching. "He has a knife. Who would have thought!"

Jarre could not flee. Fear had made his legs become two stakes nailed to the ground. Adrenaline had tied him by the neck like a noose.

"Hey!" Suddenly cried a third voice, youthful and somehow familiar. "I think I know him! Yes, yes, I know him! Jarre? Do you recognise me? It's Melfi. Do you remember me, Jarre?"

"I… remember," Jarre struggled with all of his strength against a powerful, ugly and so far completely unknown to him feeling. Only when he felt pain in his side, from hitting the planks on the bride, did he realise the sensation. The

feeling of the loss of consciousness.

***

“What a surprise!” Repeated Melfi. “Such a coincidence to meet a native from Ellander. And a friend. Isn’t it, Jarre?”

Jarre swallowed the mouthful of bacon, which the strange company had given to him, along with some roasted turnips. He did not answer, just nodded his head in the direction of all six surrounding the campfire.

“What direction are you headed, Jarre?”

“To Vizima.”

“Ha! We are also headed to Vizima! What a coincidence! What do you say to that, Milton? You remember Milton, Jarre?”

Jarre did not remember. He was not even sure if he had seen him before. Furthermore, Melfi, too, was exaggerating a bit calling him a friend. He was the son of the Cooper in Ellander. They had both attended the minor seminary in the temple, Melfi had regularly and severely beat Jarre and called him a bastard conceived of nettles, without a mother or father.

It lasted about a year, after which the Cooper had taken his son from school and confirmed that the boy was only intended for barrels. That was Melfi – instead of devoting the sweat of his brow to learning the secrets of reading and writing, he devoted his sweat and blood in his father’s workshop, sanding staves. And when he finished his studies, Jarre, with a recommendation of the temple found a job as the assistant town clerk, and the journeyman cooper bowed deeply to him and assured him of their friendship.

“Let’s go to Vizima,” said Melfi. “To the army. All of us here, as one group. Those there are Milton and Ograbek, sons of serfs, but have been removed from their obligations, you know…”

“I know,” Jarre looked at the two young, blond villagers who were as alike as brothers.

“They conscript one out of ten fiefs. And you Melfi?”

“With me,” sighed the cooper, “mind you, this happened – the first time the army came to recruit my father paid them off. But the second time, we had to draw straws… well you know…”

“I know,” Jarre nodded again. “The draw to enlist was decreed by the city council on Ellander, the decreed is dated January sixteenth. It was inevitable against the threat of Nilfgaard…”

“Listen, Pike, to how he speaks,” said one husky, broad-shouldered lad, who had first shouted at Jarre on the bridge. “Like some kind of sage.”

“Wisearse. Fucking know it all,” contributed another of the companions, whose round face was pasted with a stupid grin.

“Shut up, Klaproth,” snarled Pike, the oldest boy in the group, who already boasted narrow droopy moustache. “If he is a sage, then a man should listen to what he says. It doesn’t hurt to learn something. Learning has never hurt anyone. Well, almost never. And almost anyone.”

“What is true is true,” announced Melfi. “Jarre, is in fact not stupid. He is a scholar and he learned to read and write in Ellander at the temple of Melitele and takes care of their library.”

“I wonder,” Pike looked at Jarre thought the smoke from the fire, his eyes glistened like an actual pike in the light of the torch at the bow of a fishing boat, “what a scholar is doing on the road on the way to Vizima?”

“Like you,” said Jarre. “I’m going to join the army.”

“Why would some kind of fucking know it all go and join the army? Sanctuaries do not have to supply recruits And every fool knows how to rescue the *service and claim* to his scribe. What is it then, Sir Officer?”

“I’m going to enlist as a volunteer,” said Jarre. “I want to enlist out of choice, not mandatory conscription. Partly for personal reasons, but mainly from a sense of patriotic duty.”

The group burst into loud, thundering laughter.

“Look, guys,” said Pike after he caught his breath, “you can find a double temperament in some people seated in contradictions. Two natures. Here is a youngster; he would seem to be well educated and experienced, and in addition surely not a born fool. You ought to know what happens in war – someone attacks someone else and kills them. And he, like you has joined by their own volition and person reasons and patriotic obligations but joins the losing side.”

Nobody said anything. Neither did Jarre.

“Such feelings of patriotic obligations,” said Pike, “reliably reveal those who are weak in the head. But you also spoke about personal reasons. I’m dangerously curious, what are these personal motivations?”

“They are personal,” said Jarre, “and I’m not going to be talking about them. I’d rather you speak of your own reasons.”

“Pay close attention to what I say,” Pike said after a moment of silence. “You are not talking to some kind of yokel. But do not worry scribe… I will forgive you this time. I’ll even answer. Yes, I’m going into the army and also as a volunteer.”

“How weak in the head should someone be to join with the losers?” Jarre was

surprised at his sudden audacity. “And on the way, stripping travellers on bridges?”

“Ha,” Melfi burst out with laughter, “he still cannot forgive the trap by the stream. Jarre, it was just for fun! We were just joking, right, Pike?”

“Sure,” Pike yawned. “It was just an innocent prank. Life is sad, like a cow being led to the slaughter. People will do anything for fun, don’t you think, scribe?”

“I think. In principle.”

“That’s fine,” Pike did not take his shining eyes off of him. “Otherwise you would have had to make the trip to Vizima alone.”

Jarre was silent. Pike stretched.

“I’ve said what I wanted to say. Well, guys, the fun is at an end, it is time to hit the sack. We have until tomorrow evening to get to Vizima, we hike at daybreak.”

***

The night was very cold, despite his fatigue; Jarre could not sleep, curled up under his blanket, his knees almost touching his chin. When he finally feel asleep, he slept poorly and nightmares plagued him. Upon awakening he remembered only two.

In the first dream he saw the Witcher Geralt or Rivia who occasionally visited mother Nenneke. The witcher sat motionless under icicles hanging from an overhanging rock and was snowed in from a blizzard. In the second dream, Ciri was hunched over a horse’s neck, galloping towards a low wall of alders.

Oh yes, and just before dawn he dreamed of Triss Merigold. After her last stay in the temple the young man dreamed of the enchantress often. Those dreams had consequences, for after waking up he was very ashamed.

This time, however, nothing of the sort happened. It was just too cold.

***

In the morning they did indeed march at dawn. Milton and Ograbek, the children of serfs, added a note of encouragement by singing a military song:

Go on, brave warrior!
Your armour rumbles like thunder.
Don’t run, girl, he wants to kiss you.
Just give it to him, you won’t regret it,
After all, the handsome soldier is going to fight for us!

Pike, Okultich, Klaproth and Melfi, walked together like lice on a beggar and told silly jokes and anecdotes, which in their opinion were outrageously funny:

"…And the Nilfgaardian asks 'What's that smell?' And the Elf says, 'Shit!', Ha, ha, ha!"

"Hahahahahaha!"

"Ha, ha, ha, ha! Do you know this one? An elf and a dwarf are going to Nilfgaard…"

As time passed they met other travellers on the road, walking and driving, farm carts, merchants and military units. Some vehicles were loaded with food and Pike walked after them with his nose practically pressed to the ground, like a retriever, collecting anything that fell off the back – a carrot here, a potato there and sometimes even some onions. Some of the food they devoured on the spot and some they saved for later.

Jarre was waiting for any chance or reason to separate from them. He did not like Pike or Okultich. He did not like the looks that Pike and Okultich threw the wagons of the merchants who passed or the carts of the farmers with girls and women sitting in the carts. He did not like the mocking tone Pike put on when he spoke of his purpose of volunteering for the military at a time when it was clear and inevitable they would be defeated.

The air smelled of freshly ploughed earth. And smoke. In a valley between the regular checkerboard fields they saw fruit trees and between them the crowns of a thatched roofs.

They heard dogs barking, roosters crowing and cattle lowing.

"Nice village," Pike said. "Not too big but neat and rich at first sight."

"Here in the valley," Okultich hurried to explain, "halflings have settled. They organise everything neatly. They are diligent stewards."

"Non-humans are cursed," snarled Klaproth. "Fucking kobolds. They are thriving here while everyone else is in poverty. Not even the war affects them."

"For now," Pike's lip curled back in an ugly grimace. "Remember this settlement, boys. Remember it well. If we ever wanted to take a look there, I would not like to wander."

Jarre turned his head. He pretended not to hear. He watched the road in front of them.

They continued their journey. Ograbek and Milton started singing a new song. Not a military song, but something much grimmer. It could have been, after Pike's previous references, taken as an ominous sign.

People listen and learn the cruelty of death.
Old, young or brave,
No one escapes the Reaper.

No mercy from his scythe.

***

“He,” Okultich said quietly, “must have some money. I’ll be damned if he does not have silver.”

The subject for whom Okultich had made the bet was a merchant who was travelling along the road, walking with a two wheeled wagon being pulled by a donkey.

“Money calls money,” Pike lisped, “and the little donkey would also be worth something. Lead the way, boys.”

“Melfi,” Jarre pulled on the cooper’s sleeve, “open your eyes! Do you not see what is brewing here?”

“These are just jokes, Jarre,” Melfi pulled away. “They are only joking…”

Close up they could see that the cart was also a stall that he could set up in a few moments to spread his wears ready for sale. The cart was covered with a tarpaulin which doubled as a sign that praised the shopkeepers range – protective amulets, talismans and scapulars, roots and medicinal drugs, magic potions and all sorts of spices, elixirs and magical poultices, precious metal detectors as well as infallible bait for fish, ducks and maidens.

The merchant, a thin elderly man, looked around and saw them, swore and urged his donkey forward. But the donkey like any ass did not go faster.

“He’s wearing a pretty decent outfit,” Okultich quietly appreciated. “And I’m sure we’ll find things in the cart.”

“Well, boys, let’s get to it,” Pike commanded, “while there are few witnesses on the road.”

Jarre could not believe his courage, when he ran a few quick steps ahead of the gang, turned and stood between them and the merchant.

“No!” He uttered with difficulty, as if his throat was being squeezed. “I won’t let you…”

Pike carelessly parted his long cloak and pointed at a knife on his belt, which was without a doubt sharp as a razor.

“Move aside, pen-pusher!” Pike lisped with hatred. “If you want to save your throat. I thought you were looking for adventures with our company, but no, I see your temple has made you a prude, you stink of incense. Get out of the way now, because otherwise…”

“What is happening here? Huh?”

From behind the bushes at the side of the road, emerged two eccentric looking figures.

Both men wore waxed moustaches curled upwards that looked like a colourful Danish pastry, they wore quilted jackets decorated with ribbons and big, soft, velvet berets with tufts of feathers. In addition they wore wide belts with hanging daggers and both men wore on their backs two-handed swords, about a meter in length, with long hilts.

The landsknechts emerged from the bushes after having apparently fulfilled their necessary requirements. Although they behaved with ostentatious carelessness and did not reach towards their swords, Pike and Okultich immediately backed away and went limp and Klaproth looked like a deflated bladder.

“We… we’re not…” Stammered Pike. “Nothing wrong with…”

“Just a joke,” whined Melfi.

“No one was hurt,” the old merchant said unexpectedly. “So no big deal.”

“We,” Jarre said quickly, “are on our way to Vizima. We have to report for conscription. By chance maybe that is the way you are travelling, gentlemen soldiers?”

“By chance we are,” chuckled the landsknecht, who immediately understood what was going on. “We are also going to Vizima. Whoever is interested can go with us. We will be safer together.”

“In any case,” the other landsknecht measured Pike and his henchmen with penetrating eyes. “I would like to add that we met a sheriff’s patrol a short distance away. His men are angry they have to trudge through the country, instead of sitting somewhere warm. They are keen to hang any robbers they find on the roads.”

“Very well,” Pike recovered and showed his teeth in a fake smile. “Very well, the law punishes rogues and keeps order. Then let us be on our way to Vizima, to the army, because patriotic duty calls.”

The landsknecht looked at him for a long time and rather contemptuously, then shrugged his shoulders, adjusted the sword on his back and walked by. His companion, Jarre, and the merchant and his wagon and donkey followed him, and a short distance behind, Pike’s mob.

“I thank you, gentlemen soldiers,” said the merchant driving his donkey. “And I thank you, your sir.”

“You’re welcome,” the landsknecht waved his hand. “It happens.”

“A wide range of people are being recruited for the military,” said the second fellow looking back over his shoulder. “They arrive at a village or a town and order one out of every ten men. Often the first thing they do is take advantage of

the opportunity to get rid of the crooks, which is worse, because then the road become full of robbers. Oh, like those back there. However, once they reach the training centre a soldier will club some discipline into them. Everyone learns to listen when they are forced to run down a corridor of sticks a few times."

"I," Jarre was quick to clarify, "wish to enlist as a volunteer, not forced."

"I noticed right away," the landsknecht looked at him, "you're a different breed from those rascals. So why are you with them?"

"Chance brought us together."

"I have seen many such pairings," said the experienced soldier seriously, "which together by chance led them to the gallows. Take a lesson from that, my boy."

"I will."

***

Before the clouds obscured sun stood at its zenith, they reached the highway. There awaiting them was a large group of travellers who had arrived before them, Jarre and his companions had to stop because the road was completely blocked by military troops.

"They're heading south," said one of the landsknechts. "To the front. To Maribor and Mayenne."

"Look at their banners," nodded the other.

"Redania," said Jarre. "Silver eagle on purple."

"Smart boy," said the landsknecht patting him on the shoulder. "Yes, it is Redanian soldiers that have been sent to help by Queen Hedwig. Finally the kingdoms are united again – Temeria, Redania, Aedirn and Kaedwen, now we are allies for a common cause."

"It's about time," Pike said from behind them with obvious sarcasm. The landsknecht looked, but said nothing.

"Let's sit down," Melfi said. "Get some rest. The crowd of troops is not near the end, it will take a while before the path is clear."

"We can sit on that hill," the merchant pointed. "We will have a better view."

The Redanian light cavalry passed rapidly past them, raising dust. Behind them marched the crossbowmen. Behind them came a column of heavy cavalry.

"Those," Melfi pointed to an armoured knight, "march under another banner. A black standard, dotted with white speckles."

"From what sunken hole did you climb?" The landsknecht shook his head. "You do not know the banner of your own king? These are the silver lilies, you blockhead…"

“Black field covered with silver lilies,” Jarre said, who wanted to show that he definitely climbed from no hole, and hurriedly explained – “The old coat of arms of the Kingdom of Temeria was a striding lion. Only the crown princes used a different standard to put on their shields, the three fleur de lys. The heraldic symbolisms of the lilies are a sign of the crown prince, heir to the crown and sceptre…”

“Fuckin’ know it all,” muttered Klaproth.

“Shut your mug, pig heads,” warned the landsknecht. “And you, my boy, keep going. This interests me.”

“When prince Goidemar, son of old King Gardik went to fight Falka’s evil insurgents, the army he brought fought under the coat of arms of the lilies, making a decisive advantage. And when Goidemar inherited the throne from his father, in memory of those victories and the miraculous salvation of his wife and children from enemy hands, he instituted the coat of arms of three lilies on a black field for his kingdom. And then King Cedric changed the official flag by special decree, so now it is a field strewn with silver lilies. And this is Temeria’s crest today. Which you can visually verify without difficulty, since on the road move Temerian spearmen.”

“You explained that very well, young sir,” praised the merchant.

“Not I,” said Jarre, “but Jan of Attre, a scholar of heraldry.

“And obviously you are as well versed.”

“Fucking great then,” said Pike in a low voice, “that he is being recruited by the banner of the silver lilies, for the king of Temeria.”

Suddenly they heard singing. Deep, threatening, like an approaching thunder storm.

Following in the tracks left by the Temerians, came another army in close formation. A grey, almost colourless cavalry, over which waved no flags or banners. At the front of the column carried on a pole was a horizontal staff decorated with horses’ tails from which three human skulls hung.

“The Free Company,” the landsknecht pointed at the riders. “*Condottiere*. An army of mercenaries.”

“Even the untrained eye can see that they are seasoned,” Melfi sighed. “I would serve with them. They ride in formation, as if on parade…”

“The Free Company,” repeated the landsknecht. “Behold, beardless yokels, those are true soldiers. The same condottieri was present at the battle of Mayenne- Adam Pangratt, Lorenzo Molla, Frontino and Julia Abatemarco where they decided to attack and broke the siege and liberated them from Nilfgaard’s

strength.”

“In combat they are unyielding as solid rock,” added the other. “War is a craft for them, and they provide their service for money, as you can easily deduce by their songs.”

The company approached at a walk, their singing thundering above their heads, but with a strangely discordant note.

Never the sceptre nor throne shall we serve
Never with monarchs alliance we make
We with the coin, so like the sun shimmering
Leap to obey!
Nothing for us your soldier’s fealties
Nor bow to your banners, nor kiss hands
We for these coin, so like the sun golden
Give our allegiance!

“I would like to serve with them,” Melfi breathed again. “To fight at their side. Capturing fortune and fame.”

“Do my eyes deceive me?” Okultich furrowed his brow. “Who rides at the head of the crowd? A female? Are these mercenaries fighting under the command of women?”

“She is not just any woman,” growled the landsknecht. “It is Julia Abatemarco who they call Pretty Kitty. All of her enemies tremble before her. This company comprises barely a thousand men, but before the gates of Mayenne they cut down three thousand Black Ones and elves.”

“I heard,” Pike said in a humble, yet disgustingly vitriolic tone, “that famous victory was for nothing, that the gold coins used for their pay was wasted unnecessarily. Nilfgaard recovered and again inflicted on our people a good lesson. They besieged Mayenne again. Maybe even took it. Maybe they are stretching their strength to the north. Maybe they - Nilfgaard bought these well-paid mercenaries. Maybe…”

“Maybe,” interrupted the landsknecht coldly, “you want me to smash your lying mouth, bastard! And yet you’re lucky, because barking against one’s own army is punishable by hanging. So hold your tongue before I run out of patience!”

“Oooh!” The burly Klaproth said, opening his mouth widely. “Oh, look at you! Dwarfs are more fun!”

On the road, under the deafening din of drums, the blaring of bagpipes and the shrill whistle of fifes, marched a formation of infantry armed with halberds,

battle-axes and spiked flails. Clad in pointed helmets, leather and chain shirts were soldiers far smaller than usual.

“Dwarves of the mountains,” said the landsknecht. “Some of the regiments of the Mahakam Volunteer Army.”

“I thought,” said Okultich, “the dwarves fought against us. That these filthy tadpoles betrayed us to the Black Ones…”

“You thought?” The landsknecht looked at him with pity. “I wonder what with? If you swallowed a cockroach in you soup, dolt, you would have more intellect in your gut than in your head. Those who march there are one of the dwarven regiments of infantry, sent to aid us by Brouver Hoog, Governor of Mahakam. They have already entered combat, suffering heavy casualties during the battle of Mayenne they drove back the Black Ones.”

“Dwarves are brave people,” confirmed Melfi. “I met one once, at an inn in Ellander during the celebration of Saovine and he gave me such a slap in the ear that I had a ringing in them until the feast of Yule.

“The regiment of dwarves is the last column,” the landsknecht shaded his eyes with his hand. “End of the parade. The road will be free soon. Let’s get moving it is almost noon.”

***

“So many people are moving arms to the south,” nodded the merchant. “There will be a great war, a great misfortune. People will perish by fire and sword by the thousands. Did you, gentlemen, see the comet in the firmament night after night, dragging a red tail behind it? When a comet has a pale tail, it announces disease and epidemics, plague, cholera and leprosy, a comet with a bluish tail portents disaster, floods, cloudbursts, or prolonged rain. A red colour indicates that it is a comet of fire, and blood and iron that are born of fire. Severe disasters will fall on people, death and bloodshed. What is said in the old prophecy – corpses will cover the earth, hear the howl of the wolves, and those who miraculously survive, will cry with happiness when they find traces of another living person… Woe to us!”

“Why us?” The landsknecht interrupted coldly. “The comet is flying high, certainly it can be seen from Nilfgaard. And the Ina valley, where Menno Coehoorn camps. If it can be seen by the Black Ones, why not believe that it portends disaster and misfortune for them and not us.”

“Right!” Agreed the second landsknecht. “Woe to the Black Ones!”

“You, gentlemen, are exceedingly clever.”

“Absolutely.”

***

They left the woods and went into meadows and pastures surrounding Vizima. Here grazed herds of horses used for riding and towing. Now in March, the grass in the meadow was scarce, but in the meadow stood wagons filled with hay.

“I cannot believe my eyes,” Okultich licked his lips. “Herds of horses and no one watching them! Just choose one and…”

“Shut up,” growled Pike from between his teeth, smiling at the mercenaries, “This one, gentlemen, is dying to serve in the cavalry. He enjoys looking at horses.”

“Serve in the cavalry?” The landsknecht spluttered. “Have no illusions of riding on horseback. Such as you would be useless unless you were cleaning the stables or moving manure with a bucket and wheelbarrow!”

They continued on and soon arrived at the dock that ran along the ponds and channels.

And suddenly above the tops of the alder they spotted the red-tiled towers of Vizima castle which stood by the river.

“We’re almost there,” said the merchant. “Can you smell it?”

“Pu-ugh!” Melfi cried. “What a stink! What is it?”

“Probably the soldiers who have died waiting for the king to pay them,” muttered Pike form behind them, but so the landsknechts could not hear.

“A wonder your snout doesn’t break, huh?” Laughed one of them. “We are approaching the camp, where during the winter thousands of troops camped. An army has to eat… and shit too. So it was established by nature and nothing that can be remedied! And all that shit has to go somewhere. Like in those pits over there, where they go and cover it with soil. In winter, it remains frozen and you can withstand it a bit, but come spring… Pah!”

“Do you hear that buzz?” The second landsknecht sniffed. “There are clouds of flies and in the spring it will be an unheard of thing. Cover your face as best you can, because these flies go rampaging through the mouth and eyes. Let’s pick up the pace, the faster the better.”

***

They left the trenches behind, but failed to lose the smell. On the contrary, Jarre would have given his head, the closer to the city, the worse the smell got. And much more diverse. The smell surrounded the city stank of military camps and tents. It smelled of hospitals. I stank of crowded and busy boroughs, squares and streets, the walls above the city stank.

Luckily the nostrils soon grew accustomed to it and could not tell the difference between either dung or carrion or whether it was cat urine or the next inn.

Flies were everywhere. Buzzing annoyingly like experienced soldiers, crawling into mouths, noses, eyes and ears. The insects could not be driven off and it was easier to crush them on their faces.

As they left the darkness of the city gate, Jarre's eye fell upon a huge poster of a painted knight, who pointed his finger at him. The inscription beneath the knight in capital letters read – WHAT ABOUT YOU? HAVE YOU ENLISTED?

"Yes," muttered the landsknecht. "Unfortunately."

There were many similar signs, hung on almost every available wall. Most were of the knight pointing his finger, often also with a pathetic looking mother with billowing grey hair, standing in the background of burning villages and babies impaled on Nilfgaardian stakes. Another popular motif was pictures of elves with bloody knives in their teeth dripping blood.

Jarre turned around and suddenly realised they were alone – the landsknecht, the merchant, and himself. Pike, Okultich, Klaproth, Melfi and the rural recruits were gone without a trace.

"Well, well," the landsknecht confirmed his conjectures looking around inquisitively. "As I expected, your comrades took off at the first opportunity, rascals, gave us the slip at the first corner. But you know what I'll tell you, boy? Be glad that your paths diverged. And wish that you had never met."

"I'm sorry for Melfi," Jarre murmured. "He is not a bad person."

"Each person chooses his own destiny. Come with us. We will show you were to recruit."

They entered a square with a stone platform in the centre, on it stood a pillory.

Around the pillory townspeople and soldiers thronged. The condemned had mud and shit flung at their faces, they were spitting, spluttering, screaming and crying. The crowd laughed.

"Wow!" Cried the landsknecht. "Look who is locked in the stocks! It's Fuson! I wonder why he is in there?"

"For farming," a fat burgher in wolf fur and a felt hat hastened to explain.

"For what?"

"For farming," the fat man repeated with emphasis. "For planting."

"Ha! So you spoke clearly, forgive me," the landsknecht laughed. "That's nonsense, I have known Fuson for many years. He is a shoemaker, the son of a

shoemaker and grandson of a shoemaker. In his life it has never occurred to him to plough or sow or reap. Where did you come to such a towering pile of shit, sir?"

"The magistrate read the judgement," the man said indignantly. "It is said the criminal will stay in the pillory until tomorrow morning, for on the command of Nilfgaard he has sown some strange, exotic herb. Probably poisonous… Wait, I remember… Oh! *Defetyzm!*"

"Yes, yes!" Cried the merchant. "I heard talk of it. The Nilfgaardian spies and the elves are spreading epidemics, poisoning wells, springs and streams with various poisons such as hemlock, typhoid and defetyzm."

"That's right," said the fat man in the felt cap. "Yesterday in the square they hanged two elves. Surely for such poisonings."

"In this street," the landsknecht pointed, "is an inn, with a draft board in the office. Good luck kid, and perhaps the gods with let us meet in better times. Farewell, and you, Mister merchant."

The merchant cleared his throat.

"Kind gentlemen," said the merchant rummaging through little chests and trunks on his cart, "for your help… As a sign of gratitude…"

"Do not trouble yourself, good man," the landsknecht said with a smile. "Let's not speak of it."

"How about a magic ointment against arrows?" The old man rummaged through a trunk. "Or an effective and versatile tool for the treatment of asthma, gout, paralysis and to remove dandruff? Or a balm for bee stings or if you have been bitten by a rabid dog, vipers or a vampire? Or a talisman against the evil eye?"

"And you do not have anything," the second landsknecht said seriously, "for the effects of bad food?"

"I have!" Cried the merchant. "Here it is, the most effective antidote developed from magical roots, spices and herbs. Three drops will suffice after each meal. Please take it, noble lords."

"Thank you. Farewell, sir. You too, boy."

"Honest and decent gentlemen," said the merchant, when both the landsknechts disappeared into the crowd. "It's not every day you find people like that. Nor like you, young sir! What can I give you then? An amulet against lightning? A bezoar? Turtle

pebbles effective against spells of charming? Aha! I even have a hanged man's tooth and a piece of devil shit…"

Jarre tore his gaze away from a group of people fiercely washing paint from the wall of a house which read – DOWN WITH THE FUCKING WAR!

“No need,” he said. “It is time for me…”

“Ha!” The merchant shouted and pulled out a brass medallion in the shape of a heart. “This is the right thing for a young man. It is truly unique, I have only one such amulet. It is a magic charm. It makes the one who carries it never forget his love, even if time and many miles separate them. Look, inside is a piece of papyrus, with magical red ink that I have, you just write the name of the loved one and she will never forget or betray you. What do you think?”

“Hmmm…” blushed Jarre. “I don’t know…”

“What name,” the merchant dipped a quill into his magic ink, “should I write?”

“Ciri. I mean Cirilla.”

“Done. Here you go.”

“Jarre! Bloody hell! What are you doing here?”

Jarre turned impulsively. I’d hoped, he thought, that I would leave my past behind, that everything would be all new and I seem to constantly bump into old acquaintances.

“Dennis Cranmer!”

A dwarf dressed in a heavy fur coat, steel armour, arm guards and a fox-skin hat with a tail cast a penetrating look at the boy, then the merchant, then again at the boy.

“What are you doing here Jarre?” He asked sternly, his brows, beard and moustache bristling.

For a moment the boy thought to lie and get the good-hearted merchant to confirm it. He immediately gave up this idea. Dennis Cranmer, who had once served in the guard in the Principality of Ellander, enjoyed the reputation of being a dwarf who was difficult to deceive. And he knew it was not worth the try.

“I’m going to enlist in the army.”

He knew what the next question would be.

“Do you have permission from Nenneke?”

He did not respond.

“You ran away,” Dennis Cranmer stroked his beard. “You fled from the temple. And Nenneke and the priestesses are probably pulling out their hair…”

“I left a letter,” grumbled Jarre. “Mister Cranmer, I could not… I had to… One cannot sit idly by while the enemy is on his border… in a time of threat to

one’s homeland… and… Ciri… Mother Nenneke banned me. She sent three quarters of the sanctuaries girls to the army, but she did not want me to go. But I had to…”

“So you ran away,” the dwarf wrinkled his brow. “By a thousand sacramental demons! I should tie you to a stick and send you back to Ellander. I should order you locked up in a cave until the priestesses come and pick you up! I should…”

He snorted angrily.

“When was the last time you ate something, Jarre? How long since your throat had a hot meal?”

“Hot meal? Three… No, four days ago.”

“Come with me.”

***

“Eat slower, son,” Zoltan Chivay, one of Dennis Cranmer’s comrades rebuked him. “Not so fast, it’s not healthy to swallow without chewing properly. Where are you going in a hurry? Believe me; no one is going to take the pot away.”

Jarre was not so sure. In the main hall of the Hairy Bear inn a duel of fisticuffs was being held. Two stubby dwarves as wide as stoves were banging fists together so loud that the noise rang over the top of the clamour and cheers from the companions of the regiment. The plank floor creaked, dishes fell from shelves and blood from broken noses sprayed the surrounding area like rain. Jarre was afraid that one of the opponents would soon roll over the table and throw the wooden platter with pork, cooked peas and earthenware pints to the floor. He swallowed a chunk of meat without swallowing, because the last few days had taught him that anything could befall you.

“I don’t understand, Dennis,” said another dwarf at the table called Sheldon Skaggs, without paying attention to the fact that one of the fighters after a hard blow almost rolled over his back. “If the boy is a priest, how is he going to enlist? The blood of priests should not be spilled.”

“He was schooled at the temple, he’s not a priest.”

“Damn, I can never understand those human superstitions. But it is not proper to mock other people beliefs… However, since this young man was only brought up in the temple, there is nothing against his shedding blood. Especially Nilfgaard’s. What do you say, boy?”

“Let him to eat in peace, Sheldon.”

“I will answer…” Jarre took a bite of pork with a spoonful of peas. “I think the spilling of blood in a righteous war is permissible and justified. That’s why I

want to enlist. The motherland is calling."

"You can see for yourself," Sheldon Skaggs looked at his companions, "how much truth there is in the assertion that humans are a race closely akin to our own and that we derive from the same root, both them and us. The best proof is sitting in front of us and eating peas. In other words, the same stupid enthusiasm we see in young dwarves."

"Especially after Mayenne," said Zoltan Chivay calmly. "After winning a battle voluntary enlistment always rises. The momentum will cease as soon as the news that Menno Coehoorn is heading up the Ina River, leaving land and going by water."

"I only wish that the rush was the other way," muttered Cranmer. "I do not have confidence in the volunteers. It is interesting that every second deserter is a volunteer."

"How can you…" Jarre almost choked. "How can you suggest something like that, sir… I volunteer from patriotic motives… For the motherland…"

One of the dwarves had fallen during the fistfight, the boy thought that he had shaken the foundations of the building, because the dust from the cracks in the floor planks rose as high as a raised arm. However, this time he stayed down, rather than jumping back up and pouncing on his opponent, he lay on the floor, feebly moving his limbs so he looked more like a giant beetle on his back.

Dennis Cranmer stood up.

"The issue is resolved," he announced in a thundering voice, looking around the taproom. "The post of company commander, vacant after the heroic death of Elkana Foster, killed in the field of honour during the battle of Mayenne, will be occupied by… What is your name, son, I have forgotten?"

"Blasco Grant!" The winner of the match spat a tooth on the floor.

"Blasco Grant is the new commander. Does anyone have any objection to his promotion? There are none? All right. Innkeeper! Beer!"

"What were we talking about?"

"Of a just war," Zoltan Chivay began to count on his fingers. "Of the volunteers. Of the deserters…"

"Oh, that!" Dennis interrupted him. "I knew I wanted to explain something concerning volunteers, deserters and traitors. I remember the late volunteer army for the Marshal of Cintra, Vissegerd. The motherfuckers, it turns out, have not even changed their banner. I know this from the Condottieri of the Free Company from Julia 'Pretty Kitty'. At Mayenne they encountered the Cintrans. Those sons of bitches were fighting alongside Nilfgaard under the banner of the

golden lion…”

“Called on by their motherland,” Skaggs said gloomily. “And the future Empress Cirilla.”

“Shh,” said Dennis.

“Right,” said the fourth dwarf Yarpen Zigrin who had been silent up until now. “Hush! And quieter than silence. But not because of fear of spies, but because you cannot talk about things you have no fucking idea about.”

“And you, Zigrin,” Skaggs puffed out his beard. “You know something about this?”

“Aye, I know. I tell you one thing – nobody, not even Emhyr var Emreis, nor those treacherous sorcerers from Thanedd, not even the devil himself could force that girl to do anything. They did not manage to break her. I know it. Because I know her. It’s a hoax this whole marriage to Emhyr. A deception that has led many fools astray… Also I’ll tell you, that girl’s destiny is quite different.”

“You talk,” muttered Skaggs, “as if you really know her, Zigrin.”

“Leave him!” Zoltan suddenly scolded. “Her fate is different. I think so to. I have my reasons for it.”

“Bah!” Sheldon Skaggs replied, shaking his hands. “Why spend saliva in vain. Cirilla, Emhyr, destiny… They are distant issues. Our concern is Menno Coehoorn the Field Marshal of the Centre Army Group.”

“Well,” sighed Zoltan Chivay. “It seems to me that we are not going to escape a battle. Perhaps the biggest in known history.”

“Much will be decided,” muttered Dennis Cranmer. “A lot will end.”

“Everything…” Jarre belched and covered his mouth with his hands, embarrassed. “Everything ends.”

The dwarves watched him for a moment, silent.

“I don’t think I fully understand you,” Zoltan finally said. “Could you explain what you mean?”

“At the royal council in Ellander I heard…” stammered Jarre. “There was talk about a great victory in this war; it was so important that… That this war put an end to all wars.”

Sheldon Skaggs snorted, spitting beer onto his beer. Zoltan Chivay roared with laughter.

“What do you think, gentlemen?”

Now it was Dennis Cranmer’s turn to burst out laughing. Yarpen Zigrin retained his seriousness. He studied the young man attentively and seemed concerned.

“Son,” he said very seriously. “Look. There, sitting at the counter is Evangelina Parr. She is admittedly, substantial. Indeed, even great. But despite her actions, no one whore can put an end to all whores.”

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When they left the inn, Dennis Cranmer took the young man aside.

“I have to praise you, Jarre,” he said. “Do you know why?”

“No.”

“Do not pretend. Before me, you do not. It is worthy of praise that you did not blink an eye when they mentioned Ciri. Do not look as if you don’t know what I mean. I know a few things that were happening at Nenneke’s temple. I also heard the name that you had entered in the heart medallion.”

The dwarf pretended not to notice the blush that suffused the boy’s face.

“Keep it up, Jarre. And not only about Ciri… What are you looking at?”

On the wall of a granary visible at the entrance to an alley stood a blurred painting, written in lime, which read – MAKE LOVE, NOT WAR.

Just below, with significantly smaller letters, someone had scrawled the following message – MAKE SHIT EVERY MORNING.

“Look the other way, stupid,” Dennis Cranmer barked. “Just seeing such inscriptions can get you in trouble. Do not say *no* out of place, or they tie you to a post and whip you bloody. Here the trials are very fast! Incredibly fast!”

“I saw,” Jarre whispered, “a shoemaker in the pillory. He allegedly sowed defetyzm.”

“The sowing,” the dwarf said seriously, pulling the boy’s sleeve, “probably consisted of the fact that the father was driving his son to the military, and he cried and shouted about patriotism. For the more serious sowing there is a different punishment. Come on, I’ll show you.”

They entered a small square. Jarre had to pull back and cover his nose and mouth with his sleeve. On a huge gallows hung several bodies. Some, from their appearance and smell, had been hanging there for some time.

“That one,” said Dennis, while swatting away flies, “wrote silly phrases on the walls. He said that war is a thing of lords and peasant recruits, and that Nilfgaard were not their enemies. That one was drunk and told the following anecdote – ‘What is a spear? The weapon nobles stick a poor man at each end.’ And there, at the end, you see the old woman? She was the mistress of a military brothel, and had decorated a sign with this – ‘Fuck today, warrior! Because tomorrow you may not be able to.’”

“And just for that…”

“One of the girls, it was revealed later, also had gonorrhoea. And that came within the paragraph of conspiracy and sabotage of combat capabilities.”

“I understand, Mister Cranmer,” Jarre took a stance that he considered military. “But do not worry about me; I am not a defeatist…”

“You do not understand shit and do not interrupt me, I have not finished. The last one that was hanged, who stinks already, their only crime was the during a talk with an undercover informer, responded saying – ‘You are correct my friend, it is not.’ Now you can tell me you understand.”

“I understand,” the boy looked around cautiously. “I’ll be careful. But… Mister Cranmer… What is really happening?”

The dwarf also glanced around carefully.

“The truth,” he replied in a whisper, “is that the strength of Field Marshal Menno Coehoorn’s Centre Army Group is a hundred thousand men. If there was no rebellion in Verden, he would be here. The truth is that neither of our combined armies have enough power to stop Coehoorn. At least not before the strategic line of the Pontar.”

“The river is north of us,” whispered Jarre.

“Well, you wanted to hear the truth. But remember to keep a lock on your mouth.”

“I’ll be careful. And once I enlist? I have to be careful around the soldiers? In case there is a spy among them?”

“In a combat regiment? Near the front line? On no! Spies are too busy far from the front, because they are afraid of ending up there themselves. Also, if every soldier who protested, complained or cursed was hanged, there would be no one to fight this war. But your mouth, Jarre, as in the case of Ciri, keep it closed. Now come with me, I will escort you to the Commission office.”

“Mister Cranmer,” Jarre looked with hope at the dwarf. “Will you speak for me there?”

“You foolish, dandy! This is the Army! If I recommend you and protect you, it is like having ‘milksop’ embroidered on your back in gold thread. No one will leave you alone in your unit, lad.”

“What about you…” Jarre asked. “Does your unit…”

“Do not even think about it.”

“Because there is only room for dwarves, it that it?” Said the boy bitterly. “Not for me?”

“Right.”

Not for you, thought Dennis Cranmer. *Not for you, Jarre. I’m too obliged to*

Mother Nenneke. Therefore I would like you to return from the war. The Mahakam Volunteer Army is composed of dwarves, volunteers from inferior races and foreigners, they will always be sent into the worst places, the most dangerous sections of the battle. There is no return. To the places when humans would not be sent.

"So what can be arranged," Jarre frowned, "to get into a good unit?"

"And that, according to you is special, for you to seek?"

Jarre turned, hearing singing, coming on like a wave in the surf, rising as rapidly as an approaching thunder storm. The singing was loud and strong and hard as steel. He had heard such singing before.

From the street leading away from the castle, in three columns, marched the Condottieri regiment. At their head with the standard covered with horses and skulls, was a man with an aquiline nose and hair in a braid that fell onto his armour.

"Adam 'Adieu' Pangratt," murmured Dennis Cranmer.

The condottieri's singing thundered down the street.

In counterpoint was the ringing of horseshoes on pavement, which filled the street and soared up to the tops of the houses and far up into the blue sky over the city.

For we do not mourn for lovers or wives
When we the earth redden with blood
For the coin, like the sun fills us with light
For this we fight!

"Which unit?" Jarre said, unable to look away from the cavalry. "Hopefully one like this! In one that would be worthwhile…"

"Each one has its own anthem," the dwarf broke the silence. "But every soldier must pour out his own blood. Either someone will cry for him or not. In war, son, those who sing and march are equal, the formations are equal. And then, in battle, everyone must face their own destiny. Whether in the Free Company with 'Adieu' Pangratt or in the infantry or in the camps… In shiny armour with a proud plume or in a lousy fur coat. With a lush stallion or with a battered shield… each must face his destiny. Well, here we are at the Commission office, can you see the sign above the entrance? Make your way over there if you are still thinking of being a soldier. Good luck, Jarre. I'll see you when this is over."

The dwarf's eyes followed the boy until he disappeared through the door to the inn occupied by the recruitment box.

“Or maybe I will not see you,” he added quietly. “Who knows what is written. What is chosen.”

***

“Can you ride? Shoot a bow or crossbow?”

“No, Commissioner. But I can control font and calligraphy. I know ancient runes… I know Elder Tongue…”

“Are you skilled with the sword? Using a spear?”

“I’ve read the history of wars. Writings by Marshal Pelligram. And Roderick de Novembre…”

“Can you at least cook?”

“Not well… But I can count…”

The recruiter rolled his eyes and waved his hand.

“More intellects. How many more will we get? Write him some papers for the PFI. You will serve in the PFI, young man. Take the papers to the south end of town, to the Maribor gate, next to the lake.”

“But…”

“You should have no problems with it. Next!”

***

“Hey, Jarre! Wait!”

“Melfi?”

“It sure is,” said the journeyman cooper, staggering and leaning against a wall. “Brrr, I’m sick…”

“What is it?”

“What do I know? Heh, heh! Nothing! We celebrated a bit. We drank to the defeat of the Nilfgaardians. Oh, Jarre, I’m glad to see you. I thought we had lost you somewhere… My friend…”

Jarre stepped back like someone had slapped him. The cooper not only reeked of dirty beer and brandy, but also onions, garlic and the devil knew what else. It was unbearable.

“Where did they go,” he asked mockingly, “your great comrades?”

“Let the devil take them,” Melfi grinned. “You know why I came, Jarre? Because that Pike was not a good person.”

“Bravo. Good for you.”

“So you see,” Melfi continued, not noticing Jarre’s taunt. “I was not easy to fool. Do you know why he came to Vizima? Do you think he wanted to join the army? You’d be wrong! You would not believe what he is up to.”

“I’d believe it.”

“He needed horses and uniforms,” Melfi concluded triumphantly. “He wanted to steal them here, because he had an idea of going on bandit raids dressed as a soldier.”

“He’ll end up on the gallows.”

“I should say so,” said the Cooper, leaning against the wall, unbuttoning his pants. “I’m sorry for Ograbek and Milton, the stupid straw heads let themselves be deceived by Pike and they’ll end up on the gallows as well. Do you know about yours, Jarre?”

“Huh?”

“Where are you assigned?” Melfi asked while urinating on the whitewashed wall. “I’ve been sent to the Maribor gate. On the south side of town. Where are you going to?”

“Also, there.”

“Ha!” The Cooper jumped a few times then buttoned his pants. “We will fight together?”

“I think not,” Jarre said with an air of superiority. “I have been assigned to the unit according to my qualifications. The FPI.”

“Of course,” Melfi hiccupped and burped his hideous drunken breath again. “You’re a scholar! You would certainly have an important position. But what can you do? Meanwhile we can continue to walk for a time together. After all, we have to go the same way to the south side of the city.”

“It seems so.”

“Shall we?”

“Let’s go.”

***

“I don’t think this is it,” said Jarre, looking at the tents surrounding a courtyard, where the dust stirred around the feet of a company practising manoeuvres with long sticks on their shoulders. Each person, the young man realised, had a bundle of hay bound to their right leg and a bundle of straw on their left.

“I think we took a wrong turn, Melfi.”

“Straw! Hay!” They could hear the roars from the courtyard from a sergeant who was addressing the ragged mob. “Straw! Hay! Pick up the pace, or I’ll whore your mother!”

“There is a flag over the tent,” Melfi said. “See for yourself, Jarre. These are the same lilies you told us about on the road. There is a flag? Yes. There is a camp? Yes. This indicates we are in the right place.”

“Maybe for you. But certainly not for me.”

“Look, there is someone over by the fence. Let’s go ask them.”

Then everything started to happen quickly.

“New recruits?” Yelled the sergeant. “Give me your papers! Why the hell are you standing there next to each other! March! Left I said, not right! Trot, trot! Halt, fuck and about-face! Listen and remember! Go to the Master of Supplies! Collect your weapons! Chain shirt, tabard, pike, helmet and dagger! Then back here for drills! Be ready at sunset! Break ranks! Go!”

“Wait,” Jarre said looking insecure, “Because I think I have another assignment…”

“WHAT?”

“Excuse me, Officer,” Jarre blushed. “I just want to prevent any mistake… The Commissioner clearly… Explicitly talked about an allocation to the PFI, so I…”

“You’re home, boy.” Snorted the sergeant, disarmed a bit by being called ‘officer’. “This is your assignment. Welcome to the Poor Fucking Infantry.”

***

“Why,” wondered Rocco Hildebrandt, “do we still have to pay you, gentlemen soldiers? We have already paid all the taxes on time.”

“Do you hear this shrimp,” Pike said grinning to his cronies on stolen horses. “He said he already paid. And they think that that was everything. It’s like the turkey who was pondering Sunday. But had his head cut off on Saturday!”

Okultich, Klaproth, Milton and Ograbek broke out in laughter. The joke was after all a front. And the fun was about to start.

Rocco saw the disgusting, sticky eyes of the ravagers and looked around. On the threshold of the cottage was Incarvilia Hildebrandt, his wife and his two daughters, Aloe and Yasmin.

Pike and his company looked at the halfling women, smiling lasciviously. Yes, without a doubt, this promised to be great fun.

From out of a hedge on the other side of the road approached Hildebrandt’s niece, Impatientia Vanderbeck, affectionately known as Impi. She was a truly beautiful girl. The bandit’s smiles became even more disgusting.

“Come,” Pike urged the halfling. “Bring out food for us and the horses and take it to the barn. We do not want to be stuck here after dark. We want to visit the neighbouring villages today.”

“Why do we have to pay and give you what is ours?” Rocco Hildebrandt’s voice trembled slightly, but still remained stubborn and tenacious. “You say it is

for the army, for our defence. And who will protect us from hunger? We have already paid for the winter quarters and the contribution to the army, and the tax for each person and assessment for our lands, and rates and a tax on wagons and signposts and the devil knows what else! And as if this was not enough, four from our settlement, among them my own son, have been enlisted into the army. A relative of mine, Milo Vanderbeck, known as Rusty, is a field surgeon in the army and an important person. We have fulfilled their obligations. What are we to pay again? And why?"

Pike continually watched the wife of the halfling, Incarvilia Hildebrandt of Biberveldt. And the plump daughters, Aloe and Yasmin. Also the cute Impi Vanderbeck, who looked like a doll in a green dress. At Sam Hofmeier and his grandfather, and old man Holofernes. The grandmother Petunia, pecking viciously at her garden bed with a hoe. At the other halflings in the village, mainly women and youths, looking anxiously from behind houses and fences.

"You ask why?" Pike hissed, leading forward in his saddle, looking into the eyes of the frightened halfling. "I'll tell you why. Because you are mangy halfling, a runt, a stranger. You are inhuman and it is the will of the gods that you are beaten and killed. Because I cannot wait to see this rat hole burn and see you and your bitch scurry about. Because we are five humans and you are a handful of cowards. Now do you know why?"

"Now I know," Rocco Hildebrandt said slowly. "Get away from here, big people. Go far away. We will not give you anything."

Pike sat up and reached for the sword hanging on his saddle.

"Strike!" He shouted. "Kill them."

With a movement, faster than the eye could follow, Rocco Hildebrandt bent down to his wheelbarrow, took out a crossbow hidden under some mats and shot his attacker with a bolt right into his open mouth. Incarvilia Hildebrandt, born a Biberveldt, whipped her hands through the air and threw a sickle which neatly cut through Milton's larynx. The country boy, a son of a servant, began to vomit blood and flipped over the back of his horse, legs waving.

Ograbek, emitting a scream, and fell face down under the hooves of his horse, in his belly up to the wooden handle was stuck grandfather Holofernes knife. The burly Klaproth started to club the old man, but flew out of his saddle, squealing terribly, hit straight in the eye with a skewer flung by Impatientia Vanderbeck. Okultich wheeled his horse and tried to flee, but grandmother Petunia jumped up and sliced her hoe into his thigh. Okultich roared and fell, his foot still stuck in the stirrup, his frightened horse dragged him through hedges

and over sharp sticks. The dragged robber roared and howled and after him raced grandmother Petunia with her hoe and Impatientia with a crooked knife for grafting trees. Old man Holofernes blew his nose loudly through his fingers.

The whole episode – from Pike screaming to grandfather Holofernes blowing his nose – took about as long as it would take to say – “Halflings are extremely fast and agile and can flawless hurl missiles of all kinds.”

Rocco sat on the steps of the cottage. Beside him sat his wife Incarvilia. Their daughters went to help Sam Hofmeier strip the slain and wounded.

Impatientia came back with her green dress pulled back to the elbows. Grandmother Petunia also came back, she walked slowly, panting and groaning and leaning on her hoe.

Oh, our grandmother is getting older and aging, Rocco thought.

“Where should we bury the robbers, Mister Rocco?” Asked Sam Hofmeier.

Rocco Hildebrandt took his wife in his arms and looked at the sky.

“In the birch grove,” he said, “along with the ones who have come before them.”

The sensational adventures of Mister Malcolm Guthrie of Braemore have achieved great notoriety in the pages of the largest newspapers, even the London 'Daily Mail' has dedicate a few lines in the 'Bizarre' section. Since we know that only a small number of our subscribers read press releases issued south of Tweed, we will recall the said event. On March 10th this year Mister Malcolm Guthrie went with a fishing rod to Loch Glascarnoch.

There Mister Guthrie saw out of the mist and nothingness (sic) from the lake appeared a girl with a scar on her face (sic), riding a black mare (sic), accompanied by a white unicorn (sic).

The girl approached the stunned Mister Guthrie and spoke to him in a language that Mister Guthrie described as, and I quote "French, I think, or a dialect of another continent."

However, as Mister Guthrie does not speak French or any other dialect from anther continent, he could not talk to the girl. The girl and the unicorn disappeared, to quote Mister Guthrie again "Like a golden dream."

Editor Review: The dream of Mister Guthrie was a golden colour like the colour of single malt whiskey, which we learned from a reliable source that he used to drink regularly and which fully explains the visions of white unicorns, white mice and monsters from Scottish lakes. But the main question we want to ask Mister Guthrie is - What were you doing with a fishing rod on the shores of Lock Glascarnoch four days after the ban on fishing?

Inverness Weekly, March 18, 1906

CHAPTER SEVEN

The wind picked up, clouds rushed from the west and gradually enveloped the constellations. The Dragon vanished, the Lady Winter and then the Seven Goats. Finally the Eye disappeared, the constellation that shone the brightest.

The dome of the sky gleamed along the horizon briefly with lightning. It was joined by a dull thunder clap. The storm grew more violent, throwing dust and dry leaves into her eyes.

The unicorn whinnied and sent another mental signal.

We must not waste time. Our only hope is a quick getaway. At the right place and the right time. Hurry Star Eyes.

I am the Lady of the Worlds. I am of the Elder Blood. I am from the blood of Lara Dorren, the daughter of Shiadhal.

Ihuarraquax whinnied again, urging her to hurry. Kelpie whinnied as well. Ciri pulled on a pair of gloves.

"I'm ready," she said.

A buzz sounded in her ears. A glow. And then darkness.

***

The curses of the Fisher King, while he pulled and twisted on a rope on his boat trying to free it from the tangled web at the bottom of the lake, broke the silence of the afternoon. The oars, which were loose, rattled softly. Nimue coughed impatiently and Condwiramurs turned, leaving the window and leaned back over the prints. There was one print that drew the eye more than the other. A girl with ruffled hair, sitting on a prancing horse. Next to her was a white unicorn.

"Perhaps for this part of the legend," mused the adept, "the historians had no objection and just recognised it as a fictional story or a metaphor. But the artists and painters, took a liking to this episode. Look, here is a picture with Ciri with a unicorn. Here is Ciri with a unicorn on a cliff above the sea, here on a narcotic induced landscape, and here under two moons."

Nimue was silent.

"In short," Condwiramurs threw the prints onto the table, "Ciri and the

unicorn from all sides. Ciri and the unicorn in the labyrinth of worlds, Ciri and the unicorn in the abyss of time…”

“Ciri and the unicorn,” interrupted Nimue, looking out the window at the lake, to the boat with the Fisher King. “Ciri and the unicorn appearing out of nothingness like ghosts and hanging over a lake, a lake that unites time and places like a bridge, all the time different and yet always the same?”

“How?”

“Phantoms,” Nimue said not looking at her. “Visitors from other dimensions, other levels, other places, other times. Visions that transform one’s life. Transforms your life and your destiny… Without knowing. For them it is… just another place. The wrong place, wrong time. Who knows how many times…”

“Nimue,” Condwiramurs interrupted her with a forced laugh. “You recall that I’m the dreamer here. And you all of a sudden begin to divine. You were talking, like you saw it… in a dream.”

The Fisher King, judging from the intensity of his voice and curses, failed to untangle the rope, and it broke. Nimue was silent, looking at the pictures. Ciri and the Unicorn.

“It is true,” she said at last, “I have seen this in my dreams. I have seen it in my dreams many times. And once while awake.”

***

The journey from Czluchow to Malbork may under some circumstances take up to five days. And because Grand Master Winrich von Kniprode’s letter had to reach the addressee no later than the day of Pentecost, Heinrich von Schwelborn the knight was not slow and left the day after the Sunday of *Exaudi Domine*, to be able to travel safely and without any risk of delay. Slowly but steadily. The knight’s approach was greatly enjoyed by his company, six crossbowmen, commanded by Hasso Planck, the son of a baker from Cologne. The crossbowmen and Planck were more accustomed to these knights cursing, shouting and ordering them to ride their horses to death to arrive on time and then casting all the blame on their poor servants for any delays.

It was cold, although it was cloudy. From time to time it drizzled, and fog rippled through the ravines. The hills covered in dense vegetation reminded the knight Heinrich of his native Thuringia. The crossbowmen sang at the rear the ballad of Walther von Vogelwiede, and Hasso Planck dozed in the saddle.

If you love a good woman
It is the cure to all iniquity…

The travel proceeded peacefully and who knows, maybe the end would have

been peaceful if not for the fact that around noon the knight Hienrich saw at the bottom of the road, a shimmering lake. And since the next day was Friday and custom decreed that they fast from red meat, the knight ordered them to enter the water and look for fish.

The lake was large, it even had an island. No one knew what its name was, but it was surely called Sacred. In this pagan country every second lake was called Sacred.

The hooves of the horses crushed shells on the shore. The fog hung over the lake and the wilderness. There were no signs of boats or nets, not a soul. We will have to look elsewhere, Heinrich von Schwelborn thought. And if not, then so be it. We will eat what we have in our saddlebags, even the jerky, and we'll confess to chaplain Malbork, who can grant us absolution for our sins.

He was about to give the order when in his head, under his helmet, started a buzz. Hasso Planck released a sharp cry. Von Schwelborn looked in the same direction and crossed himself.

He saw two horses – one white and the other black. In the next moment he noticed that the white horses head was domed with a twisted horn that rose from its forehead. He also realised that the black horse, actually a sable mare, had a girl sitting on it with ashen hair which covered part of her face. The visions seemed not to touch either the land or the water, and he had the feeling that they were part of the mist that twisted above the surface of the lake.

The black horse whinnied.

"Ooops," the girl with the ashen hair said quite clearly. "*Ire lokke, ire tedd! Squaess'me.*"

"Saint Ursula, Patroness…" Hasso stammered, pale as death. The crossbowmen froze with open mouths, and made the sign of the cross in front of them.

Von Schwelborn also crossed himself, and with a trembling hand drew his sword from its scabbard strapped to his saddle.

"Holy Mary, Mother of God!" He cried. "Stand with me!"

Knight Heinrich did not bring shame to his ancestors that day, including Dietrich von Schwelborn, who valiantly fought against Damietta and was one of the few to not run away when the Saracens conjured and released a horse of black demons. Kicking his heels into his horse and remembering his ancestors, Heinrich von Schwelborn charged the apparition.

"By the Order and Saint George!"

The white unicorn reared back and the black mare danced. The girl, you

could see at a glance was frightened as knight Heinrich rushed to the attack. God knows how it would have ended, all of a sudden a gust of wind brought a scrap of mist from the lake, and the vision vanished in a rainbow of colours like crushed stones or broken stained glass. The phantoms disappeared – the unicorn, the mare and the strange girl…

The sorrel on which Heinrich von Schwelborn was mounted entered the lake with a splash, stopped and shook its head and snorted, chewing at the bit.

Hasso Planck mastered his reluctant horse and headed for the knight. Von Schwelborn was breathing and wheezing, his eyes bulging like a fishes.

“The bones of Saint Ursula, Saint Korduli and all the eleven thousand virgin martyrs…” Hasso Planck managed. “What was it? Knight Heinrich? A miracle? A revelation?”

“The devil’s work!” Von Schwelborn gasped, now only pale and trembling. “Black magic! Witchcraft! A damned thing, pagan and demonic.”

“We’d better get out of here, Sir. The sooner… We are not far from Pelpin, let the church bells guide us…”

In the same forest, on a hill, the knight Heinrich looked down one last time. The wind drove the fog back in places and the wrinkled surface of the lake became visible.

Over the water circled a great eagle.

“Wicked, pagan country,” Heinrich von Schwelborn muttered. “Lot and lots of hard work awaits us; the law of the Teutonic Knights will finally drive the devil from here.”

***

“Horsey,” Ciri said reproachfully, and ironically at the same time. “I would not want to rush you, but I’m in a bit of a hurry to get to my world. My loved ones need me, you know. Instead we almost fall into a lake and see a man in funny clothes, then we see a band of dirty screamers with clubs and finally a madman with a cross! These are not my world or my time! Please try to get better. Please.”

Ihuarraquax whinnied and nodded his horn and sent Ciri a mental idea. Ciri misunderstood. She had no time to think since the inside of her skull was again flooded by a cold clarity, her ears buzzed and her body tingled.

And again the darkness engulfed her.

***

Nimue, laughing with delight, pulled the man’s hand, they both ran to the lake, dodging among the birches and alders. On the sandy shore, Nimue kicked

off her sandals, lifted her dress and ran barefoot into the water. The man pulled off his shoes, but did not go into the water. He took off his cloak and carefully spread it on the ground.

Nimue ran to him and hugged him around the neck. She stood on tiptoe, and even so the man had to bend deeply to kiss her. They did not call her Thumbelina for nothing, but now since she was eighteen and was accomplished in the magical arts, she only permitted her closes friends to call her that. And some men.

The man, not taking his lips from Nimue's, slid his hand behind her neck.

Then it went quickly. They were both on the sand on his cloak. Nimue's skirt was hiked up over her waist, her legs wrapped around the man's hips and her nails dug into his shoulders and back. When he took her, as usual, he was too impatient, she gritted her teeth, but quickly caught up in the excitement of it. The man emitted ridiculous sounds. Over his shoulder Nimue watched slowly flying clouds of fantastic shapes.

Something dimly rang like a bell under water. Nimue heard a murmur in her ears. Magic, she thought, and turned her head away from the face of the man. Standing by the shore – hanging above the surface, was a white unicorn. At his side was a black mare. In the saddle on the horse sat a girl…

But I know this legend, the thought flashed through Nimue's head. *I know this story! When I was a child I heard this tale, from the old wandering storyteller… The Witcheress Ciri… The scar on her cheek… The black mare, Kelpie… The unicorn… The Land of the Elves…*

The movement of the man, who was oblivious to the events going on, became more violent, and he issued funnier sounds.

"Ooops," said the girl sitting on the black mare. "Another mistake! Not here, not at this time. To make matters worse, I think we arrived at the completely wrong time. Sorry."

The image faded and burst, exploding like painted glass, into a riot of rainbow luminescence, radiance and brightness, then everything disappeared.

"No!" Nimue cried. "No! Don't disappear! Don't run!"

She straightened her knees and tried to break free of the man, but could not – he was more powerful than her and heavier. The man groaned and grunted.

"Ooooh, Nime… Oooh!"

Nimue screamed and sunk her teeth into his shoulder.

They lay side by side on the crumpled cloak, sweaty and anxious. Nimue looked back at the lakeshore. The waves gave off an off-white foam. The reeds

bent in the wind. The colourless, bleak emptiness that remained after the lost legend.

Tears flowed down Nimue's face.

"Nimue… Is something wrong?"

"Yes, there was…" She clung to him, but still looked at the lake. "Don't talk. Hold me and say nothing."

The man smiled.

"I know what happened," he said boastfully. "The earth moved, right?"

Nimue smiled sadly.

"Not only the earth," she said after a moment. "Not only the earth."

***

A flash. Darkness. The next place.

***

The place was gloomy, sinister and repulsive.

Ciri involuntarily hunched in her saddle. She was shaken, both physically and mentally. Kelpie's horseshoes rang on something flat and smooth, durable and as hard as rock. After a long time gliding in oblivion where everything was soft, the mare whinnied and began to pull violently to one side; smashing her hooves into the hard rock with such a staccato that Ciri's teeth rang.

The second shook was from a smell. Ciri gasped ad covered her mouth and nose with her sleeve. She could feel her eyes immediately fill with tears.

Around her floated an acid, corrosive, dense stench, it was choking and disgusting and she could not remember ever smelling anything like it. What it was – was the stench of decay, cadaverous, the final stench in the chain of degradation and degeneration, the smell of ruin and destruction, and she felt that whatever was rotting had smelt no better when it had been alive. Even at its heyday.

She bent over with her gag reflex, which she could no longer suppress. Kelpie snorted and tossed her head. The unicorn, who appeared beside them, sat on his haunches, jumped and kicked. The impact with the hard surface was answered with a loud echo.

Around them, the night was dark and wrapped them in a choking haze. Ciri looked up to get their bearings by the stars, but above her head was nothing but a black vault, just above the horizon was illuminated by the red glare of distant fires.

"Ooops," she said, when she grinned she felt a sticky, acidic moisture on her lips "Brrrr. Wrong place, wrong time. In the literal sense!"

The unicorn snorted and shook his head, his horn moved in a short arc.

The floor grating under Kelpie's hooves was rock, but strange and unnatural even, which gave off an intense smell of burning ash and dirt. It took a while before Ciri realised the maybe it was a road. She was getting the most agonizing shock with each step, therefore she turned Kelpie towards the verge lined with something that was perhaps once trees, but now only looked like mutilated skeletons, from which hung tattered shreds which reminded her of the remnants of rotten shrouds.

The unicorn warned her with a whinny and a mental signal. But it was too late.

The dead trees began to slope down and ended at a deep escarpment. Ciri screamed and kicked her heels into the mare's sides. Kelpie's strained muscles were bunching up and her hooves were crushing what was covering – or basically consisted of the slope – garbage, mostly some weird empty containers. These containers did not crumple under the horseshoes, but broke as if disgustingly soft, like big fish bladders. Each of them gurgled softly and emitted a smell that nearly knocked Ciri out of the saddle. Kelpie, neighing furiously, stomped up the dump towards the road. Ciri, choking from the stench, clung to the mare's neck.

The made it. The hardness of the unpleasant road was greeted with an odd mixture of joy and relief.

Ciri was still shaking as she looked down the hill. The escarpment ended at a black lake at the bottom. Its surface was glossy and motionless, as if there was no water, but was filled with pitch. Behind the lake, past mounds of ash and slag heaps the sky glowed with distant fires.

Above the horizon ruddy columns of smoke were rising.

The unicorn snorted. Ciri wanted to rub her watery eyes on her sleeve, but found that the entire sleeve was covered with dust. A layer of dust also covered her thighs, saddle and Kelpie's neck and mane. The smell was unbearable.

"How disgusting," she muttered. "Revolting… Let's leave. Let's leave quickly, Horsey."

The unicorn pricked up his ears.

Only you can make that happen. Do it.

"Me? Alone? Without your help?"

The unicorn nodded his horn. Ciri scratched her head, sighed and closed her eyes. She concentrated.

First, she felt only suspicion, uncertainty and fear. But soon her mind was

awash in a cold light – the light of knowledge and power. She had no idea where this source of knowledge and the wellspring of power had come from, but she knew she could. She could if she wanted to.

Once again she looked at the motionless dead lake, the steaming heap of waste and the skeleton of trees. In the distance the sky was illuminated by the glow of fires.

“Fine,” she said. “This is not my world.”

The unicorn whinnied eloquently. She understood what he wanted to say.

“And if it’s is mine,” she wiped her eyes and nose with a handkerchief, “then I hope that it is infinitely far away in time. Either it’s the distant past, or…”

She stopped.

“The past,” she said dully after a moment. “I believe this is the past.”

***

The heavy rain which greeted them at their next jump was a welcome blessing. The downpour smelled of mud, grass and summer and quickly washed away the dirt and dust from the dead world.

After sometime, however, the long cleansing became unbearable. Water spilled down Ciri’s collar, it soaked her to the skin and started to make her uncomfortably cold. Therefore she quickly jumped from the wet place.

Because it was also not the right place or time.

***

The next place was very warm, an intense heat prevailed there, so Ciri, Kelpie and the unicorn dried very quickly and the water vanished off of them like vapour from a teapot.

They were in a heath ravaged by the sun on the edge of a forest. The could immediately see it was a great forest, a dense forest, wild and incredibly thick.

In the throbbing heat, Ciri hoped this might be the forest of Brokilon and finally a known location.

They rode slowly around the edge of the forest. Ciri looked for anything that could determine where they were. The unicorn snorted, lifted his horned lead and looked around, sniffing. He was restless.

“Do you think, Horsey,” she said, “that they can chase us?”

His snort was clear and unambiguous, even without the telepathy.

“Have we not managed to escape far enough yet?”

The thought that he sent her she didn’t understand. *Not far away and not close? What does that mean? The Spiral? What spiral?*

She did not understand what he meant. But she understood his anxiety.

The hot heath was not the right place and not the right time.

They realised that night, when the heat had yielded and in the sky over the forest appeared not one moon, but two. One large and one small.

***

The next place was at the edge of a sea, on a very steep cliff from which doves were spread out on strangely shaped rocks. The wind smelled of the ocean, shrieking terns, gulls and petrels and white layer covered the rocky terraces. The sea reached to the horizon, framed by dark clouds.

Down on a stony beach, Ciri could suddenly distinguish the skeleton of a giant monstrous fish head partly buried in the gravel. The teeth that protruded from the white jaw were over three feet in length and the jaw itself gave the sense that one could go riding through the portal of the ribs without ever touching the head or spine.

Ciri was not sure if this was her world or her time as there were fish like that there as well.

They walked along the edge of the cliff. Seagulls and albatrosses did not seem frightened at all, they did not move out of the way, they even pecked and slashed their beaks at Kelpie and Ihuarraquax. Ciri knew that these birds had never seen a horse or unicorn. Or humans either.

Ihuarraquax snorted, shook his head and horn and was visibly uneasy.

He turned out to be correct. Something snapped, like the sound of torn fabric. The gulls rose with a shriek and a flutter, covering everything instantly in a cloud of white feathers. The air over the cliff suddenly trembled and became cloudy and broke like glass.

From the crack and darkness emerged riders. Behind them blew coats, whose colour resembled the reflection in the sky from the setting sun.

Dearg Ruadhri. The Red Riders.

Even before the screaming birds and the warning neigh, Ciri, Kelpie and the unicorn turned to flee. But the air had already cracked on the other side of them and from the crack spilled riders. The pursuers formed a semicircle around them and closed, pushing Ciri closer to the abyss. She screamed and pulled her sword from its sheath.

The unicorn sent her a strong signal that pierced her brain like a needle. Ciri understood immediately. He showed her the way. There was a hole in the skirmish line. The unicorn whinnied menacingly and threw himself against the elves.

“Horsey!”

Save yourself, Star Eyes! Do not allow yourself to be caught.

She clung to Kelpie's mane.

Two elves cut across her path. They held long poles with rope loops at the end. They tried to throw them around Kelpie's neck. The first loop, the mare gracefully ducked her head under, without slowing in the least. The second loop was severed by a swing from Ciri's sword. The mare swept between the elves like a storm.

But other pursuers were already on her heels, Ciri hear their cries and the clatter of hooves. *What happened to Horsey? What did he do?*

She had no time for reflection. The unicorn was right, she could not allow herself to be caught. She had to escape into space, hide and lose them in the maze of places and times.

When she tried to concentrate, she felt panic, because in her head she suddenly found a strange emptiness and rapidly growing confusion.

They are casting a spell on me, she thought. *They want to deceive me with spells. But even spells have a limited range. I cannot let them get to me.*

"Run, Kelpie!"

The black mare stretched her neck and flew like the wind. Ciri stuck to her neck to provide the minimum of wind resistance.

The shouts behind them, which only a moment before had been loud and dangerously close, faded and were drowned out by the cries of frightened birds. Then complete silence.

Kelpie ran like a storm. The sea wind howled through their ears.

In the distant cries of their pursuers came a note of anger. They had realised that they were not going to catch her. They were never going to reach the black mare galloping without any signs of tiredness, light, soft and elastic like a cheetah.

Ciri did not look back. She knew that her pursuers would still be following. They would follow until their own horses began to snort, wheeze and stumble almost to the ground, with their mouths open and full of foam. Only then would they stop following her and shout curses and impotent threats.

Kelpie ran like the wind.

***

The place to where she escaped was dry and windy. The prickly wind quickly dried the tears on her face. She was alone. Alone again. A tramp, and eternal pilgrim, a swimmer wandering the endless oceans between the islands, of places and time.

A swimmer losing hope.

The wind whistled and moaned and rushed over the cracked earth and clumps of weeks.

The wind dried her tears.

***

Inside her head a cool brightness murmured in her ears, the constant murmur of the heart of a sea shell. There was a burning sensation in her throat. Black soft nothingness.

A new place and time, another place and time. The islands of places and times.

***

“Tonight,” Nimue said, wrapping herself in fur, “will be a good night. I can feel it.”

Condwiramurs said nothing, although she had heard similar assurances several times. It was not the first night that they had sat on the balcony: in front of them the shining lake and the setting sun, behind them the magic mirror and the magical tapestry.

From the lake echoed the curses from the fisher King, who did not hesitate in voicing his distaste for fishing failures. According to his repertoire, it was possible to conclude that today he had been extremely successful.

“Time,” said Nimue, “has no beginning and no end. It is like the serpent Ouroboros, which holds in its teeth its own tail. Every moment hides eternity and eternity is made up of moments. Eternity is an archipelago of moments, which can float, but navigation is extremely difficult and deviation from the course is dangerous. It is good to have a beacon that can light the way in the darkness, to hear a cry through the fog…”

She paused for a moment.

“How do we end this interesting legend? It seems to us, you and me, we know how it ends. But Ouroboros still keeps his teeth in his own tail and how the legend ends will be decided in this moment. It just depends on whether the wandering swimmer sees or hears the beacon through the fog.”

From the lake they could hear more swearing, splashing water and the creaking of oars.

“Tonight will be a good night. The last before the summer solstice. The moon wanes, the sun enters the fourth house, enters the sign of Capricorn. The best time to dream. Concentrate, Condwiramurs.”

Like so many times before, Condwiramurs obediently focused until falling

into a trancelike state.

“Find her,” said Nimue. “She is somewhere between the stars, somewhere in the moonlight, between the islands of places and times. She is alone. She needs help. Help her Condwiramurs.”

***

Concentration, fist on her temples. In her ears the sound like from inside a conch shell. A flash. And suddenly soft, black nothingness.

***

She was in a place where Ciri could see flaming piles. The women who were in them were chained to stakes, begging for mercy, but the crowd laughed, cheered and danced. She was in a place where a great city was burning, the flames leapt from collapsing roofs and black smoke covered the sky. She was in a place where giant lizards fought and the wounds from their terrible teeth and claws flowed with blood. She was in a place where hundreds of identical white windmills intersected the air with slender blades. She was in a place where the stones rustled and rattled with the sounds of scales and the hissing of thousands of snakes.

She was in place where they was only darkness and in the darkness, voices whispered in fear.

She was in a lot of other places. But none of them were right.

***

She transported from place to place and it was going so well she decided to start a little experiment. One of the few places where she was not afraid was the heated heath on the edge of the forest. She summoned a memory of the sight of the two moons and repeated this in her mind that this is what she wanted. Ciri concentrated, strained and plunged into nothingness.

She succeed on the second try.

The success gave her confidence and encouraged her to an even more daring attempt. It was clear that part from visiting different places, she could also visit different times, Vysogota and the elves and mentioned it and so had the unicorns.

She did it, albeit unknowingly, earlier. When she had been wounded in the face she escaped her enemies by jumping to another time. She transported herself four days ahead, and when Vysogota calculated the days, it didn’t fit…

So maybe it was her chance? To jump through time?

She decided to try it. The burning city for example, would not burn eternally. What if she got there before the fire? Or after?

She jumped right into the centre of the fire. Arousing panic among the

refugees who ran from their houses, scorching her lashes and eyebrows.

She escaped to the friendly heath. It is not worth risking it this way, she thought, the devil knows what could happen. I'll stick to the proven method of jumps between different places, but I'll try to get to places that I can remember. One where I was safe.

She started with the temple of Melitele, imagining the gate, the building, the parks and workshops, the dormitories of the adepts, the room in which she lived with Yennefer.

She focused on the temple recalled the faces of Nenneke, Eurneid, Katye and Iola the Second.

It did not work. She jumped into a swamp full of mosquitoes where the whistle of turtles resounded and frogs croaked.

After she tried – without success – Kaer Morhen, the Skellige islands and the bank in Gors Velen where Fabio Sachs worked. She did not dare try and enter Cintra, she knew the city was occupied by the Nilfgaardians. Instead she attempted Vizima, the city where she and Yennefer went shopping once.

***

Aarhenius Krantz, a sage, alchemist, astronomer and astrologer, squirmed on his hard stood with his eye pressed against the eyepiece of a telescope. The first magnitude comet, which would only be in the sky for a week, was necessary to study and describe. The learned astrologer knew that such a comet with a fiery red tail predicted great misfortune, war and bloodshed. In truth, this time the comet was a little late, because the war with Nilfgaard had already stretched for a long time and bloodshed could be reliably predicted without celestial phenomena. But Aarehnius Krantz was thoroughly familiar with the movement of the comet and so he was going to calculate how many years or centuries until the comet returned, heralding a new war, to which, who know, they will be better prepared than the current one.

The astronomer rose, rubbed his backside and went to relieve his bladder, over the side of the terrace. He always pissed from the terrace directly into the bed of peonies, regardless of the owner's reprimands. The toilet was just too far away, the time wasted in the long march there would make him risk losing valuable observations, and no scientist could afford that.

He stood at the railing, undid his pants and looked at the reflection of Vizima's lights in the lake. He sighed in relief and raised his eyes to the stars.

The stars, he thought, and constellations. *Lady Winter, The Seven goats, the Pitcher.*

According to some theories they are not just blinking light, but worlds. Other worlds. Worlds, which are separated from us by time and space… I firmly believe, that it will be possible to travel to these other places, to those other times and cosmos. Yes, certainly it will be possible one day. There is a way. But this will require whole new ideas, new and refreshing ideas that will burst the dogma of today…

Ah, he thought, *if only it were possible… Attaining enlightenment, finding clues! If I found one unique occasion…*

Below, next to the terrace, something shone, the dark night burst like a star and with a pop there appeared a horse, with a rider on its back. The rider was a girl.

"Good evening," she greeted politely. "I apologise if it is late. Could you tell me what this place is? And the date?"

Aarhenius Krantz gulped gasped and spluttered.

"The place?" The girl repeated patiently. "The date."

"Aha… This… Ahh…"

The horse snorted. The girl sighed.

"We are in the wrong place, I failed again. Wrong place, wrong time! But try to answer me man! At least one intelligible word. Because I've never found a world where people have forgotten how to speak!"

"Er…"

"Just one word."

"Er…"

"Damn you, fucking idiot," said the girl.

And then disappeared. Along with the horse.

Aarhenius Krantz shut his mouth. He remained standing for a moment beside the railing, staring into the night, into the lake which reflected Vizima's lights. Then he tied up his pants and returned to his telescope.

The comet crossed the sky at full speed. It needed to be constantly monitored, without looking away from the eyepiece. It needed to be watched until it disappeared into the depths of space. That was the unique opportunity that no true scholar must squander.

***

I'll try another way, she thought as she watched the two moons. It was now seen as two narrow crescents, one bigger and one smaller. *I'll try it another way, I've tried imagining a place or a face, Now I'll try a powerful desire. I wish strongly, from my heart…*

What's the harm in trying?
Geralt. I want Geralt. I really want Geralt.

***

"Oh no," she cried. "The devil take me!"

Kelpie neighed confirmed her felt the same way. Steam exploded from his nostrils and his hooves sank into the snow.

The storm howled, blinding them with sharp ice crystals that hacked at their faces. Cold penetrated her clothing and bit like a wolf. Ciri was shaking, stooping her shoulder and her neck, trying to hide herself in her raised collar.

To the right and left loomed majestic peaks, granite monuments, whose peaks bathed in the blizzard. In a valley a rushing river was rushing and thick with ice. Everywhere was white.

I have these abilities, Ciri thought, such power. I'm the Lady of the Worlds but there is no point! I wanted Geralt and I find myself lost in the wilderness, in winter in a blizzard.

"Come, Kelpie, move or you'll freeze!" She pulled on the reins with fingers that were numb with cold. "Come on, bullhead! I know that this is the wrong place, now we'll return to our warm heath. But I have to concentrate and it takes some time. So, move!"

The mare exhaled a cloud of steam.

The wind blew; snow fell on her face and froze her eyelashes. The wind howled and whistled.

***

"Look!" Angoulême shouted above the wind. "Look there! There are hoof prints. Someone was here!"

"What did you say?" Geralt moved the scarf which he had around his head to avoid his ears freezing. "What, Angoulême?"

"Footprints! Hoof prints!"

"Who could bring a horse here?" Cahir also had to scream above the river Sansretour, which thundered and echoed. "How can you get a horse up here?"

"Look for yourself?"

"Indeed," said the vampire, the only member of the company that showed no symptoms of freezing, obviously had equal susceptibility to low and high temperatures. "They're tracks. But are they really from a horse?"

"Certainly not," said Cahir running his cheeks and nose. "Not in this wilderness. It must have been some wild animal. Probably an ibex."

"You're an ibex, you stupid goat!" Shouted Angoulême. "When I say it was a

horse, it was a horse!”

Milva, as usual, preferred practice to theory. She jumped from her saddle and knelt, throwing back her hood.

“The brat is right, it is definitely a horse. Perhaps even shod, but it’s hard to say. The wind has blown away a lot of traces. They went there into that ravine.”

“Ha!” Angoulême rubbed her hands together. “I knew it! Someone lives here! Let’s follow their trail maybe we’ll find a warm cottage. Maybe they have a fire? Perhaps they’ll welcome us?”

“Perhaps with an arrow from a crossbow,” Cahir added sarcastically.

“It would be wiser to stick to the plan of following the river,” Regis decreed in his omniscient voice. “We will not run the risk of getting lost. And along the shore of the Sansretour there are trading posts we can fall back on.”

“What do you think, Geralt?”

The witcher was silent, staring into the swirling snowstorm.

“We’ll follow the tracks,” he said finally.

“I do not…” the vampire begun, but Geralt did not let him finish.

“We’ll follow the tracks! Let’s go,” he ordered.

The spurred their horses, but did not travel too far. They had gone into the ravine about a quarter mile.

“They’ve ended,” Angoulême said, looking down at the pristine snow. “The horse has disappeared like in an Elvish circus.”

“What now, witcher?” Cahir turned in his saddle. “The tracks have disappeared. The wind has covered them.”

“No,” disagreed Milva. “The storm isn’t blowing hard enough in the ravine to hide tracks.”

“So what happened to the horse?”

The archer shrugged and huddled up in her saddle.

“Where is the horse?” Cahir did not give up. “Did it fly away? Vanish? Or are we just dreaming?”

The storm wailed over the ravine.

“Why,” asked the vampire, staring with profound insight at the witcher. “Why did you lead us after the tracks, Geralt?”

“I don’t know,” Geralt admitted reluctantly. “Something… I felt something. Something I knew. It doesn’t matter. You were right, Regis. Let’s return to the Sansretour and stick close to the river. No more side trips along the way. According to what Reynart said, real winter and bad weather are waiting for us just beyond the pass of Malheur. When we get there, we will need to be at full

strength. Don’t just stand there, let’s go.”

“But what happened to the horse?”

“What’s happened to him?” Muttered the witcher. “His footsteps have been covered by the snow. Or maybe it wasn’t a horse, but an ibex.”

Milva looked at him wryly, but refrained from making any comment.

When they returned to the river, the mysterious tracks were gone, covered by wet snow.

The steel-grey Sansretour river flowed thickly with ice which twirled and twisted in the water.

“I will tell you something,” Angoulême said. “But you have to promise that you are not going to laugh.”

They turned to face her. Covered with a woollen cap pulled down over her ears, with cheeks and nose red from the cold, wearing a large coat, the girl looked funny, just like a pudgy little kobold.

“It is about those tracks. When I was riding with Nightingale, in his Hanse, they said that in winter along the mountain passes, on an enchanted horse, rides the King of the Mountain, the ruler of the ice demons. To meet him face to face is certain death. What do you say, Geralt? Is it possible…”

“Anything,” he interrupted her. “Anything is possible in this company. The Malheur pass is ahead of us.”

The snow whipped and lashed, the wind blew and among cliffs came the whistling and howling of ice demons.

***

The heath to which she had jumped was not the familiar heath, Ciri knew immediately. She did not even have to wait until evening, she was confident that see would not see two moons.

She rode around the edges of the forest and also noticed differences. For example, there were many more birches and much less beeches. She had not heard or seen any birds. There was among the clumps of heather only dry sand, there used to be a green carpet. Even the grasshoppers here were different, frightened by Kelpie’s steps. So familiar. And yet…

Her heart beat faster. She saw a path, overgrown and neglected. Leading into the forest. Ciri thoroughly explored the surrounding area and made sure that the path did not end. That it did not lead to the woods, but led through it. She wasted no time, kicking her heels into her mare and rode into the trees. I’ll ride for half a day, she thought, if I don’t find anything I’ll turn around and go the opposite direction, into the heath.

She walked under the canopy of the trees, looking carefully around her, trying not to miss anything important. Thanks to this approach she did not miss the little old man who watched her from behind an oak.

The old man was small, but not hunched. He was wearing a linen shirt and trousers of the same material. On his feet he wore enormous, ridiculous looking sandals. In one hand he carried a gnarled cane and in the other a wicker basket. Ciri could not clearly see his face as it was concealed by a straw hat, from which protruded a sunburned nose and a mattered grey beard.

“Don’t be afraid,” she said. “I won’t harm you.”

Greybeard shifted from behind the oak and took off his hat. His face was round and dotted with age spots but vigorous with a little wrinkled brow and a small chin. He had long grey hair at the nape of his neck which he had pulled back into a ponytail, but the crown of his head was bare, shiny and yellow like a pumpkin.

She noticed that he was looking at her sword, the hilt of which was protruding over her right shoulder.

“Don’t be afraid,” she repeated.

“Hey, hey!” He said, mumbling a bit. “Hey, hey, my lady. Gramps is not afraid. Not afraid, on no.”

He smiled. His teeth were big and due to his receding lower jaw, his upper teeth stuck out of his mouth. Therefore his speech was hard to understand.

“Gramps is not afraid of strangers,” he said. “Even bandits. Gramps is poor and pitiful. Gramps is peaceful, no threat to anyone. Hey!”

He smiled again. His smile seemed to be comprised of only his front teeth.

“And you my lady, are you afraid of Gramps?”

Ciri snorted.

“I’m not afraid of you.”

“Hey, hey, hey! Whatever you say!”

He stepped towards her, leaning on his cane. Kelpie snorted. Ciri pulled on the reins.

“She does not like strangers,” Ciri warned. “And she bites.”

“Hey, hey. Gramps understands. Bad, rude pony! And out of curiosity, where is the lady going? Where is she heading?”

“It’s a long story. Where does this path lead?”

“Hey, Hey! The young lady does not know this?”

“Do not answer questions with questions, if you please. Where does the path lead? What is this place? And what is the date?”

The old man grinned again, his teeth sticking out like a beavers.

“Hey, hey, I can see from these questions that my lady has come from far away.”

“Quite far,” she said indifferently. “From another…”

“Time and place,” he finished. “Gramps knows. Gramps guessed.”

“How have you guessed? What do you know?” She asked excitedly.

“Gramps knows much.”

“Speak!”

“Is my lady hungry?” He said. “Thirsty? Tired? Gramps will take you to his cottage, give you food and drink and let you rest.”

Ciri had not had time to think about food and rest. Now, the words of the strange old man, made her stomach rumble and her tongue stick to the roof of her mouth. The old man looked at her from under the brim of his straw hat.

“Gramps,” he said, “has food and spring water at his house. And hey for your mare, the mare that wants to bite Gramps. Hey, hey, at the house we can talk about places and times… It’s not far. Will my lady accept the invitation? Will she enjoy Gramps refreshments?”

Ciri swallowed.

“Lead on.”

Gramps turned and walked along the barely visible path, measuring the way with long strokes from his cane. Ciri followed him, bowing her head to keep the branches from pulling her from the saddle and keeping a firm hand on the reins to stop Kelpie from biting the old man or eating his straw hat.

Despite his claims the cottage was not close at all. When they finally reached his place the sun was almost at it zenith.

Gramps’s cottage proved to be picturesque made of wood, with a roof which had been evidently repaired often using the first thing that had come to hand. The walls of the hut were covered with what looked like pig skins. In front of the cottage was a wooden structure in the shape of a gallows, a low table and a stump with an axe sticking out of it. In the cottage was an enclosed fireplace made of stone and clay, on which stood a smoking pot and pan.

“Gramps’s home,” said the old man proudly, “this is where I live. Here is where I sleep and cook food. Come have something to eat. Hey, hey, it is difficult to capture food in the forest. Does my lady like the flavour of millet porridge?”

“I like it,” Ciri swallowed again. “I like it.”

“With pork? With butter? And bacon?”

“Mmmm.”

“It is clear,” the old man gave her a probing look, “that you have not recently filled a plate full of pork and bacon. My lady is skinny. Skin and bones. Hey, hey. What is that back there?”

Ciri looked back. She fell for the old and most primitive trick in the world.

The heavy blow from the cane hit her directly in the head, her reflexes were just enough to raise her hand and cushion some of the blow which could have broken her skull like an egg. But Ciri found herself bewildered, stunned and complete disoriented.

Gramps showed his huge teeth then leapt at her and hit her again with his gnarled stick.

Ciri once again managed to protect her head with her up-raised hands, but the result was her left hand falling limp, probably broken. Gramps jumped to her other side and swung, hitting her in the stomach. She screamed and curled into a ball. He threw himself on her like a hawk; he turned her face to the ground and crushed her knees. Ciri arched up and kicked back, hitting him with a sharp blow to his elbow. Gramps roared furiously and slammed his fist onto the back of her head with such force that her face dug into the sand. He grabbed her by the hair on her neck and ground her nose and mouth into the sand. She felt suffocated.

The old man knelt on her, still pushing her head into the ground, pulled out her sword and tossed it to the side. His fumbling hand reached over her stomach and unlaced her pants. Ciri screamed and her mouth filled with more sand. The old man pushed harder, clutching her hair in his fist. With a strong tug her pulled down her pants.

“Hey, hey,” the old man wheezed. “Today Gramps caught a nice ass. It has been a long time.”

Ciri felt the touch of his dry hand and cried out again through her mouth full of sand and pine needles.

“Just be quiet and lay still, my lady,” he drooled onto her buttocks. “Gramps is no longer young, like he used to be… But no fear, the old man still knows what to do. Hey, hey, and then Gramps will eat you…”

He did not finish the sentence, he grunted and roared.

Ciri felt his grip break, and broke away from him like a spring. Now she could see what had happened.

Kelpie had silently crept up from behind, grabbed Gramps in her teeth and literally lifted him off the ground. The old man yelled and thrashed about, kicking. Finally he managed to break free, but left a lot of his grey hair in the

mare’s teeth. He leaped for his gnarled stick but at the last moment Ciri kicked it out of his reach. The second kick she wanted to deal out was to where it was necessary, but her pants pulled down to her knees restricted her movements. She pulled them up and turned, but Gramps had utilised the lost time well. With several jumps he reached the stump and wrested the axe from it. He waved the axe, driving Kelpie back, then with a roar, he lunged at Ciri, raising the axe to strike.

“Gramps is gonna bugger you wench!” He howled wildly. “Even if he has to hack you to pieces first. Gramps doesn’t care if my lady is whole or filleted!”

Ciri thought that she could handle his easily. He was after all, a decrepit old man. She was mistaken.

Despite his age and large sandals, he was as agile as a rabbit and leaped at her, brandishing the axe with the skill of a butcher. When the sharpened blade almost hit her a few times, Ciri realised that the only way to save herself was to escape.

But she was saved by coincidence. Stepping backwards she ran into her sword. She quickly picked it up.

“Throw down the axe,” she yelled, pulling her sword with a hiss from its scabbard. “Throw down your axe, you old shit, maybe I’ll give you your life.”

He paused. Wheezing and puffing, he had saliva running from his mouth into his beard.

But he did not throw down the axe. She saw in his eyes a murderous rage.

“No!”

“Then come at me.”

For a moment he looked at her as if not understanding, then he gnashed his teeth, roared and lunged at her. Ciri had had enough. She turned quickly and cut up from the bottom slicing his arms above the elbow. The old man dropped the axe and his bloody hands followed, he immediately jumped at her again. She jumped and slashed him across the neck.

More out of pity than necessity, the open arteries in his arms would have bled out in a few moments.

He lay there, parting with life with incredible difficulty, without his severed limbs, he squirmed like a worm. Ciri stood over him. In her teeth, sand gritted. She spat it out on the dying old man. Before the saliva hit him, he died.

***

The strange construction in front of the cottage that resembled a scaffold was decorated with iron hooks and rigging. The table and the stump were slippery,

covered in grease and smelled. Like a slaughterhouse.

In the kitchen Ciri found a the millet porridge, full of pieces of meat and mushrooms. She was very hungry, but something stopped her from eating it. Instead she drank only a little water from a jug and at a small wrinkled apple.

Some stairs descended deep into a cool cellar. The shelves were stored with earthenware pots and lard. Meat hung from the ceiling. Some remnants of a thing. She ran from the cellar, as if chased by demons, She fell into the nettles and rose, staggering away from the cottage. Despite having an empty stomach, she vomited violently for a long time.

The thigh hanging in the cellar belonged to a child.

***

Driven by a stench, she found a pit whose bottom was half flooded with water where Gramps threw his garbage, everything that he did not eat. Looking at the skulls, ribs and pelvises rolling in the mud, Ciri realised with horror that she had survived only because of the old man’s lust, he wanted to rape more than he wanted food. If his hunger at that moment had been stronger that his lustful appetites, he would have treacherously struck her with the axe and not the gnarled stick. He would have hung her by her feet on the wooden gallows, gutted her, pulled off her skin and chopped her up on the table…

Although her legs were shaking with weakness and her left hand throbbed with pain, she dragged the body into the forest and plunged it into the stinking mud, between the bones of his victims. She returned to the cottage with branches and dried twigs and placed them around the four sides of the house. The carefully set fire to all four sides.

She left when the fire had flared up properly. When she felt the heat, heard the roar and when she was sure that a random shower would not prevent the razing of this place.

***

Her hand was not so bad. It was swollen, yes, and it hurt, but there didn’t seem to be any broken bones.

When evening came, a single moon appeared in the sky. However Ciri did not want to accept this world as her own.

Or stay in it any longer than necessary.

***

“Tonight,” Nimue whispered, “will be a good night. I can feel it.”

Condwiramurs sighed.

The horizon burned in gold and purple. A beam of the same colours settled

on the lake.

They were sitting on the terrace in chairs, behind them was a mirror in an ebony frame and a tapestry depicting a small castle clinging to a rocky wall which was reflected in the water of a mountain lake.

How many evenings, Condwiramurs thought, will we sit up in the falling twilight and the darkness? Without any results? Just talking?

It got colder. The sorceress and the adept were wrapped in furs. From the lake came the creak of oars from the boat of the Fisher King, but they could not see it as it was hidden by the blinding glow of sunset.

“Quite often I dream,” Condwiramurs said, “I’m in an icy wasteland, where there is nothing but piles of white snow and the sun sparkling on ice. And there is silence, silence calling in my ears. Unnatural silence. The silence of death.”

Nimue nodded, as if she knew what this meant. But she said nothing.

“Suddenly, it seems that I can hear something,” continued the adept. “I can feel the surface of the ice tremble under my feet. I kneel down in the snow. The ice is clear as glass, it is from a mountain lake, stones and fish can be seen through the thick pane. In my dream, I can also see that, the layer of ice is dozens or perhaps hundreds of inches thick. This does not prevent me from hearing… people screaming for help. Below the ice… there is a frozen world.”

Nimue remained silent.

“Of course, I know,” said the adept, “the dream is born from Ithlinne’s Prophecy, the famous White Winter, the Time of the White Frost, the time of the Wolf Blizzard. The world has perished under snow and ice that is the forecast of re-birth. Pure and better.”

“I deeply believe that,” Nimue said softly, “it will regenerate the world. But not that it would be better.”

“What?”

“You heard me.”

“I did not mishear? Nimue, the Time of the White frost has been predicted many times, every cold winter; people believe that it is beginning. But today not even children believe that some long winter will destroy the world.”

“So you can see, children do not believe, but I do.”

“Do you have some rational reasons,” Condwiramurs said with slight irony, “or is it a mystical belief in the infallibility of elven prophecies?”

Nimue’s fingers twitched among the fur in which she was shrouded.

“Our world,” she began in her mentoring tone, “has the shape of a sphere and revolves around the sun. Do you agree or do you belong to one of those tiny

sects that believe the opposite?”

“No, I’m not one of them. I accept the heliocentric doctrine and believe that the earth is round.”

“Good. Then you know that the earth’s axis is tilted and the track the earth takes around the sun is not circular, but elliptical?”

“I’ve learned about it. But I am not an astronomer, so…”

“There is no need to be an astronomer, just think logically. The earth moves around the sun in an elliptical shaped orbit and so during its movements it is sometimes closer and sometimes further away. The further the earth is from the sun, it is logical to think that the colder it will be. And thanks to the planetary axis the northern hemisphere is further from the light.”

“This is logical.”

“Both aspects – the ellipse of the orbit and the inclination of the axis are subject to change. Believed to be cyclic. The ellipse can be more or less elliptical, elongated or shallower, the axis also experiences changes. Due to the distance from the Sun and the large tilt of the earth’s axis, the polar regions receive very little light and heat.”

“I understand.”

“Less light in the northern hemisphere means more residual snow. The white glistening snow reflects sunlight so the temperature drops even more. The snow remains even longer, the larger tracts do not melt, or only briefly. The more snow, the more residual, the more white and shiny reflective surface…”

“I understand.”

“The snow falls and falls and there becomes more and more of it. Note that, the sea currents migrate from the south of the warm air. Humidity condenses over the cold areas and causes further snow to fall. The greater the temperature differences, the more abundant the snowfall. It gets colder.”

“I understand.”

“The snow becomes so heavy the ice becomes pressed and forms a glacier. On which, as we know, the snow keeps falling, squeezing it even more, the glacier grows, not only increasingly thick but covering more space. White spaces…”

“That reflects the sunlight,” Condwiramurs nodded. “Getting colder and colder still. The White Light that Ithlinne prophesied. But can this really lead to a cataclysm? Can the ice that likes to the north suddenly start moving south, crushing and covering everything? How quickly can the ice at the poles grow? How many inches a year?”

“As you probably know,” Nimue said staring at the lake, “the only port that does not freeze is the Gulf of Praxeda in Pont Vanis.”

“I know.”

“Enrich your knowledge. You know that a hundred years ago, all the major ports in the Gulf were open water throughout the year. In the Chronicles it is recorded that even in the last century that Talgar could still grow cucumbers and pumpkins and sunflowers. Now those crops won’t grow there, because the growing season is too short and the winter is too rigid. Did you ever hear that Kaedwen had its own vineyard? Wines from the local vines were probably not the best, but they were cheap. And the local poets sang of them. Those vines no longer grow in Kaedwen because the winters, unlike the old, bring severe frosts and heavy snows that kill the vines. Not only inhibits the vegetation, but simply kills it. Destroys it.”

“I understand.”

“Yes,” reflected Nimue. “Shall I tell you more? Perhaps of the snow falls in Talgar in mid November. And at the end of December and January, there is snow in the catchment area of Alba, where even a hundred years ago nobody had seen snow. Why at Birke do we celebrate the welcoming of spring, what do you think?”

“It’s the spring equinox. But it is true that the little children wonder, because outside there is still snow on the ground. At the same time I have read that in ancient times that during Birke daffodils and crocuses had already bloomed.”

“You mean the ancient times, not more than a hundred and twenty years ago. Historically it has been recently. Ithlinne was right, the prophecy is fulfilling. The world is perishing under the ice. Mankind will perish because of the Destroyer, who was to open the way to salvation. As we know from legend, he did not.”

“For reasons that are not explained in the legend.”

“That is true. However, the fact remains, the White Frost is coming. The civilizations of the northern hemisphere are doomed. They will disappear under the sprawling ice, under permafrost and snow. But there is no need to panic, because it will take some time before it happens.”

The Sun went down and the blinding brilliance from the surface of the lake disappeared.

Now a softer beam of light fell on the water. The moon bathed the tower of Inis Vitre in a bright glow.

“How long?” Said Condwiramurs. “How long do we have left, do you

think?”

“A lot.”

“How much, Nimue?”

“About three thousand years.”

Somewhere on the lake, the Fisher King struck himself with the oar and cursed loudly.

Nimue shook her head. Condwiramurs sighed.

“I’ve calmed down a bit. But only a little.”

***

The next place was one of the most horrible that Ciri had seen, it certainly placed in the top ten, and maybe even ahead of them. It was a port, she saw boats and galleys with springs and lines, she saw a forest of masts and saw sails hanging heavy in the still air. Around her twisted columns of smoke, smelly smoke.

The smoke rose from crooked huts also standing along the port. In them she heard voices, the sound of crying children.

Kelpie jumped, pulling hard on the reins and hitting her hooves hard on the cobblestones. Ciri looked down and saw dead rats. They were everywhere, some of the rodents were dead, other writhing in pain, with pale pink legs.

Something is not right, she thought, suddenly feeling panic. Flee, run away from here as quickly as possible.

Next to a pole where fishing nets hung a man was sitting on the ground. His shirt was torn across the chest, his head was laying on his shoulder. He did not look like he was sleeping. A few steps further on lay more people. The did not move when Kelpie’s horseshoes tinkled on the pavement right next to their heads. Ciri bent so that she could pass under clothes hanging on a clothesline. They reeked of the staleness of dirt.

At the door to one of the huts was a cross painted with lime or white paint. Behind its roof, black smoke rode into the blue sky. A child was crying, someone shouted in the distance, someone closer was coughing and snorting. A dog howled.

Ciri’s hands felt itchy. She looked down.

Her hands were covered in black fleas.

She screamed aloud. Trembling with fear and disgust, she began to violently wave her arms. She startled Kelpie, who took off at a gallop, Ciri nearly fell off. Clutching the side of the mare with her thighs she combed her fingers through her hair, ruffling it. She tore at her jacket and shirt. Kelpie continued to gallop

through the smoke that blew across the street. Ciri screamed in horror.

She was going through hell, the inferno, the most terrible of nightmares. Among the houses marked with white crosses. Among smouldering rags. Among the dead lying alone and those who were lying in piles, one on the other. And among the living, ragged, half naked ghouls with sunken cheeks, crawling through the muck, screaming in a language she did not understand, stretching out their emaciated arms, covered in horrible bloody pustules…

Run! Run away from here!

Even in the black nothingness of nonexistence of the archipelago of places, Ciri smelt for a long time in her nostrils the smoke and the stench.

***

The next place was also a port. But here it was spring and it had a channel, and in the channel were boats, scooters, yachts and a forest of masts. But in this place of masts, there were screaming gulls and it smelled of joyous normal home – wet wood, seawater and fish.

On the deck of a boat, two men were fighting, screaming with excited voices.

She understood everything that they were saying.

They were arguing over the price of herring.

Not far away stood a tavern, and from its doors came the musty smell of beer and loud voices, laughter and the clinking of glasses. Someone was singing a loud obscene song.

Luned, c'ard t'elaine arse
Aen a meath ail aen sparse!

She knew where she was. For she had read the name on the stern of one of the galleys – *Evall Muire*. And it port of origin – *Baccala*. She knew where she was.

In Nilfgaard.

She fled before anyone paid her any attention.

However, before she was immersed into nothingness, a flea, which had jumped on her shirt at the last place and followed her through space and time, jumped from her shirt onto the pier.

The flea settled onto the bare skin of a rat, an old male mousy veteran of many wars, which was testified by his torn ear. That evening the rat and flea boarded a vessel. And the next morning they sailed the high seas. The ship they boarded was old and dirty and bore the name '*Catriona*'. That name would go down in history. But nobody knew anything about that yet.

***

The next place, though she could hardly believe it, surprised her with a truly idyllic image. It was a quiet riverside, with a lazy stream flowing among the willows, alders and oaks which leant over the water. Next to a bridge with a delicate stone arch linking the two shores stood a wild vine covered inn.

Above the door swung a sign with large gold letters, which Ciri did not know how to read.

However, because of the inscription of a shield also nicely illustrated with a black cat on it, Ciri decided to call the tavern '*The Black Cat*'.

Flowing from the tavern was the smell of food. Ciri almost fell into a swoon. It didn't take her long to decide. She adjusted the sword on her back and stepped inside.

The tap room was empty, only one table sat three men, who at first glance appeared to be villagers. They did not even look at Ciri who out of habit sat in a corner with her back to the wall.

The landlady, a stout woman with a spotless apron and a cap, came up to her and asked something. Her voice was thunderous but melodious. Ciri poked one finger towards her mouth and patted her stomach, then took a silver button from her blouse and laid it on the table. Seeing the surprised expression on the woman's face she was about to pluck a second button, but the woman stopped her with a gesture.

The silver button provided her with a heavy casserole and vegetable soup, a pot of timber beans and smoked meat, bread and a jug of watered wine.

From the first tablespoon, Ciri thought she was going to cry. But she controlled herself. She ate slowly. Relishing it all.

The landlady came over and asked her a ringing question, and put her hands to her cheek. She wanted to know if she was staying the night.

"I don't know," said Ciri. "Maybe. In any case, thank you for the invitation."

The woman smiled and walked into the kitchen.

Ciri undid her belt and leaned back against the wall. She wondered what to do next. This place, in contrast to some previous ones, was pleasant and she was tempted to stay longer.

However, experience had taught her that excessive confidence can be dangerous and a lack of vigilance can be fatal.

From out of nowhere a black cat appeared, exactly the same as the one on the signboard.

It arched its back and rubbed itself on her calf. She stroked the cat and he pushed his head into her palm, then settled down beside her and began to lick his

fur. Ciri watched.

She saw Jarre sitting next to a fire in a circle with ugly rogues. They all nibbled at something that resembled a piece of coal.

“Jarre?”

“It has to be this way,” said the boy while watching the dancing flames. “I read about it in the History of War, Marshal Pelligram’s work. So it is necessary when the country is in danger.”

“What is necessary? Eating coal?”

“Yes. Exactly so. The motherland calls. And partly for personal reasons.”

“Ciri, do not fall asleep in the saddle,” Yennefer said. “We have arrived.”

The had arrived at a city, where the doors and gates of the houses had painted white crosses on the. They rode into a dense, suffocating smoke, coming from the bodies of the dead who were being burned. Yennefer didn’t seem to notice.

“I have to beautify.”

Before her face, above the ears of her horse appeared a mirror. It danced in the air along with a brush that combed her raven tresses. Yennefer only uses magic, and not her hands, because…

Her hands were covered in masses of clotted blood.

“Mother! What did they do?”

“Get up, girl,” Coen says. “Master the pain, get up again on the comb. Otherwise you’ll catch fear. Do you want to be afraid the rest of your life?“

His yellow eyes shine in an unpleasant manner. His sharp, white teeth flash. Then it’s not Coen. It is a cat, a black cat…

A column of an army, many miles long, marches. Above them wave a forest of spears and banners. Jarre has a round helmet on his head and a pike on his shoulder, which he has to hold with both hands otherwise the weight would unbalance him. Drums and bagpipes echo, and thunder the songs of war. Above the column crows fly. Many crows…

A lake shore, a field of reeds. An island on the lake. On the island a tower with jagged battlements. Above the tower, in the darkening evening sky, the moon shines, and makes the tower glow. On the balcony are sitting two women wrapped in furs. A man fishes on a boat…

A tapestry and a mirror.

Ciri lifted her head with a jerk. In front of her sitting at the table is Eredin Breacc Glas.

“You should know,” he said, grinning with his even teeth, “that you are only delaying the inevitable. You belong to us and we’ll find you.”

“Never.”

“You will come back to us. You have seen a couple of times and places, but sooner or later you’ll get to the Spiral. And the Spiral is ours. You will never get back to your world and time. After all, it is already too late, you have nothing to return to. The people that you knew are long dead, their graves overgrown with grass and their names forgotten. Your name too…”

“You’re lying! I do not believe you!”

“Your belief is your thing. But know that soon you will come to the Spiral and I’ll be there waiting. Admit that you secretly long for me, *me elaine luned.*”

“You are delusional!”

“We, *Aen Elle*, perceive such things. You were fascinated with me, and you were afraid of your desires. You still want me, Zireael. My hands, their touch…”

She jumped to her feet, overturning her cup, fortunately empty and grabbed her sword.

She immediately calmed down. She was in the ‘Black Cat’ inn. She had fallen asleep at the table. The hand that had touched her hair, was the landlady’s. Ciri was not fond of this kind of contact, but the woman simply radiated kindness, for which Ciri could not repay with rudeness. She allowed her to stroke her head, with a smile and listened to her melodious speech. She was tired.

“I have to go,” she said at last.

The woman smiled and spoke in her singsong voice.

How is it possible, thought Ciri, *in all the worlds, places and times, in all languages and dialects, this word is always understandable? And always the same?*

“Yes, I have to. My mother is waiting for me.”

The landlady escorted her into the yard. Before Ciri could jump into the saddle, she suddenly hugged her tightly pressing her into her plump breasts.

“Goodbye. Thank you for your hospitality. Forward, Kelpie.”

She went straight over the arched bridge over the calm river. When the mare’s horseshoes rang on the stones, she looked up. The woman was still standing at the front of the inn.

Concentration, fists on her temples. A noise in her ears like the sound of a sea shell. A flash. Soft black nothingness.

“Good luck, my girl,” Théres Lapin, owner of the pub *‘Au Chat Noir’* in Pont-sur-Yonne on the road from Melun to Auxerre.

“Godspeed!”

***

Concentration, fist on her temples. A noise in her ears like the sound of a sea shell. A flash. Soft, black nothingness.

Places. A lake. An island. The moon like a half thaler, it's brilliance glowing over the water of a lake. The mast of a boat with a man fishing…

On the terrace of the tower… Two women?

***

Condwiramurs could not stand it, she shouted with excitement and then immediately covered her mouth with her hand. The Fisher King dropped his nets with a splash and the swore terribly then with his mouth open he froze. Nimue did not move.

On the surface of the lake, on a ray of moonlight Appeared a black horse with a rider on her back.

Nimue calmly reached out and shouted a spell. The tapestry on the wall in the room bust into multicoloured lights. The lights reflected in the oval mirror, danced on the walls like coloured bees and then sailed out of the room like a rainbow, as light as a ribbon that lit up the lake like the first rays of dawn.

The black mare lifted her head and whinnied loudly. Nimue abruptly extended her hands and shouted another spell. Condwiramurs saw an image forming in the air, growing more tightly focused. The image immediately popped into focus. Then became a portal. A gate, beyond which they could see…

A plain full of shipwrecks. A castle stuck on a sharp cliff, lording over the dark mirror of a mountain lake…

"Over there!" Nimue shouted loudly. "This is the path that you must follow! Ciri, Pavetta's daughter! Enter the portal, follow the path that leads to your meeting with fate! That closes the wheel of time! Let Ouroboros bite his own tail. Do not wander anymore! Hurry to help your loved ones! This is the right way to go, witcheress!"

The mare snickered and buried her hooves in the air. The girl in the saddle, turned her head, looking alternatively at them and the image produced by the tapestry and mirror. She tossed her hair from her face, on which Condwiramurs saw the scar.

"Believe me, Ciri," cried Nimue. "You know me! We've seen each other once already!"

"I remember," they heard her answer. "I believe you. Thank you."

They watched her spur the mare towards the portal. Before the image faded, the ashen-haired girl turned in the saddle and waved.

Then everything disappeared. The lake was calm, the bar of moonlight settled. It was so quiet, they thought they could hear the loud breathing of the Fisher King.

Nimue refrained from tears and tightly embraced Condwiramurs. She was like a little trembling fairy. They remained in the embrace for some time. Without words they both turned and looked at the place where the Gate of Worlds had disappeared.

“Godspeed, witcheress!” They cried in unison. “Good luck on your journey!”

Not far from the battlefield, where that terrible battle between almost the entire North was facing almost all of the aggressor Nilfgaard's power, there were two fishermen villages – Old Butts and Brenna. However, since Brenna was burned to the ground, people used to talk about the 'Battle of Old Butts'. Today, however, it is referred to as the 'Battle of Brenna' for two reasons – First, Brenna is now restored and is now a prosperous settlement, while Old Butts was abandoned by its inhabitants a long time ago and is now overgrown with nettles and weeds. Secondly – the original name in the context of that grand and tragic struggle seemed extremely awkward, as if it were not enough that roughly thirty thousand unfortunates gave their lives but with their butts, that were old.

So, in historical literature the military has taken to calling it the 'Battle of Brenna' and not just in our writings but in Nilfgaard's who have many more sources than ours.

Reverend Jarre the Elder of Ellander
Annales seu Cronicae Incliti Regni Temeriae

CHAPTER EIGHT

“Cadet Fitz-Oesterlen, you’ve failed. Sit down. I would like to draw your attention to this cadet’s ignorance of important and famous events from the history of his native country that every good citizen and patriot should know, but for a future office is simply inexcusable. And one more thing, cadet. For twenty years I have worked at this school and I do not remember even a single semester when an exam hasn’t had a question about the Battle of Brenna. Your ignorance practically eliminates your chances for a military career, but when you become a baron, there is no obligation to become an officer, so maybe you can try your hand at politics. Or diplomacy. I wish this wholeheartedly, Cadet Fitz-Oesterlen. The rest of us will get back to the Battle of Brenna, gentlemen. Cadet Puttkammer!”

“Present!”

“To the map, please and continue. From where the lord Baron’s knowledge failed.”

“As ordered! When Field Marshal Menno Coehoorn heard the reports from the secret service confirming that the Nordling’s armies were coming to aid the besieged fortress of Mayena, he decided to make a quick march to the west. His plan was to cut off the enemy troops and to force them into a decisive battle. For this purpose he distributed the Centre Group Army. Some of his forces he left at Mayena, the rest of his forces rapid marched…”

“Cadet Puttkammer! Are you a writer of historical fiction or a future military commander? What is the name for ‘the rest of his forces’? Please give me the exact *orde de bataille* of Marshal Coehoorn’s strike team. Using military terminology!”

“Yes, commander. Field Marshal Coehoorn had at that time, two armies – the Fourth Cavalry Army, led by Major General Marcus Braibant, patron of our school…”

“Very good, Cadet Puttkammer.”

“Fucking toady,” Cadet Fitz-Oesterlen hissed from his bench.

“…And the Third Army, commanded by Lieutenant General Rhetz de Mellis-

Stoke. The Fourth Cavalry Army, with a strength of twenty thousand soldiers was comprised of the following units – the Venendal Division, the Magne Division, the Frundsberg Division, the Second Vicovaro Brigade, the Seventh Daerlan Brigade, the Nauzicaa Division and the Vrihedd Brigade. The Third Army was composed of the Alba Division, the Deithwen Division and… umm. The Division…"

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"The Ard Feainn Division," said Julia Abatemarco. "If your men didn't mistake anything. They really had banners with silver suns on them?"

"Yes, Colonel," said the commander of the scouts, without hesitation.

"So, Ard Feainn," mused Pretty Kitty. "That's interesting. This means that in the three marching columns that you saw, not only is the Fourth Army coming against us, but most of the Third as well. I do not believe it; I have to see it with my own eyes. Captain, take over command during my absence. Send out immediately a transmission to Colonel Pangratt…"

"Colonel Abatemarco, is it reasonable for you to personally…"

"That's an order!"

"As you command!"

"This is a gamble, Colonel," the commander of the scouts shouted over the thunder of hooves. "We could run into a company of elven scouts."

"Don't talk! Lead!"

They galloped through a valley, past a stream and then turned into some woods. They had to slow down as their riding was hindered by the undergrowth; also there was the threat of running into one of the Nilfgaardian reconnaissance patrols. Even though the condottieri scout approached from the flank of the enemy, not from the front, there was still a good chance the flank was protected. The actions they took were risky as hell. But Pretty Kitty was known for such frivolous things. And there was not in the whole of the Free Company any soldier who wouldn't have followed her – even to hell.

"It's here," said the commander of the scouts. "This is the tower."

Julia Abatemarco shook her head. The tower was twisted, ruined, bristling with broken beams and a patchwork of holes that the west wind blew through whistling like a bagpipe. No one had any idea who or why the tower had been built in this secluded spot. But it was known that it had been built a long time ago.

"It will not collapse?"

"Certainly not, Colonel."

Among the Free Company, the condottieri did not use ‘sir’ or ‘ma’am’. Only rank.

Julia swiftly climbed to the top of the tower. The commander of the scouts joined her after some time, panting like a bull covering a cow. Pretty Kitty stood on the tilted battlements and watched the horizon through a spyglass, while putting her tongue between her teeth and sticking out her bottom. At the sight, the commander of the scouts felt a slight thrill. However, for his own safety, he quickly mastered it.

“On my soul, Ard Feainn,” Julia Abatemarco licked her lips. “I can see the Seventh Daerlan, the elves of the Vrihedd Brigade our friends from Maribor and Mayena… Aha! There are also the skullheads, the famous Nauzicaa Brigade… I can also see the flames of the armoured Deithwen Division… And the white banner with the black Alerion of the Alba Division.”

“You recognized them,” muttered the commander, “like old acquaintances… How do you know them?”

“I graduated from the military academy,” said Pretty Kitty carelessly, as if it was nothing. “I am a career officer. Well, I saw what I wanted to see. Let’s go back to the banner.”

***

“He has brought against us the Fourth Cavalry Army and the Third,” Julia Abatemarco said. “I repeat, the whole of the Fourth Cavalry and the Third Army. Behind the vanguard I saw dust clouds reaching up to the sky. In those three columns, I estimate about forty thousand horses, maybe more. Maybe…”

“Maybe Coehoorn divided his Centre Group Army,” finished Adam ‘Adieu’ Pangratt, chosen to be the supreme commander of the Free Company. “Maybe he took only his Fourth Cavalry and the horses from the Third and no infantry so he could proceed as quickly as possible… Ha, you know what I’d do if I were coming up against King Foltest’s constable Natalis…”

“I know,” Pretty Kitty’s eyes flashed with amusement. “I know what you’d do, you’d send runners.”

“Of course.”

“Natalis is a cunning fox. Maybe tomorrow…”

“Maybe,” Adieu said again. “I guess he thinks like me. Come with me, Julia, I want to show you something.”

They moved ahead of the rest of the army. The sun was almost touching the hills to the west, the forest and grassland darkened and the valley was filled with a long shadow. However, it was still light enough for Pretty Kitty to immediately

notice what Pangratt wanted to show her.

“Here,” Adieu said, confirming her guess. “If I was the commander of our forces, this is where I would pose the battle tomorrow.”

“It is good terrain,” Julia admitted. “Hard, straight and plain… We could marshal the forces there… on those plains. And that hill is an idea command post.”

“You’re right. Look right in the middle of the valley, there is a lake and we can use that tactically as well, with the river, although they are shallow, they have marshy shores… What was the river called, Julia? The one we passed through yesterday. Do you remember?”

“I forgot. The Scoop, I guess. Or something like that.”

***

Those who are familiar with the local surroundings can easily imagine the situation better than someone who has to rely solely on cartography to find the settlement of Brenna. It was to this settlement that the royal army arrived, in truth there was no settlement because during a battle the year before, Elven commandos burned it to the ground. It was there on the left flank that the Redanian contingent, commanded by Count de Ruyter took a position. He had eight thousand men, infantry and cavalry.

The centre of the army was located under the hill, which was later called Gallows Hill.

On this high ground stood King Foltest’s constable, John Natalis which gave him a perfect view of the battlefield. Below him were grouped the main strength of our troops – twelve thousand Temerian and Redanian infantry formed into four square units, beyond which were arrayed ten banners of heavy cavalry. In reserve were three thousand Maribor infantry under the command of Voivode Bronibor.

From the southern shore of the lake, which the local residence called Gold, which meandered down to the Cholta, were deployed the units of our right flank – The Volunteer Army of Mahakam dwarves, eight squadrons of light cavalry and factions of the great condottieri, the Free Company. The right flank was under the command of Adam Pangratt and the dwarf Barclay Els.

At a distance of nearly two miles across from the royal army, the army of Nilfgaard was mobilized under the command of Field Marshal Menno Coehoorn. It’s armed populous stood like an iron wall, regiment after regiment, company after company, squadron after squadron, as far as the eye could see. And through the forest of banners and halberds you could see that their position

was not only wide, but also deep.

Their army was about forty-six thousand strong at that time, however, only a few people knew this. Which was fortunate, because the determination of many of our soldiers did not waver at the sight of the immense power of Nilfgaard.

But even the most bold of heart had theirs pounding faster under their armour, because it was obvious that a difficult and bloody battle was about to begin here soon and that many of those lined up here would not see the sunset.

Jarre pushed up his glasses, which had slipped down onto his nose, and re-read through the entire piece of text again, sighed, rubbed his bald head and erased the last sentence.

The wind whispered through the linden trees and bees buzzed. Children, as children do, tried to out-shout one another.

A ball bounced off of a wall and stooped at the feet of the old man. Before he could awkwardly reach down, one of his grandsons passed him and grabbed the ball while running.

As he passed he banged the table. Jarre, with his right hand, saved the inkwell from falling, and with the stump of his left hand held the ream of paper.

Bees, yellow and heavy with pollen from the linden trees, buzzed loudly overhead.

Jarre resumed writing.

The morning was cloudy, but the sun pierced the clouds to explicitly remind us of the passing hours. The wind picked up, the flags and banners fluttered like a flock of birds rising to depart. Before us the Nilfgaardians were still, and all began to wonder why Field Marshal Menno Coehoorn did not give the order to attack…

***

"When?" Menno Coehoorn looked up from his map and planted his eyes on his commanders. "You want to know when I'll give the order to attack?"

No one answered. Menno watched his officers. Those who seemed the most tense and nervous were those who had to stay in the reserve. Elan Trahe, commander of the Seventh Daerlan and Kees van Lo of the Nauzicca brigade. Clearly nervous too was Ouder de Wyngalt, the aide-de-camp of Field Marshal Coehoorn, who had not even come close to a battle field.

But those who personally commanded battle actions looked calm, even bored. Marcus Braibant yawned, Rhetz de Mellis-Stoke was picking at his ear with his little finger, Colonel Ramon Tyrconnel, the young commander of the Ard Feainn division softly whistled while his eyes wandered over the distant

horizon. Another of the promising young officers, Colonel Liam aep Muir Moss of the Deithwen division flicked through a pocket volume of his favourite verses. The commander of the Alba division of Lancers, Tobor Eggebracht was scratching at his collar with the handle of a riding whip like a coachman.

“The attack will start,” Coehoorn said, “when the reconnaissance patrols return. I’m worried about the hills to the north. Before we strike, gentlemen, I must know who or what is behind them.”

***

Lamarr Flaut was terribly afraid. Fear gripped his bowels, and it seemed to him that his intestines were coated with slimy eels that were doggedly searching for a way to get to freedom. An hour earlier, the patrol had received orders which had been put into motion. Flaut, in the depth of his mind, was hoping that the fear would be drowned out by the cold morning and routine, a ritual that he had exercised a hundred times, harsh, serve and military ceremonial. He was wrong. Now, after an hour and travelling about five miles, deep into the dangerous enemy territory, the fear still gnawed at him.

The patrol stopped on the hillside below the fir forest. The riders were carefully concealed in a growth of tall junipers. Before them stretched a wide valley. Fog spun around the top of the grass.

“Nobody,” said Flaut. “Not a soul. Let’s go back. We’ve travelled too far.”

The sergeant looked at him in askance. Far? They had barely gone a few miles and moved like lame turtles.

“We should,” he said, “go out there to the opposite hill, Lieutenant. We will have a better view. Especially of both valleys. From there we can see if anyone is in the other valley. What do you think, sir? It is only a few yards.”

A few yards, Flaut thought. In open terrain, which is as flat as a pan. The eels writhed and sought a way out of his guts. Flaut felt that at least one of them was on the right track.

I heard the jingle of spurs. A horse snorting. There, among those pines, on that sandy slope. Is something moving there? A silhouette? Are we being surrounded?

A rumour ran through the camp a few days ago that the condottieri Free Company had caught in an ambush a party from the Vrihedd brigade and managed to capture an elf alive. It was said that he had been castrated; his tongue had been torn out, all of his fingers cut off of his hand… And finally they put out his eyes.

Then they joked, saying he would not be able to have fun with his elven

whores. And he wouldn't be able to watch others having fun.

"Well, sir?" The sergeant spoke hoarsely. "Do we approach the hill?"

Lamarr Flaut swallowed.

"No," he said. "Let's not waste time. We have found nothing; there are no enemies here. We have to go back and give our report to the commander. Let's go back!"

***

Menno Coehoorn listened to the report and raised his head from the map.

"To the banners," he ordered shortly. "Mister Braibant, Mister Mellis-Stoke. Attack!"

"Long live the Emperor!" Yelled Tyrconnel and Eggebracht. Menno looked at them strangely.

"To the banners," he repeated. "May the Great Sun shine on your glory."

***

Milo Vanderbeck, a Halfling and a field surgeon who was better known by his nickname, Rusty, sucked through his nostrils the familiar mix of smells of iodine, ammonia, alcohol and magical elixirs that floated around the tent. He wanted to savour the fragrance of this now, while it was still healthy, pure and clinically sterile. He knew that it would not stay this way for long.

He looked at the operation table, still as white as driven snow and his instruments, the dozens of tools engendered respect and trust with the impassive and menacing dignity of it's cold steel, pristine cleanliness, orderly placement and aesthetics.

Gathered around the instruments was his bustling staff – three women. No, Rusty mental corrected himself. A woman and two girls. No. One old, yet beautiful and young-looking woman. And two children.

The sorceress and healer named Marti Sodergren. And two volunteers. Shani, a student from Oxenfurt. And Iola, a priestess from the Temple of Melitele in Ellander.

Marti Sodergren I know, Rusty thought, *I've already worked with this beauty, more than once. A little nymphomaniac, she also has a tendency towards hysteria, but so long as she works her magic. Her spells for anaesthetics, disinfectants and to stop haemorrhages.*

Iola, is a priestess, or rather an adept. A girl of ordinary beauty like a linen cloth and big, strong peasant hands. The temple prevented her hands from being stained with dirt in a silt field. But she could not disguise her origin. No, Rusty thought, in principle, I have nothing to fear from her. These hands are peasant

hands, trustworthy hands. In addition, the girls at the temple rarely fail, and in moments of stress do not crack, but look back on their religion, in their mystical faith. Interestingly; it helps.

He looked at the red-haired Shani, deftly threading curved suture needles.

Shani. A child from the meagre neighbourhood that received her education at the University due to her infinite desire for knowledge and unimaginable sacrifice of poor parents. A student. What can she do? Threading needles? Tightening a tourniquet? Holding hooks? The question is whether the red-head will faint, drop the hooks and go nose first into the open abdomen of the patient being operated on?

Humans are not very resilient, he thought. *I asked them to give me an elf. Or someone of my own race. But they did not. They do not trust us. Or me, anyway. I'm a halfling. Not human. Alien.*

"Shani!"

"Yes, Mister Vanderbeck?"

"Rusty. That is, for you 'Mister Rusty'. What is this, Shani? What is it for?"

"Are you examining me, Mister Rusty?"

"Answer, girl!"

"This is a scraper! To remove the periosteum during an amputation! In order for the periosteum not to burst under the serrated blade, you must saw cleanly! Are you satisfied? Have I gained your approval?"

"Quiet, girl, quiet."

He ran his fingers through his hair.

Interesting, he thought. *Here we have four doctors. And all are redheads! Is this fate or what?*

"Please come out, ladies," he nodded to his assistants, "before the tent."

They obeyed. But each of the three muttered under their breath. Each in their own way.

Before the tent sat a group of medics, enjoying the last minutes of sweat idleness. Rusty gave them a stern look, and sniffed to see if they were already drunk.

The blacksmith, a muscular fellow, was busy rearranging tools on his bench that would be used to rescue the wounded from warped armour and helmets.

"There," Rusty began without preamble, pointing towards the battlefield, "will soon begin a bloodbath. And right afterwards we will get our first wounded. You all know what to do, where your position is and what your responsibilities are. If you behave accordingly, you can not go wrong. Are we

clear?”

The girls listened to his speech without comment.

“There,” Rusty pointed in the same direction as before, “will soon begin hundreds of thousands of people trying to hurt and kill each other. In very sophisticated ways. In this and two other hospitals we have twelve doctors. There is no way in the world we’ll be able to help all those in need. Not even a fraction of those in need. And to tell you the truth, no one even expects that from us. But we will treat them. Because it is, sorry for the cliché, the reason for our existence. To those who need us.”

His listeners remained silent. Rusty shrugged.

“We cannot do more than we can,” he said quieter and warmer. “But we will do our all, we can do no less than that.”

***

“They’re charging,” Constable John Natalis said while wiping his sweaty palms on his pants. “The Nilfgaardians are charging, Your Majesty, they are coming for us!”

King Foltest, mastered his dancing horse, a white horse decorated with lilies on his saddle and turned his noble profile, worthy of decorating coins towards the constable.

“We must prepare an appropriate welcome, Lord Constable! Officers!”

“Death to the Black Ones!” Yelled the condottiere Adam ‘Adieu’ Pangratt and Count de Ruyter. The Constable straightened in his saddle and took a deep breath.

“To the banners!”

Drums reverberated, cymbals crashed and horns sounded. The earth trembled under the tens of thousands of hooves.

***

“Now,” said the Halfling, Andy Biberveldt brushing the hair from his pointy ears. “It begins…”

Tara Hildebrandt, Didi Hofmeier and the others who were gathered around the wagons nodded. They could hear the dull, monotonous thud of hooves coming from behind the hill and forest. They could feel the ground shaking.

Then, beyond the forest arose cries. And the noise intensified.

“The first volley from the archers,” said Andy expertly who had already seen – or rather heard – many battles. “There will be another one.”

He was right.

“Now they’ll collide.”

“Ma…ma…maybe we could… hide… under the… wagon,” William Hardbottom proposed, stuttering and writhing uneasily.

Biberveldt and the others looked at the Halfling with pity.

“Under? The wagons? What for? We are separated from the battle by nearly a quarter of a mile. And even if a patrol came here to the rear, hiding under the wagon would not save our lives.”

The noise from the fighting intensified.

“Now,” Andy Biberveldt estimated and was right again. From a distance of a quarter of a mile through the forest came the sound of the royal army colliding with iron and a horrible sound that bristled the hair.

Terrible, desperate, wild squeals and whinnies from animals being mutilated.

“The cavalry…” Biberveldt licked his lips. “The cavalry impaled on pikes…”

***

The old chronicler used the sponge and erased the next sentence, with whose wording he was not satisfied. He closed his eyes, reminding himself of that day. The moment when the two armies collided. Where both armies, as fierce as mastiffs, jumped at each other’s throats, tightening in a deadly embrace.

Jarre looked for the words with which to describe it.

In vain.

***

A wedge was driven into the side of the Temerian infantry. A gargantuan live ram of the Alba division, crushing everything that protected the living bodies of the infantry – pikes, spears, shields and halberds.

The Alba division struck like a dagger into a living body and shed blood. Horses slipped on the blood slicked ground. But although the tip of the dagger penetrated very deep, it did not hit the heart or any vital organs. The wedge of the Alba division instead of crushing and dismembering the Temerian infantry, dug in and got stuck. They remained stuck in the mass of infantry, thick and viscous like pitch.

At first it did not seem so threatening. The head and wings of the wedge were made up of elite troops in heavy armour, from their shields and armour, blows bounced off like a blacksmith’s hammer off of an anvil, they had also chosen well protected mounts. And although every now and again one of the armoured troops fell and the horse with him, their swords and axes fell among the infantrymen in a bloody harvest. Surrounded by a mob, the division began to penetrate deeper.

“Albaaa!” Junior Lieutenant Devlin aep Meara heard the battle cry of

Colonel Eggebracht, rising above the clatter of weapons and the roar of men and the neighing of horses. “Forward Alba! For the Emperor!”

They moved forward, chopping, pounding and thrusting. Under the reluctant horses’ hooves could be heard sloshing, cracking and wailing.

“Albaaa!”

The wedge became stuck again. The landsknechts although crushed and bleeding, did not yield and surrounded the cavalry like a vice. The earth trembled. Under the bludgeoning of the halberds and the flails, the first line of the wedge fell apart. Riddled with halberds and clubs, torn from their mounts by hooks, the knights of the Alba division began to die.

The dagger stuck in the Temerian infantry, was now not so much crippling iron in a living organism but was now like an icicle in the grip of a peasant.

“Temeriaaa! For the King! Kill the Black Ones!”

It was not easy for the landsknechts. The Alba division did not burst apart. Swords and axes rose and fell and for every fallen rider the fierce infantry paid the price in blood.

The tip of a spear found its way into the crack in the armour of Eggebracht and thrust into it. The Colonel cried and swayed in his saddle. Before his men could help him, the combat swept him to the ground and the infantry fell upon him.

The black banner with the Alerion wobbled and fell. Heavy cavalry, among them Junior Lieutenant Delvin aep Meara, rushed in that direction, chopping, slashing, trampling and yelling.

I wonder, thought Devlin aep Meara, removing his sword from the shattered skull of a Temerian landsknecht. I wonder, he thought deflecting a blow aimed at him, what is the point of all this? And who is to blame?

***

“Uh… And then the Great Masters gathered at… Our Venerable Mother… uh… Whose memory will always live within us… For the… Er… great champions of the First Lodge of… consulted… and decided…”

“You did not prepare, adept Abonde. You have failed. Go sit down.”

“But I learned it. Really…”

“Sit down.”

“Why do they have to teach that old nonsense,” Abonde muttered, sitting down. “Who cares about it today… And what is the use…”

“Silence! Adept Nimue!”

“Present, Mistress.”

“Can you answer the questions? If not, sit straight and do not waste my time.”

“I can.”

“Well, I’m listening.”

“So it stands in the annals that the convent of masters took place at the Castle of Bald Mountain and there they agree to end the destructive war between the Emperor and the Kings of the North. Reverend Mother Assire, the holy martyr, decided that the rulers would not stop fighting until completely exhausted. Whereupon, Reverend Mother Philippa, the holy martyr decided, *‘Let’s give them an unimaginably horrible, cruel and bloody battle, a battle that will be unprecedented. That the imperial armies and troops of the kings will be swimming in the blood of that battle, and then, we, the Grand Lodge will force them to make peace’*. And that is exactly what happened. The Reverend Mothers created the Battle of Brenna. And then the rulers were forced to sign for peace at Cintra.”

“Well done, adept Nimue. I’d give you an A… if not for the word *‘so’* at the beginning of the speech. Do not start a sentence with *‘so’*. Sit down. And now we will talk about the Peace of Cintra…”

The bell rang for recess. But the adepts did not react with the immediate snap and clatter of desks. They kept their calm and dignity, a distinguished tranquillity.

They were not snotty first years. They were third years. They were already fourteen. And that was important.

***

“This is the only possible solution,” Rusty assessed the status of the first of the wounded, who was covering the clean operation table with blood. “The thigh bone is crushed. The artery has not been cut, otherwise it would have been a corpse brought here. It looks like an axe blow, with which the saddle served as a wooden block. You can look for yourselves…”

Iola and Shani bent over the wounded soldier, Rusty rubbed his palms together.

“As I said, there is nothing to heal here; we will just have to cut. To work. Iola, a tourniquet. Tighten it harder. Shani, a scalpel. Not that one. The larger one for amputation.”

The wounded man kept shooting terrified glances at their hands, watching their actions through the eyes of an animal caught in a trap.

“A little magic, Marti, if you please,” The Halfling bent over the patient so as

to minimize his field of vision.

“I have to amputate son.”

“Noooo!” The wounded man said, thrashing his head, trying to escape Marti Sodergren’s hands. “I don’t want you to!”

“I have to amputate or you will die.”

“I’d rather die…” The wounded man’s movements were getting slower under the influence of the healing magic. “I’d rather die than be maimed… Let me die… I beg you… Let me die!”

“I cannot,” Rusty raised the scalpel and looked at the bright blade of immaculate steel. “I cannot let you die. I am a doctor.”

He strongly pressed the blade into the skin and cut deeply. The wounded man howled.

The sound was inhuman.

***

The messenger stopped the horse so suddenly that sparks emerged from under the hooves. Two assistants seized the halter and calmed the frothy stallion. The messenger dropped to the ground.

“Who are you?” John Natalis said. “Who sent you?”

“Lord de Ruyter…” wheezed the messenger. “We have stopped the Black Ones, but we have suffered terrible losses. Lord de Ruyter is asking for reinforcements.”

“No,” the Constable replied after a moment of silence. “You’ll have to endure. You have to!”

***

“Look here,” Rusty said pointing like a collector who was showing his collection. “Kindly look at the resulting cut from a blow to the abdomen. Someone has beat us to it and made this unfortunate amateur laparotomy. Good thing he was brought here with care and has not lost most of the important organs… At least, I hope not… What’s wrong, Shani? Why the look on your face? Up until now, have you only known men from the outside?”

“The intestines are damaged, Mister Rusty…”

“A diagnosis as accurate as evident! I don’t even have to look, just smell. A handkerchief, Iola. Marti, there is still too much blood, be so kind as to give us some of the priceless magic of yours. Shani, clamp here, you can see how much he is bleeding. Iola, scalpel.”

“Who wins?” The soldier was quite awake, his eyes bulging. “Tell me… Who wins?”

“Boy,” Rusty said hunch over the open, bloody, pulsating abdominal cavity. “That is the last thing I’d be interested in if I was in your place.”

***

On the left flank and in the centre a fierce fight still lasted, but even though the Nilfgaardian army was hard and persistent, they broke upon the King’s army like a sea wave breaks against the rocks. For there stood the brave soldiers from Maribor, Vizima and Tretogor and the grim landsknechts, the mercenary professionals, the cavalry did not scare.

And there they fought, truly like the sea against the rocks and continued to fight, and it was not possible to guess who would win, because even though the waves beat against the rock, it did not weaken or disappear and it stood there between the raging waves.

Like an old hawk, who knows where to fall and attack, so Field Marshal Menno Coehoorn knew where to strike. With the iron fist of his army, which consisted of the Deithwen division and Ard Feainn division he struck at the enemy lines above Golden Pond.

That place was fiercely defended by the troops from Brugge, but they were less armed and armoured and morale was low. They managed to hold off the attack of the Nilfgaardians. In a breath of relief two flags of the Free Company under the command of Adam Pangratt arrested the Nilfgaardians, but both sides paid dearly in blood.

However, the dwarves of the Volunteer brigade were facing a terrible siege and the threat of encirclement, which would threaten to tear apart the formation of the royal army.

Jarre dipped his pen into the inkwell. His grandchildren played in the yard, their laughter ringing like bells.

Seeing the danger threatening, however, John Natalis, attentive as a crane, understood what was happening at the time, and without waiting he sent a messenger with orders to Colonel Els…

***

In all the naivety of his seventeen years, the trumpeter, Aubry, thought that he could get down to the right wing, transmit his orders and be back up the hill in no more than ten minutes. Absolutely no more! Not on Chiquita, his light foot mare.

Even before he reached the Golden Pond, the trumpeter realised two things – He didn’t know when he would reach the right wing and he didn’t know when he would get back. And that Chiquita’s agility would be very useful to him.

At the east end of Golden Pond, fighting raged. The Black Ones fought against Brugge's cavalry which was protecting the infantry. Before the eyes of the trumpeter

from the heat of the battle rode individual riders in green, yellow and red robes who fled at a gallop towards the river. Behind them like a black river, spilled the Nilfgaardians.

Aubry jerked the reins, stopping his mare, ready to turn her and flee out of the way of the fugitives and pursuers. But his sense of duty prevailed. The trumpeter clung to the horse's neck and went into a wild gallop.

Around him was shouting and confusion, a kaleidoscopic jumble of silhouettes, the glitter of swords, crashes and rattles.

Some of the men from Brugge where backed up to the pond and put up a desperate fight, milling about their flags with a crossed anchor. On the field the Black Ones murdered the infantry who were devoid of support.

Before his eyes swirled a black cloak with a silver sun on it.

"Evgyr, Nordling!"

Aubry yelled and Chiquita excited by the howling, took off at a gallop, saving his life by putting it out of reach of the Nilfgaardian's sword. Above his head arrows whistled and flashed around the blurring silhouettes.

Where am I? Where are ours? Where is the enemy?

"Evgyr morv, Nordling!"

The thunder of hooves, neighing of horses, banging of weapons, shouting.

"Stop, you little shit! Not that way!"

A woman's voice. A woman on a chestnut stallion, in armour, her hair dishevelled and her face splattered with blood. Behind her were armed horsemen.

"Who are you?" She said, smearing the blood on her face with the back of her hand which held a sword.

"Trumpeter Aubry, Second Lieutenant to Constable Natalis… with orders for Colonels Pangratt and Els…"

"There is no way you'll get to 'Adieu' through the fighting. We'll go to the dwarves. I'm Julia Abatemarco… Fuck! They're flanking us! Ride!"

He did not have time to protest. Similarly, it would not have made sense.

After a while of furious galloping, they emerged from the dust in front of the infantry square who were defending themselves like a turtle with a wall of shields and like the skin of a hedgehog covered with spears. Over the square loomed a huge banner with crossed hammers and next to it was a pole with

skulls and horsetails.

The square who were moving and jumping around like a dog escaping from an old man waving a stick, were being attacked by the Nilfgaardians. The Ard Feainn division who thanks to their coats with the silver sun on them could not be mistaken for any other.

“Strike, Free Company!” Screamed the woman, raising her sword. “Make them pay!”

The riders – and with them Aubry – charged the Nilfgaardians.

The battle only took a few moments. But it was horrible. Then the wall of shields opened before them. They were inside the square, in a crushing ring of dwarves in mail shirts and helmets, among the Redanian infantry, the cavalry of the Brugge and the light armoured condottiere.

Julia Abatemarco – Pretty Kitty, Commander of the condottiere – who Aubry only now recognised – led him to a stocky dwarf in a helmet decorated with a red plume, sitting on a captured Nilfgaardian stallion, with a high saddle, with which he could see over the heads of his soldiers.

“Colonel Barclay Els?”

The dwarf nodded his plume and looked at the blood that covered the messenger and his mare. Aubry involuntarily blushed. It was the blood of a Nilfgaardian who one of the condottiere had cut down right next to him. He did not even draw his sword.

“Trumpeter Aubry…”

“Son of Anzelm Aubry?”

“The eldest.”

“Ha! I know your father! What have you got for me from Natalis and Foltest, trumpeter?”

“The centre formation is in the threat of a breakthrough, the Constable commands you to move your men between Golden Pond and the bank of the Cholta… To support…”

His next words were drowned out by an incredible din of shouting and neighing horses. Aubry realised how useless the orders he had brought were. How much these orders meant to Barclay Els, to Julia Abatemarco, to the dwarves with the banner with the crossed hammers, who were besieged from all side by Nilfgaard.

“I was delayed…” he wailed. “I’ve arrived too late.”

Pretty Kitty sputtered like a real cat. Barclay Els gritted his teeth.

“No, trumpeter,” he said. “Nilfgaard has arrived too early.”

***

“Congratulations ladies and myself, for a successful resection of the small intestine, colon, splenectomy and liver stitching. Take note of how long it took for us to remove the effects of what had been done to our patient in a split second in battle. I would recommend this material for philosophical reflection. Sew up the patient now, Lady Shani.”

“But I’ve never done it, Mister Rusty!”

“You have to start sometime. Sew red with red, yellow with yellow and white with white. And everything will be all right.”

***

“What did you say?” Barclay Els said yanking his beard. “What did you say, eldest son of Anzelm Aubry? Do you think we are idle here? We are under attack by Nilfgaard! It is not our fault that the men from Brugge were attacked!”

“But the orders…”

“I don’t give a shit about the orders!”

“If we do not close the gap,” he shouted over the noise, “the Black Ones will break through the front! They will break through the front! Opening our ranks, Barclay! You must march there!”

“We’ll be slaughtered before we can leave the pond! We’ll die for nothing!”

“So, what do you propose?”

The dwarf furiously cursed, took off his helmet and threw it on the ground. His eyes were wild, terrible and bloodshot. Chiquita, frightened by the roar, pulled at the reins.

“Fetch me Yarpen Zigrin and Dennis Cranmer! Hurry!”

Two dwarves waded out of the bloodiest part of the battle; it was clear at first glance. Both were covered in blood. The chainmail of one had a deep cut that was sheered at a sharp angle. The other had his head bandaged with a cloth, which was soaked in blood.

“Are you alright, Zigrin?”

“I wonder,” sighed the dwarf, “why everyone is asking me that?”

Barclay turned and fixed his eyes on the Constable’s messenger.

“This is the eldest son of Anzelm. The Constable and the King have commanded that we go to the front to help them. Make sure you keep your eyes open, trumpeter. There will be something to look at.”

***

“The plague!” Cursed Rusty, backing away from the table waving his scalpel. “Why? Damn it! Why must it be so?”

No one answered. Marti Sodergren only spread her hands. Shani bowed her head and Iola sniffed.

The patient who had just died, stared upwards, his eyes were fixed and glassy.

***

“Strike, Kill! Kill these motherfuckers!”

“At the same pace!” Barclay Els shouted. “Walk the same way! Keep the ranks tight! Stay as a group! A group!”

No one is going to believe me, thought the trumpeter Aubry. *When I tell people about this, no one will believe me. The square is breaking out of a full siege… Surrounded on all sides by cavalry, torn, beaten and harassed… And this square progresses. Advancing at the same pace, in close formation, shield to shield. Advancing, treading on corpses, pushing themselves against the elite Ard Feainn division… They were advancing.*

“Keep pace! Walk the same way!” Barclay Els shouted again. “Hold the ranks! The song, you whoresons, the song! Our song! Forward, for Mahakam!”

From the throats of a thousand dwarves came the famous Mahakam song of war.

Hooouuu! Hooouuu! Hou
Wait, fellows!
Soon you will go to hell!
This whorehouse will crumble
To its foundations!
Hooouuu! Hooouuu! Hou
“Strike, Free Company!”

Between the huge roar of the dwarves, like a thin blade of mercy, emerged the acute soprano of Julia Abatemarco. The condottieri left the square and made a counterattack on the Nilfgaardian cavalry. It was a suicide action – for the mercenaries, lacking the protection of the halberds, pikes and shields of the dwarves were exposed to the power of the Nilfgaardians attack. The pounding, yelling and the squealing of horses made the trumpeter, Aubry, instinctively curl up in his saddle. Something struck him in the back. He felt his mare become caught in the general crush and was inexorably dragged into the terrible carnage and confusion. He firmly grasped the hilt of his sword, which suddenly seemed to him to be strangely slippery and cumbersome.

After a moment he was driven across the line of shields and started to chop and fight around him like a man possessed.

“Again!” He heeded the wild cry of Pretty Kitty. “One more strike! Hold on, boys! Kill, kill! For coins as golden as the sun! To me, Free Company!”

A Nilfgaardian rider without a helmet and with the silver sun on his cloak broke in through the shields, standing in his stirrups, he hacked his axe into the dwarf who was not protected by a shield, he then opened the head of another. Aubry turned in his saddle and cut horizontally. The Nilfgaardian’s head fell to the ground. At the same time the trumpeter received a blow to the head and fell from the saddle. The crowd of people around him prevented his immediate fall to the ground and for a few moments he hung between heaven and earth between the sides of two horses. Although he was full of fear, he was not in pain for long. As soon as he hit the ground, his skull was immediately crushed by hooves.

***

After sixty-five years, when asked about those days, about the Battle of Brenna, about the square marching over corpses of friends and foes, advancing towards Golden Pond, the old woman smiled, further wrinkling her face, which was already wrinkled and dark as a prune.

Impatiently – or maybe just pretending impatience, she waved her trembling, bony hand which was twisted with arthritis.

“Neither side,” she lisped, “could gain an advantage. We were in the middle and surrounded. They attacked us from all sides. We simply killed. They, us and we them… khekhe-khh… They us and we them…”

The old woman controlled her coughing with effort. The listeners who were closest saw her wipe away a tear that was making its way through her maze of wrinkles and old scars.

“They were as brave as us,” she muttered. “Khe-khe… And we were just as strong and stubborn and fierce as they. Us and them…”

She paused. For a long time. The listeners urged her, watching her smile at the memories, with its glory. Smiling at the blurred faces of those who survived through the fog of forgetfulness. Those that could not been killed by liquor, narcotics or tuberculosis.

“We were equally brave,” ended Julia Abatemarco. “Neither side was strong enough to be braver. But we… We remained braver one minute more than they.”

***

“Marti, I beg you, give us more of your wonderful magic! Just a little bit more! These fellows guts are unfortunately one big stew, garnished with lots of chain mail rings! I cannot do anything if he keeps flopping around like a fish out of water! Shani, damn it, hold the clamp! Iola! Are you asleep, dammit? Tighten!

Squeeezze!”

Iola, breathing heavily, swallowed saliva with effort. *I’m going to faint,* she thought. *I can’t stand it. I can’t bear it any longer, the smell, the awful mixture of blood, puke, faeces, urine, intestinal contents, sweat, fear and death. I cannot endure it any longer, the constant crying, the howling, the bloody, slimy hands reaching towards me, as if I was their salvation, their refuge, their lives… I cannot stand the nonsense, what we are doing here. Because it is nonsense. On big, huge, meaningless nonsense. I cannot stand any more strain and fatigue. They continue to deliver more and more… I cannot stand it. I cannot stand it. I’m going to throw up. To faint. I will be ridiculed…*

“Bandage! Swab! Clamp! Not here! Be careful what you’re doing! If you make another mistake, I’ll smack you on your red head! Do you hear? I’ll smack you on the head!”

Great Melitele help me. Help me, goddess.

“Look! He is improving! Another clamp, Priestess. Here, clamp the vessel! Well done, Iola, keep it up! Marti, wipe your eyes and face. And me too…”

***

Where does this pain come from, thought Constable John Natalis. *What hurts me so much?*

Oh.

He unclenched his fists.

***

“Strike!” Cried Kees van Lo, waving his hands. “Strike, Lord Marshal! Their line permits! If we do not hesitate to strike, we can break them! The Great Sun will crush them!”

Menno Coehoorn bit his nails. He noticed that there were people watching him and quickly pulled his fingers out of his mouth.

“Strike,” Kees van Lo repeated calmly. “Nauzicaa is ready.”

“Nauzicaa must be,” Menno said brusquely. “Daerlan also needs to be. Lord Faoiltiarna!”

The commander of the Vrihedd brigade, Isengrim Faoiltiarna, called the ‘Iron Wolf’, turned to the marshal his face was distorted by a terrible scar that extended across his forehead, brow, the bridge of his nose and to his cheek.

“You will strike there,” Menno Coehoorn pointed his baton. “There, where the Temerian and Redanian lines come together. Right there.”

The elf saluted. His disfigured face did not move, even his great deep eyes did not change expression.

Our allies, thought Menno. Our allies. *We have fought together. Against a common enemy. But I do not understand these elves at all. They are so strange. So different.*

***

"Curious," Rusty tried to wipe his face with his elbow, but his elbow was also bloody. Iola hurried to his aid. "Interesting," said the surgeon, "the patient was stabbed with a pitchfork… one of the teeth pierced his heart, oh, look here. The cardiac chamber is breached, the aorta is almost separated… But he was still breathing a little while ago. Here, on the table. On the battlefield he was pierced through the heart and he lived still on my table…"

"You mean he died?" Said a grim member of the cavalry. "We were carrying him here in vain?"

"It is never in vain," Rusty held his gaze. "But you are right, he has died. The patient has died. Take him away… damn! Come take a look girls!"

Marti, Iola and Shani bowed over the dead soldier. Rusty lifted the eyelids of the dead man.

"Have you ever seen anything like that?"

The three began to tremble.

"Yes," all three answered simultaneously. They looked at each other in amazement.

"I have already seen it," said Rusty. "He's a witcher. A mutant. That explains to us why he survived for so long… He was your comrade-in-arms? Or did you bring him here by chance?"

"He was our companion, Sir Medic," a second soldier, a small man with a bandage head said gloomily. "From our squadron, as a volunteer. A master swordsman. His name was Coen."

"Did you know he was a witcher?"

"We did. But he was a good friend."

"Ah," Rusty sighed, looking at four soldiers bringing in another wounded in a bloodsoaked cloak. A young man judging by how thin he was. "That's too bad… I'd like to do the autopsy on this respectable witcher. This would be a fine opportunity, I could even write a dissertation, I could take a look at his organs. But there is no time, remove him from the table! Shani, water. Marti, disinfectant. Iola… Hey, girl, are you crying again? What is it this time…"

"Nothing, Mister Rusty. It is nothing. I will be alright."

***

"I feel lied to, cheated, robbed," said Triss Merigold.

Nenneke did not answer for a long time, she gazed from the terrace overlooking the temple's garden, where the priestesses and novices devoted themselves to the spring works.

"You made a choice," she said finally. "You chose your path, Triss. Your own destiny. Voluntarily. This is no time to grieve."

"Nenneke," the enchantress looked down. "I cannot really tell you more that what I have said. Believe me and forgive me."

"Who am I to forgive? What benefits will you receive from my forgiveness?"

"I can see," Triss burst out, "your eyes looking at me! You and your priestesses. I can see their eyes asking me the question. What are you doing here, sorceress? Why are you not there with Iola, Eurneid, Katje, Myrrha? Jarre?"

"You're exaggerating, Triss."

The sorceress stared into the distance, into the woods beyond the temple's walls, to the distant smoke of fires. Nenneke was silent, thinking, she too was far away. Where the war was raging and bloody. She thought of the girls sent there.

"They," Triss said, "refused me."

Nenneke was silent.

"They refused me everything," Triss repeated. "So clever, so reasonable, so logical… How could I not believe them when they explained that there are important and less important issues, and those that are less important should be given up without a second thought, to sacrifice them for the more important without a shadow of grief? That it does not make sense to save people that you know and love, because they are just individuals and the fate of these individuals are irrelevant to the fate of the world. That there is no sense for the struggle in defence of honour and ideals, for they are empty concepts? That the real battle for the fate of the world is somewhere else, and will be fought somewhere else? And I feel robbed. Robbed of the possibility of committing follies. I cannot go madly hurrying after Ciri to help her, I cannot run like crazy to save Geralt and Yennefer. Not only that, there is a war, which you have sent your girls… A war, that Jarre fled to and I am refused the possibility to even stand on a hill. To once again stand on a hill. Knowing this time, I'd made the right decision."

"Everyone has their decisions and everyone has their hills, Triss," the priestess said quietly. "Everyone. You cannot escape your own."

***

The entrance to the tent was busy. They brought another wounded soldier. Accompanied by several men. One of them, a knight in full plate armour, was shouting orders.

“Hurry up, you damn slackers! Faster! Put him here, here! Hey you! Surgeon!”

“I’m busy,” Rusty did not even look up. “Please put him with the other wounded on the stretchers. I’ll deal with him as soon as I’m done.”

“You’ll take care of him immediately, you fucking quack! This is the noble Count of Garramone himself!”

“This hospital,” Rusty raised his voice, angry because stuck in the bowels of a wounded man was the broken tip of a crossbow bolt which had slipped out of his tweezers, “has very little to do with democracy. You bring up mainly, barons, counts, marquises and earls. The ordinary wounded on the battlefield, nobody cares about. But everyone is equal here. At least on my table.”

“What?”

“Never mind,” Rusty said, again probing the wound with his tweezers, “it doesn’t matter if I was dragging a piece of metal from a serf or an aristocrat. All who lie on my table are equal to a beggar prince.”

“What?”

“Your Count must wait his turn.”

“Halfling fuck!”

“Help me, Shani. Take the other clamp. Beware of the artery! Marti, a little bit of magic, if I may ask. We have a bleeder.”

The knight took a step forward, his armour and teeth gnashing.

“I’ll have you hanged!” He shouted. “You’ll hang, cursed non-human!”

“Shut up, Papperbrock,” said the slightly wounded nobleman. “Shut up, leave me here and get back to the fight.”

“But, my lord! I cannot…”

“That’s an order!”

From the other side of the canvas came the roar and rattle of battle, the snorting of horses and wild cries. The wounded in the hospital howled in different voices.

“Please take a look,” Rusty raised the tweezers and demonstrated as he finally removed the tip. “This was undoubtedly manufactured by a clever craftsman, to feed a large family. It shows amazing skill and dexterity. The way this gizmo sticks in the human intestines is ingenious. Long live progress.”

He threw the bloody tip into a bucket and looked at the operating table, the wounded man had fainted dead away during his oration.

“Sew him up and take him away,” he nodded. “If he is lucky, he’ll live. Bring me the next one in the queue. The one with the smashed head.”

“He,” Marti Sodergren said calmly, “has just released his place in line.”

Rusty took a deep breath, without unnecessary comment walked away from the table and stood by the hurt Earl. His hands and apron were splattered with blood like a butcher. Daniel Etcheverry, Count of Garramone, paled even more.

“Well,” said Rusty. “It’s your turn Count. Lift him up onto the table. What have we here? Oh, this joint can no longer be saved, it is broken. If left it will grind your bones to mush.

“Now this will hurt, but don’t worry, it will be like in battle. Tourniquet, scalpel, saw. We will amputate, my lord.”

Daniel Etcheverry, Earl of Garramone, who until now had bravely endured the pain, howled like a wolf. Before he could again clench his jaw, Shani, moving fast, thrust a piece of soft wood between his teeth.

***

“Your Majesty! Lord Constable!”

“Speak up, boy.”

“The Volunteer army and the Free Company are nearing Golden Pond… The dwarves and the condottieri stand firm, though with severe losses. It is said that Adam ‘Adieu’ Pangratt is dead, Frontino is dead and Julia Abatemarco is dead… All the commanders. The Dorian banner, which were sent to help were cut down to the man…”

“Withdraw, Lord Constable,” Foltest said quietly but clearly. “If you ask me, it is time to fight a withdrawal. Let Bronibor’s men stand against the Black Ones. Now! Immediately! Otherwise they’ll break through the army’s front line, penetrate and end us all.”

John Natalis didn’t answer; he watched another messenger from afar who raced towards them on horseback, from which foam flew.

“Take a breath man. Take a breath and pass on the message.”

“They broke… They broke the front… Elves, the Vrihedd brigade… Lord de Ruyter conveys a message to your lordships…”

“What is it? Speak!”

“It is time to save your lives.”

John Natalis look up to the heavens.

“Blenckert,” he said flatly. “Let Blenckert arrive. Or let the night come.”

***

From all sides hooves thundered around the tent, the air was filled with screams and the whinnies of horses. A soldier burst into the hospital followed by two orderlies.

“Run people!” Shouted the soldier. “Save yourselves! Nilfgaard has won! Defeat! Doom!”

“Clamp!” Rusty said dodging blood that was spurting from the broken arteries of the patient on his operation table. “Clamp! Swab! Here, Shani! Marti, do something about the bleeding…”

Before the tent someone screamed like an animal. The scream trailed off to a grunt. A horse whinnied and something fell with a clang and a boom. A crossbow bolt ripped through the canvas, whistling, it flew to the opposite side of the tent, luckily too high to threaten any of the wounded lying on litters.

“Nilfgaard!” The soldier shouted again, in a high trembling voice. “Surgeon! Did you not hear what I said! Nilfgaard has broken our lines, and are killing everyone! Run!”

Rusty took over from Marti Sodergren, taking her needle and began to sew. The patient lay motionless for a long time, but was still alive – his heart was beating. It was clearly visible.

“I don’t want to die!” Shouted one of the wounded who were conscious. The soldier cursed and launched himself at the exit, he suddenly fell back, screaming, splattering blood, and collapsed to the ground. Iola who was kneeling beside the litter, jumped back.

Suddenly there was silence.

This is bad, Rusty thought when he saw who was entering the tent. Elves with silver lightning on their cloaks. The Vrihedd brigade. The notorious Vrihedd brigade.

“They are being treated,” said the first of the elves, tall with a narrow face and blue eyes.

No one answered. Rusty felt his hands shake. He quickly handed the needle to Marti. He saw Shani turn pale as chalk.

“What is the meaning of this?” Said the elf ominously. “Why are there so many being treated? The wounded should be there in the field of battle, dying of their wounds. And you are healing them here? It does not make sense. It appears that we have different interests.”

He bent and drove his sword into the chest of a wounded soldier closest to the door. Another elf crossed to a second wounded man and put his sword through him. The third wounded man was conscious and tried to stop the deadly stabbing with the thickly bandaged stump of his right arm.

Shani screamed shrilly. It was a sharp cry that pierced. It drowned out the heavy, inhuman grunt from the crippled man. Iola fell across a stretcher and used

her own body to protect another wounded. Her face was as white as the canvas dressing. The Elf's eyes narrowed.

"*Va vort, beanna!*" He snapped, "Get off, or I'll stab you both, *Dh'oine!*"

"Get out of here!" Rusty found himself with three jumps in front of Iola and stood between her and the elf. "Get out of my hospital, murderers! Out there you can kill each other! But get out of here!"

The elf looked down. The small, stocky halfling, trembling in fear only reached just above his belt.

"*Blorde Pherian,*" he hissed. "Human slave! Get out of my way!"

"Not on your life!" The surgeon's teeth chattered, but his words were strong.

A second elf ran forward and pushed the halfling aside with a spear. Rusty fell to his knees. The tall elf violent jerked Iola off of the wounded man and raised his sword.

He froze when he saw the black cloak rolled up under the casualty's head with the silver flames of Deithwen division on it. And the distinction of Colonel.

"Yaevinn!" An elf entering the tent shouted, his dark hair collected in a braid. "*Caemm, veloe! Ess'evgyriad a'dh'oine a'en va! Ess'tess!*"

The tall elf looked for a moment at the wounded colonel then at the watery eyes filled with fear of the surgeon. Then he turned on his heel and left.

From outside again came the sound of horses hooves pounding, screaming and the clash of iron.

"There are the Black Ones! Kill them!" Shouted a thousand voices. Someone outside the tent again roared like an animal and then ended in a grunt.

Rusty tried to stand, but his legs would not hear of it. His hands shook.

Iola shook with strong spasms of weeping, curled up next to the stretcher of the wounded Nilfgaardian, in a foetal position.

Shani was crying, without trying to hide the tears, but still held the clamps. Marti sewed quietly, only her lips moved in a silent monologue.

Rusty was still unable to stand up. His eyes met the eyes of an orderly pressed into the corner of the tent.

"Give me a sip of vodka," he said with effort. "Don't tell me you don't have any. I know you beasts always do."

***

General Blenheim Blenckert stood in his stirrups and stretched his neck as he listened to the echoes of battle.

"Form up the troops," he ordered. "Then trot over the hill. From what the scouts are saying, we will run directly into the right wing of the Black Ones."

“We’ll give them hell!” Cried one of the young lieutenants, a youth with a thin, silky beard. Blenckert gave him a side-long glance.

“Bring the standard to the front,” he ordered and drew his sword. “And give the battle cry, ‘Redania!’ with all the power in your lungs! Let Foltest and Natalis’s boys know that the relief is here.”

***

Count Kobus de Ruyter had fought many battles in the last forty years. He had fought them since his sixteenth year of life. De Ruyter’s had been soldiers for eight generations. The roar of battle, the rattle and crash of steel that was unbearable for everyone, Kobus de Ruyter perceived as a musical symphony. And at this moment he heard in the concert, new notes, chords and tones.

“Hooray!” He yelled, waving his mace. “Redania! Redania is coming! Eagles! Eagles!”

Over the top of the hill from the north appeared riders. Above the head of the riders and horses fluttered a huge banner with the silver eagle of Redania.

“Relief!” Yelled de Ruyter. “Here comes relief! Hooray! Strike at the Black Ones!”

The soldier from eight generations of soldiers noticed that the Nilfgaardians were turning in a counterattack and were moving to tighten their formation. He knew that it must be avoided.

“Follow me,” he ordered and grabbing the banner from the hands of the standard bearer. “Follow me!”

They attacked. They attacked like mad men, in a terrible but effective way. They did not allow the Venendal division to form up against the Redanian cavalry. Their attack devastated the Nilfgaardians. The sky rocked with desperate screams.

Kobus de Ruyter never saw or heard. A stray crossbow bolt struck him directly in the head. The Count slipped from the saddle and fell from his horse; the standard he held covered him like a shroud.

Eight generations of de Ruyter’s, who were following the battle from the other world, nodded with appreciation.

***

“You could say that the Nordlings were saved that day by a miracle. Or a cluster of coincidences that nobody has been able to provide… It is true that Restif de Montholon writes in his book that Marshal Coehoorn made a mistake in assessing the strength and intentions of the enemy. That he took too much of a risk, splitting the Centre Group Army and taking only cavalry units to the north.

That he plunged recklessly into a battle in which he had the upper hand. That his reconnaissance was underestimated and therefore did not know about the Redanian auxiliary army…"

"Cadet Puttkammer! The dubious 'works' of Mister Montholon are not on the reading list of this school! And his imperial majesty has spoken out quite critically about this book! So cadet, do not quote it here. Indeed, I am surprised. So far your responses had been pretty good, even excellent, and suddenly you begin to clamour about miracles and clusters of circumstances, to let you end, allows you to criticize the military capabilities of Menno Coehoorn, one of the greatest leaders of the Empire. Cadet Puttkammer and the other cadet, if you want to pass the exam, listen to me and remember – At Brenna there were no miracles or coincidences, our defeat was caused by an extensive plot! Not only by hostile marauders, but also by subversive elements within our own ranks – various malcontents, cosmopolitans, renegades and traitors! An abscess, which later was burned with a white hot iron. But before that happened, those nasty traitors, betrayed their own nation and wove their webs and traps and built their networks. They tangled and betrayed Marshal Coehoorn, then deceived and misled him! They were rogues, without honour, conscience or simple…"

***

"Motherfuckers," wheezed Menno Coehoorn, looking through his spyglass at the right wing. "Cursed motherfuckers. I'll find you, just wait and I'll teach you what it means to reconnoitre. De Wyngalt! Personally find the officer who was on patrol behind the hills to the north. And hang his entire patrol."

"As you command," Ouder de Wyngalt, the Marshal's aide clicked his heels. Of course he did not know that Lamarr Flaut, the wanted commander from the reconnaissance patrol was now dying under the hooves of the Redanian cavalry, whose arrival at the fight he did not identify because of his own cowardice. De Wyngalt obviously could not know that for himself there only remained two hours of life.

"How many are their Sir Trahe," said Coehoorn, without taking his eye from the spyglass. "According to your estimate?"

"About ten thousand," the commander of the Seventh Daerlan replied dryly. "Mainly Redania, but I also see the banners of Aedirn… There is also a unicorn, so Kaedwen as well… At least one squadron…"

***

The Dun Banner galloped, horses hooves kicking up sand and gravel.

"Forward, Dun Banner!" Roared Centurion Digod, drunk as usual. "Kill, kill!

For Kaedwen! Kaedwen!”

Damn, but I want to piss, Zyvik thought. *I should have peed before the battle… Now there is no time.*

“Forward, Dun Banner!”

Always the Dun Banner. When things go wrong, the Dun Banner. Who is sent as an expeditionary force to Temeria? The Dun Banner. Always the Dun Banner. And I want to piss.

They arrived. Zyvik screamed, turned in his saddle and cut at an ear, shattering the shoulder and neck of a rider in a black coat with a silver star with eight points.

“The Dun Banner! Kaedwen! Attack, attack!”

With the pounding and crash of hooves and the scream of humans, the Dun Banner collided with the Nilfgaardians.

***

“De Mellis-Stoke and Braibant can handle this relief,” Elan Trahe, the commander of the Seventh Daerlan brigade said calmly. “The forces are balanced, nothing can happen, that cannot be fixed. The left wing is strengthened by Tyrconnel’s division and the right wing has Magne and Venendal. And we… we can tip the balance, Lord Marshal…”

“We will strike the breach opened by the elves,” Coehoorn an experienced strategist said immediately. “They will move over to the head and invoke panic. Yes, that’s what we’ll do, the Great Sun! To the banners, gentlemen! Nauzicaa and Seventh, your time has come!”

“Long live the Emperor!” Kees van Lo yelled.

“Mister de Wyngalt,” the Marshal turned away. “Gather the attendants and the personal guard. It is the end of inactivity. We’re going to attack together with the Seventh Daerlan.”

Ouder de Wyngalt paled, but immediately caught himself.

“Long live the Emperor!” He said, his voice barely wavering.

***

Rusty cut, the wounded screamed and clawed at the table. Iola, fought bravely with the movements of his head, tightening the tourniquet. From the entrance of the tent came the sound of Shani’s raised voice.

“What are you doing? Have you all gone mad? We are trying to save the living here and you come here dragging the dead?”

“But it is our own Baron Anzelm Aubry, Lady Healer! The commander of the squadron!”

“He was the commander of the squadron! Now he’s dead! You’ve managed to bring him here in one piece only by the fact that his armour is tight! Take him away. This is a hospital, not a graveyard!”

“But, Lady Healer…”

“Do not block the entrance! Oh, there carry in that one that still breathes. Or so it seems. Or maybe it is just gas.”

Rusty snorted, but then frowned.

“Shani! Come here!”

“Remember, brat,” Rusty said through clenched teeth, leaning over crushed legs. “Cynicism is only permitted to a surgeon after the first ten years of practice. Do you understand?”

“Yes, Mister Rusty.”

“Take a scrapper and remove the periosteum… Damn we should anesthetize a bit… Where is Marti?”

“Puking at the front of tent,” Shani said without a hit of cynicism. “Like a cat.”

“Sorceresses,” Rusty picked up a saw, “instead of thinking of various terrible and powerful spells, they should focus on inventing one. So that they can cast it as a minor spell. For example, the anaesthetic. Without the various problems and side effects like puking.”

The saw grated on bone. The wounded soldier howled.

“Tighten the tourniquet harder, Iola!”

The bone finally gave way. Rusty put away the saw and then wiped his sweaty forehead.

“Veins and vessels,” he nodded out of habit, but in vain, because before he even finished the sentence, the girls had already come over. He took the severed leg from the table and threw it in the corner, on a pile of other severed limbs. The wounded man had not howled or screamed for some time.

“Unconscious or dead?”

“Fainted, Mister Rusty.”

“Great. Sew the stump, Shani. Bring in the next one! Iola go and check if Marti has finished vomiting everything.”

“I am curious,” Iola said quietly, without looking up, “how many years of experience do you have, Mister Rusty. A hundred?”

***

After several minutes of forced march that raised a cloud of dust, the cries or the Decurion’s and Centurions finally stopped and the Vizima Regiment

deployed into battle lines. Jarre panting and drinking in air like a fish saw Voivode Bronibor parading along the lines on his beautiful sorrel covered with armour plates, the Voivode was also dressed in full armour, and his armour was covered in blue though which made Bronibor look like a huge tin mackerel.

“How are you, soldiers?” Bronibor shouted to his men.

The ranks of pikemen responded with a roar that echoed like distant thunder.

“You’re making a lot of noise,” the Voivode said, turning his horse and walking back down the line, “that means, you’re doing well. When you’re not doing well you whine and moan like old ladies. I can see from your faces that you are dying to enter the battle, that you dream to fight and cannot wait to take on the Nilfgaardians! Eh, soldiers of Vizima? Then I have good news for you! Your dreams will be fulfilled in an instant. In a short moment.”

The Pikemen murmured again. Bronibor meanwhile arrived at the end of the line, turned his horse and slowly rode back. He spoke further and tapped his baton on his decorated saddle pommel.

“You have swallowed dust, infants, marching behind the knights! Until now, instead of glory and booty, you have been smelling horseshit! You lack power and you almost did not reach the field of honour and glory even today, slackers. But in the end you still manage to get my heartfelt congratulations. In this country, whose name I have forgotten, you can finally show your worth as soldiers. That cloud you seen in the field is the Nilfgaardian cavalry, which aims to destroy our army by attacking the flank and pushing our forces into the swamp near the river, whose name I have forgotten, too. But you famous Vizima pikemen, will defend the honour of King Foltest and Constable Natalis by filling in the gap created by our ranks. You will close the gap with your breasts, halting the Nilfgaardians charge. Rejoice, eh, comrades? Are you bursting with pride?”

Jarre, squeezing the shaft of his pike, looked around. Nothing pointed to the fact that the soldiers were happy with the prospect of the approaching fight, and if they were proud of their task, their pride was skilfully masked. Melfi, who was to his right, murmured a prayer to himself. To his left, Deuslax, an optimistic professional, sucked up snot, coughed and cursed to himself nervously.

Bronibor turned his horse and straightened in the saddle.

“I did not hear you!” He bellowed. “I asked if you are fucking bursting with pride?”

This time the pikemen, seeing no other way out, roared with a loud voice that they were proud. Jarre also roared. Just like everyone else.

“Good!” The Voivode turned his horse to face the army. “Now rally!

Centurions, what are you waiting for? Form a square, front row kneeling, second row remain standing! Plant your pikes! Not by this side, you idiot! Yes I'm talking to you, hairy bastard! Move closer, shoulder to shoulder! Ah, now you look terrific! Almost like you are an army!"

Jarre found himself in the second row. He pressed the butt of the pike into the ground and gripped it in fear in his sweaty hands. Melfi dimly repeated several words that were mostly related to the intimate details of the life of the Nilfgaardians, dogs, bitches, kings, constables, governors and all their mothers.

The cloud in the field approached.

"Don't waste your farts or chattering teeth now!" Bronibor cried. "You can't use those noises to scare the Nilfgaardian horses! Let there be no mistake! Moving towards us is the Nauzicaa and Seventh Daerlan divisions, an excellent, well-trained army! They cannot be scared! They cannot be beat! You have to kill them! Raise those pikes higher!"

From the distance came the sound of hooves, still far away but growing louder. The earth began to shake. In the cloud of dust, the sun sparkled off of flashing blades.

"You are fucking lucky, men of Vizima," the Voivode shouted again. "You are not using a normal pike but a new type which is twenty feet long! While the swords of the Nilfgaardians are only three and a half feet long. You know how to count? They know how to count too.

"But they think that you will not hold and show your true nature, the nature of a coward. The Black Ones are counting on those pikes hitting the ground and you men scurrying across the field like rabbits and then they can cut you down comfortably without complication.

"Remember, shitheads, although fear can lend your feet speed, you cannot outrun a horse. Those who want to live, who want fame and booty, will resist! Resist viciously! Resist like a wall! And keep the ranks!"

Jarre looked around. The crossbowmen that were behind the line of pikemen were already turning their cranks, within the square, halberds, javelins, spears and pitchforks were being lifted. The ground shook harder still. They could make out the black wall of the cavalry rushing towards them, and could make out individual riders.

"Mama, mama," Melfi repeated with trembling lips. "Mama, mama…"

"…Fucking whoresons," Deuslax murmured.

The rumbling increased. Jarre went to lick his lips but failed. His tongue had stopped moving, it had become strangely stiff and was a dry as sawdust. The

rumbling grew louder.

“Get ready!” Bronibor roared, drawing his sword. “Put your shoulder to your neighbour! None of you go to war alone! The only cure for the fear you feel is that pike in your hands! Ready for the battle! Put the pikes into the chest of the horse! What must we do, soldiers of Vizima? That is a question?”

“Resist!” The pikemen shouted in unison. “Resist like a wall! Keep the ranks!”

Jarre roared with everyone. From under the hooves of the approaching horses sprayed gravel and sand. The riders they carried howled like demons, waving their swords.

Jarre held onto his pike, hid his head on his shoulder and closed his eyes.

***

Jarre, without interrupting his writing, used the stump of his hand to wave away a wasp that was hovering over the inkwell.

Field Marshal Coehoorn’s plan failed – his counterattack against the flank was stopped by the heroic Vizima infantry and Voivode Bronibor, even though they paid a bloody tax.

While the men of Vizima resisted the strong pressure from Nilfgaard on the left flank the enemy continued on the right. Soon our troops gained the upper hand on the right flank as well, where the dwarves and tough condottiere resisted Nilfgaard’s grip. From our ranks arose a triumphant cry, and in the hearts of our fighters enter a new spirit. The confidence of the Nilfgaardian soldiers fled, their arms grew heavy and their strength ebbed. Some of them retreated, others still resisted, but now uncoordinated, in scattered groups, soon besieged from all sides.

Then the enemy commander realised that the battle was lost. Surrounded by his loyal officers and knights, they brought him a new horse and pleaded with him to escape and save his life. But in the Field Marshal’s chest beat a brave heart.

“It is not right,” he cried, pushing away the reins being handed to him. “Only a coward would flee from the field, where the empire has lost so many good men.”

Then brave Menno Coehoorn said…

***

“There is no way to escape,” said Menno Coehoorn soberly, looking around the battlefield. “They have us surrounded.”

“Give me your coat and helmet, sir.” Captain Sievers wiped sweat and blood

from his face. “Take my things and horse… Do not protest! You must survive, Lord Marshal. Your life, your skills are too valuable for the empire, irreplaceable… My Daerlan will hit the Nordlings, they will be attracted to us, and you can try to break out down there by the pond…”

“I shall leave,” Coehoorn muttered, grabbing the reins given to him.

“It is an honour,” Seivers stood up in the saddle. “We are soldiers! Of the Seventh Daerlan!”

“Good luck,” Coehoorn murmured, throwing a cloak with the silver scorpion around his shoulders. “Seivers?”

“Yes, Lord Marshal?”

“Nothing. Good luck, kid.”

“You too, sir. Behind me, men!”

Coehoorn stared after them for a long time, until the point where Sievers’ group with screaming and the pounding of hooves, collided with the condottieri. The condottieri outnumbered them and other units rushed in to help. The Black cloaks disappeared among the condottieri gray and everything was enveloped in dust.

A significant cough from de Wyngalt brought Field Marshal Coehoorn back to reality. He adjusted the harness and stirrups and mounted the stallion.

“Let’s go!” He ordered.

At first they were fine. The Nordlings made a gap in their defences, as they concentrated their forces on doggedly attacking the last division of soldiers who had survived the destruction of the Nauzicaa brigade. The Marshal made his way out of the encirclement, but not without obstacles. The Nilfgaardians had to fight the light cavalry, who according to their colours were from Brugge.

Coehoorn stopped pretending heroism, he just wanted to survive. He looked back at his private guards, struggling with the cavalry, he rode hastily with his assistants towards the river, flattening himself and clinging to his horse’s neck.

The way was clear on the other side of the river, behind some bent willows, was an empty plain, were he could see no armies. Ouder de Wyngalt also saw this and shouted with triumph.

Too soon.

The slow lazy current of the steam was the only thing that separated them from the green field. They came at it at a full gallop, after a couple of steps the horses sank up to their stomachs into a swamp.

The Marshal flew across the stallion’s head and landed in the mud. All around him horses and people screamed. Amidst the pandemonium Menno

suddenly heard a different sound. A sound that signified death.

The sound of arrows.

He lunged towards the river. Cutting through deep mud. Beside him a wading aide fell on his face in the mud, the Marshal saw an arrow in his back. At the same time he felt a hard blow to his head. He staggered, but did not fall, because he was up to mid-thigh in the marsh.

He wanted to scream, but only managed to croak.

I'm alive, he thought with relief, still alive. A horse who was trying to free itself from the clutches of the stick mud had kicked the Marshal's helmet, smashing the plate and cutting his cheek, smashing his teeth and slashing his tongue… I'm bleeding… I can taste blood… But I'm alive…

Again he heard the sound of a bow, the whistle of arrows and the crack of thunder as the bolts pierced through armour, the shouting, the neighing of horses and the splash of blood.

The Marshal looked back and saw at the edge of the shooters small, stock, squat figures in chainmail and helmets. *Dwarves,* he thought.

The sound of ropes from the crossbows, the whistle of bolts. The neighing of terrified horses. The sound of screaming form people trapped in the mud and water.

Ouder de Wyngalt turned towards the shooters and called to surrender, in a high, squeaky voice he begged for mercy and offered ransom. He grabbed his sword by the blade, the internationally known gesture and held it towards the dwarves. The gesture was not understood or wrongly understood – two arrows hit him in the chest so hard that the impact almost lifted him out of the mud.

Coehoorn ripped the damaged helmet from his head. He knew the Nordling language well enough.

"Mmmenno… Coehoorn…" He stammered, spitting blood. "Mmarshal… Coehoorn…"

"What is he spluttering, Zoltan?" One of the dwarves wondered aloud.

"Who cares, fuck this dog and his chatter! See the embroidery on his cloak, Munro?"

"A silver scorpion! Haaa! Guys, nail the motherfucker! For Caleb Stratton!"

"For Caleb!"

The strings rang. Coehoorn received one arrow in his chest, one in the groin and one below the collar bone.

The Nilfgaardian Field Marshal fell back into the slush, knotweed and pondweed and disappeared under the weight of his armour.

Who the devil is Caleb Stratton, he thought, *I've never even heard of Caleb…*

Turbid water, dense with blood and mud from the Cholta River closed over his head and into his lungs.

***

She left the tent to get some fresh air. Then she saw him sitting next to the blacksmith's bench.

"Jarre?"

He raised his eyes. In them was a void.

"Iola," he said with difficulty, his lips swollen. "How are you…?"

"What a question!" She immediately interrupted him. "A better question is how did you get here?"

"We brought our commander… Voivode Bronibor… He's hurt…"

"But so are you! Show me your hand! Goddess! You're bleeding to death!"

Jarre stared at her, but Iola suddenly began to wonder if he was seeing anything.

"There was a battle," said the boy, his teeth chattering. "We must stand like a wall… firmly in the ranks… It was easier to carry the wounded to a military hospital… The severely wounded. Orders."

"Show me your hand."

Jarre gave a short cry, his teeth chatter as if in fever. Iola frowned.

"It looks bad… Jarre, Jarre… Mother Nenneke will be angry… Come with me."

She saw him pale when he entered the tent. When he smelt the stench. He staggered. She steadied him. She saw him staring at the bloody table. At the man who lay there. At the surgeon, the little halfling who jumped suddenly, stomped his feet, cursed, swore and hurled his scalpel to the ground.

"What the hell! Fuck! Why? Why?"

Nobody answered the question.

"Who was that?"

"Voivode Bronibor," Jarre said in a weak voice, looking straight ahead, his eyes blank. "Our commander… We stood in firm ranks. Order. Like a wall. And Melfi killed…"

"Mister Rusty," Iola said. "This man is a friend of mine… He is hurt…"

"He is still on his feet," the surgeon said coolly. "And this is expecting a trepanation. There is no room for favouritism…"

At this point, Jarre with great sensitivity dramatically fainted and fell to the floor. The halfling snorted irritably.

“Well, well, get him on the table,” he commanded. “Ah, his hand. I wonder what is holding it on? Probably his sleeve. Iola, tourniquet. Harder! Do not dare cry here! Shani, give me the saw!”

With a sickening screech the saw bit into the crushed bones of the elbow joint. Jarre woke up and shouted. Awfully, shrilly – but briefly. Once the bone gave way, he immediately fainted again.

***

And so the power of Nilfgaard lay in the dirt and dust of the fields of Brenna, and the march north by the Empire was laid to an end. The losses for the Empire amounted to forty thousand killed and captured men. The foundation of Elite Knights fell. They died in captivity or went missing without a trace like such as the leaders, Menno Coehoorn, Braibant, de Mellis-Stoke, van Lo, Tyrconnel, Eggebracht and others, whose names have not been preserved in our archives.

Brenna was indeed the beginning of the end. But it is worth writing that this battle would have been a small stone in the building and its importance would have been small if the fruits of victory had not been used wisely. Constable John Natalis did not rest on his laurels, but immediately went to the south. An unexpected counterattack led by Adam Pangratt and Julia Abatemarco surprised two divisions of the Third Army which were running late to relieve Coehoorn, and were routed nec nuntius cladis. At this news the rest of the Centre Group Army crossed shamefully back over the Yaruga and escaped in a hurry, and Foltest and Natalis followed on their heels. The Imperials lost their baggage train and all their siege engines which they planned to use to conquer Vizima, Gors Velen and Novigrad.

Like an avalanche rolling down from the mountains into the valley that collects more and more snow and gains power, so did the consequences of the Battle of Brenna provide more damage to the Nilfgaardians. The Verden Group Army was heavily afflicted by pirate raids and attacks from Skellige and King Ethain from Cidaris. When Commander Duke de Wett learned of the disaster at Brenna and the news reached him that Foltest and John Natalis had ordered a forced march, he immediately sounded a retreat and in panic fled across the river to Cintra and escaping with significant losses to his troops, because word had gotten around about Nilfgaard’s defeat and a new rebellion was rising in force in Verden. Only troops remained in the forts of Nastrog, Rozrog and Bodrog and after the Peace of Cintra they emerged with honour with banners aloft.

Meanwhile, in Aedirn, the news of what happened at Brenna caused the

antagonised Kings Demavend and Henselt to join together in arms against Nilfgaard's East Group Army, which was led by Duke Ardal aep Dahy into the Pontar valley, and unable to resist the combined forces of the two kings. With the addition of the strength of the troops from Redania and the guerrilla squads of Queen Meve, who undertook combat actions in the rear of the enemy, they forced Nilfgaard to Aldersberg. Ardal aep Dahy prepared for battle, but due to fate he suddenly became serious ill, perhaps from spoiled food. He got colic and diarrhoea and two days later died in pain. Demavend and Henselt, without waiting, launched an attack against Nilfgaard in Aldersberg, surely because of historical justice, Nilfgaard suffered a heavy defeat, though they still had numerical superiority. But daring, spirit and technique won out over blind, brute force.

It is necessary to mention one other thing – namely that it is still unknown what happened at Brenna to Menno Coehoorn. Some believe that he fell with his soldiers and his remains, unrecognised were laid to rest in a common grave. Others speculate that he escaped, but from fear of the Imperial wrath never returned to Nilfgaard, but instead resorted to the Dryads in Brokilon and became a hermit in the forest. In remorse he lived for years in seclusion and separation and eventually died.

Among ordinary people circulated the rumour that the famous Marshal in the night after the battle returned to the field at Brenna and could not stand looking at the tragedy and hanged himself from a aspen on a hill, which from that time on was called Gallows. At night it is said that his spirit wanders the battle field, lamenting and crying out "Give me back my legions!".

"Grandpa Jarre! Grandpa Jarre!"

Jarre looked up from the paper and pushed his glasses further up on his nose.

"Grandpa Jarre!" Screamed the high pitched voice of his youngest granddaughter, a bright and lively six year old, who, thank the gods, looked like her mother, Jarre's daughter and not his son-in-law.

"Grandpa Jarre! Granma Lucienne told me to tell you that is enough writing for today and that dinner is on the table!"

Jarre carefully placed the reams of paper and put the cork into the inkwell. The stump of his hand throbbed with pain. *The weather is changing,* he thought, *it's going to rain.*

"Grandpa Jarreeeeee!"

"I'm coming, Ciri. I'm coming."

***

Before he was finished with the last of the wounded it was already past midnight. The last operation was performed under artificial light - lamps, candles and also magic. Marti Sodergren regained consciousness after overcoming her crisis and though deadly pale, stiff and unnatural in her movements, like a golem, she effectively performed spells.

It was dark when they left the tent, the four of them laid flat on some canvas. The meadow was full of fires. Various fires - fires of campers, unstable fires, torches and firebrands. Through the night sounds resounded through the air, shouting matches, singing, chanting and cheering.

The night was alive around them too with disjointed cries and the groans of the wounded. Supplications and sighs of the dying. They did not hear any of it. They were used to the sounds of suffering and dying, to them the sounds were ordinary, natural and blended into the night with the croaking of the frogs in the marshes by the River Cholta or the cicadas chirping by Golden Pond.

Marti Sodergren was silent, leaning on the shoulder of the halfling. Iola and Shani, hugging, tightly, occasionally issued a laugh at something completely stupid. They all sat next to the tent, each drank a glass of vodka and Marti delighted everyone with one last spell -an intoxicating spell, usually used for tooth extraction.

Rusty felt cheated. The treatment - the drink that was bound by magic, rather than relax him, or reducing his weariness, intensified it. Instead of granting oblivion, it reminded him. It seemed that the magical alcohol affected only Iola and Shani as it should.

He turned and saw the moonlight on the faces of the two girls, bright and silvery with tears.

“I wonder,” he said licking his dry and callous lips, “who has won the battle. Does anyone know?”

Marti turned to face him, but remained silent.

The cicadas sang among the willows and alders by the pond, the frogs croaked, the wounded wailed, prayed and sighed. And died. Iola and Shani laughed amongst their tears.

***

Marti Sodergren died two weeks after the battle. She had an affair with an officer of the condottieri Free Company. She tried this adventure as something temporary. Unlike the officer. When Marti, who liked changes, became involved with a cavalry officer, the condottiere, mad with jealousy, stabbed her. He hung for it, but they were unable to save the healer.

Rusty and Iola died a year after the battle, in Maribor, the biggest explosion of the epidemic haemorrhagic fever, also known as the Scarlet Death, or - from the name of the ship which it was imported from - The Catriona Plague.

All the doctors and most of the priests hurried to Maribor, along with Rusty and Iola. To heal because they were doctors. The fact that there was no cure for the Scarlet Death did not matter to them. Both were infected. He died in her arms, the strong, confident grip of her large, ugly, peasant hands. She died four days later. Alone.

Shani died seventy-two years after the battle as a famous and respected retired professor of medicine at the University of Oxenfurt. Future generations of surgeons repeated her famous quote - "Sew red with red, yellow with yellow and white with white. And everything will be all right".

Hardly anyone noticed, after delivering this quote she always secretly wiped away tears.

Hardly anyone.

***

Frogs croaked, cicadas buzzed, Iola and Shani giggled and cried.

"I wonder," repeated Milo Vanderbeck, a halfling, a field surgeon, known as Rusty. "I wonder who won the battle?"

"Rusty," said Marti Sodergren. "This is really the last thing I'd be interested in your place."

Some of the flames were high and strong, shining brightly and vividly, while others were small, shaky and trembling, and the flames darkened and they sank. At the end of the row was a tiny flame, one so weak that it was barely smouldering, barely alight and then it shimmered with great effort and almost extinguished.

"Whose is that dying light?" Asked the witcher.

"Yours," said Death.

Flourens Delannoy
Fairytales and Stories

CHAPTER NINE

The plateau, whose far end was bathed in fog at the foot of a giant mountain, resembled a stone sea. It rippled, forming mounds and curling crests that looked like the sharp teeth of a reef. The wreckages of ships contributed to that feeling. There were dozens of wrecks. The remnants of galleys, caravels and longships. Some gave the impression of only being here a short time, while others were no more than a few piles of boards and ribs and were hardly recognisable, and had certainly been there for decades, if not centuries.

Some ships were overturned and others were tipped on their sides and looked like they had been washed here by an immense storm or hurricane. Other ships gave the impression that they were still sailing the ocean. They stood straight, wedged between rocks, their masts towered proudly into the sky and the spars still flapped with ragged sails. They even had a ghostly crew – stuck in the rotten planks and tangled in the ropes were skeletons of dead sailors sentenced to an eternal voyage.

Alarmed by the appearance of a rider and frightened by the sound of pounding hooves, from the masts, yards, ropes and skeletons broke swarms of black birds, cawing. The flock circled for a moment over the edge of the abyss, at the bottom of which lay a lake, gray and smooth as mercury. On the cliff, towering over the plain of wrecks, half hanging over the lake, embedded in cliff was a dark, gloomy castle.

Kelpie recoiled, snorted, laid her ears back and looked suspiciously at the remains of the ships, skeleton and the whole landscape of death. The black birds had returned and once again settled on the broken masts, spars, bones, skulls and broken decks. The birds knew that they did not need to worry about one lone rider.

“Easy, Kelpie,” Ciri said. “This is the end of the road. This is the right place and the right time.”

***

She appeared before the walls from nowhere, as if the wind blew her from the plain of ghostly wrecks. The sentries standing guard at the gate were the first

to detect her presence, alerted by the cries of the jackdaws. Now they were shouting and gesticulating, pointing their fingers and calling to their comrades.

When she arrived at the gate, there was already a crowd. Everyone stared down at her – the few who knew her or had seen her before, like Boreas Mun and Dacre Silifant, were greatly outnumbered by those who had only heard about her, those newly recruited by Skellen; mercenaries and common ravagers from Ebbing and the surrounding areas, who now looked down in amazement at the girl with the scar on her face and the sword on her back.

The beautiful, black mare raised its head high, snorting and restlessly ringing its shoes on the cobblestones of the courtyard.

The murmuring ceased. There was almost complete silence. The mare lifted her legs like a dancer; her shoes rang like a hammer on an anvil. It took a long time before the men crossed their path. One of them with a hesitant and frightened movement, reached out to grasp the reins. The mare snorted.

“Take me,” the girl said loudly, “to the master of this castle.”

Boreas Mun himself did not know why he did it, but he held her stirrup and offered his arm. The other men held the snorting and struggling mare.

“Do you recognise me, maiden?” Boreas said quietly. “We have met.”

“Where?”

“On the ice.”

She looked him directly in the eyes.

“I did not notice your faces,” she said impassively.

“You were the Lady of the Lake,” he nodded his head very seriously. “Why have you come here, girl?”

“Why? For Yennefer. And my destiny.”

“Rather for your death,” he whispered. “This is the castle Stygga. In your place, I would quickly flee. Perhaps there is still time.”

She looked at him again. Boreas realised what that look meant.

Stefan Skellen appeared. He looked at the girl for a long time with his arms crossed.

Finally he gestured vigorously for her to follow him. She went without a word, escorted on all sides my armed men.

“A strange girl,” Boreas said through clenched teeth, shivering.

“Fortunately, she’s not our problem,” Dacre Silifant said scathingly. “I’m surprised you talked to her. That witch killed Vargas and Fripp and Ola Harsheim…”

“The Owl killed Ola Harsheim,” Boreas cut him off, “not her. She spared our

lives on the ice, but she could have slaughtered us all like puppies. All of us. Even the Owl."

"Look at her," Dacre spat on the cobblestones. "She'll be rewarded for her mercy, by the sorcerer and Bonhart. You'll see, Boreas, what they'll do to her. Remove all her skin while she is alive, in thin strips."

"That's certain," Boreas grumbled. "Because they are scoundrels. And we are no better, because we are in their service."

"Did we have any other choice? No."

Suddenly, one of Skellen's mercenaries screamed, then another. Someone cursed and sighed. Another pointed silently.

On the battlements, the corbels, the roofs, towers, parapets, gutters and gargoyles were covered as far as the eye could see in black birds. Quietly, without a squawk they came from the wrecked shipyard and now quietly, without a sound, sat and waited.

"They sense death," muttered one of the mercenaries.

"And carrion," added another.

"We had no choice," Silifant repeated mechanically looking at Boreas.

Boreas looked at the birds.

"Maybe it's time," he replied quietly, "to find one."

***

They climbed a wide stair case with three landings, passing a row of statues set in niches along a corridor, past a gallery and that surrounded a hall. Ciri walked boldly, without fear, neither frightened by the weapons or the escort. She lied when she said she did not remember the faces of the people from the frozen lake. She remembered. She remembered how Stefan Skellen, the one who was now leading her through the gloomy corridors of the castle, shivered and chattered his teeth on the ice.

Now, when he looked back at her his eyes searing, she felt that he was still afraid. She sighed with relief.

They entered a hall, high pillars supported the ribbed vault and large chandeliers hung from the roof like giant spiders. Ciri saw who was waiting there for her, Fear dug into her bowls like an iceberg, clenching it into a fist and twisting.

Bonhart in three steps was in front of her. With both hands he grabbed her blouse, lifted her off the ground and pulled her in tightly before his pale, fish eyes.

"Hell, he wheezed, "must be really terrible if you prefer me."

She did not answer. She smelt alcohol on his breath.

“Or maybe hell did not want you, you little beast. The devil’s tower spit you out, in disgust after tasting your poison.”

He pulled her closer. She turned away from his face in disgust.

“You’re afraid,” he gurgled. “Rightly afraid. Here is the end of your journey. You’ll not get away. Here in this castle, we will release the blood from your veins.”

“Finished, Mister Bonhart?”

She immediately recognised the voice that spoke. It was Vilgefortz, the wizard with whom she had met twice on the island of Thanedd. The first time while he was a prisoner in chains, and again when he followed her to the Tower of Gulls. Then on the island, he had been very handsome. Now his face had changed, something had made him deformed and awful.

“Excuse me, Mister Bonhart,” the sorcerer did not move from his throne-like chair, “it is I, the lord of castle Stygga who should assume the pleasant task of welcoming our guest, the maiden Cirilla of Cintra, Pavetta’s daughter, Calanthe’s granddaughter and descendant of Lara Dorren aep Shiadhal. Be welcome. Come closer, please.”

The last words were not spoken under a mask of courtesy and ridicule. They were only threat and order. Ciri immediately felt that she would not be able to resist this command. She felt fear. Terrible fear.

“Closer,” hissed Vilgefortz.

Now she could see what had happened to his face. The left eye was significantly smaller than the right, blinking and squinting in a wrinkled eye socket. His gaze was terrible.

“The posture of the brave with a trace of fear in her face,” the wizard said, cocking his head. “You have my appreciation. If your courage does not come from stupidity. Immediately dispel any fantasies. As Bonhart has said, there is no escape. Either by teleport or with your special abilities.”

She knew he was right. Earlier, she had told herself that even in the last moment she could run and hide among the times and places. Now she knew that this hope was just an illusion, a fantasy. The castle vibrated with hostile, alien magic, magic that penetrated her like a parasite crawling in her belly and her brain. There was nothing she could do. She was in the enemy’s hands. Powerless.

It cannot be helped, she thought, *I knew what I was doing. I knew why I had to come here. The other reasons were just false hope. Whatever will happen, will*

happen.

"Good," said Vilgefortz. "A proper assessment of the situation. Whatever will happen, will happen. More precisely – It will be, as I decide. I wonder if you can guess, what I will decide."

She tried to answer, but before she could overcome the resistance in her shrunken and dried throat, Vilgefortz probed her thoughts and again and interrupted. "Of course you do, Lady of the Worlds. Lady of time and space. Yes, yes, my wonderful, I am not surprised by your visit. I know where you ran away to from the lake, and know what you have done. I know how you got here. The only thing I don't know is if your journey was long. Or the number of experiences delivered."

Again with a malicious smile her cut her off.

"Oh, no need to respond. I know it was very interesting and exciting. I'm anxious to try it also. You do not know how I envy that talent of yours. I'll need you to share it with me, my wonderful. Yes, 'need' is the right word. Until you share with me your talent, I will not let you out of my hands."

Ciri finally realised that it was not only fear gripping her throat. The sorcerer magically throttled and strangled her. He mocked her and humiliated her, before the eyes of his followers.

"Free… Yennefer," she managed to get out, coughing with the effort. "Free her… And you can do whatever you want with me."

Bonhart burst out laughing, Stefan Skellen also started to laugh dryly. Vilgefortz poke at the corner of his macabre eye with his little finger.

"You cannot be so foolish as to think that, and so you will do what I want. Your offer is pathetic, so pathetic and ridiculous."

"You need me…" She lifted her head, though it cost her a lot of strength. "To have a child with me. Everybody wants that, you do too. Yes, I am in your power, I came here on my own… You did not catch me, though you chased me halfway around the world. I came here on my own and I give myself to you. For Yennefer. For her life. Does this seem ridiculous? Then try to take me by force, take me the hard way… You'll see how fast you lose the urge to laugh."

Bonhart stood beside her in a jump, threatening her with a whip. Vilgefortz nodded almost imperceptibly, and slightly movement of his hand, but it was enough to knock the whip from the hand of the bounty hunter, and he stumbled like he had been hit by a wagon full of coal.

"Mister Bonhart," Vilgefortz said, rubbing his fingers. "I noticed you still have difficulty adapting to the duties of being my guest. Try to remember that

my guests may destroy furniture and artwork, steal small valuables and dirty the carpets and facility chambers. They cannot beat or rape other guests. The last, at least until the host has finished beating and raping and signs that you can begin. From what I've just said, you should be able to draw the right conclusions. As to you Ciri, I'll help you. You delivered yourself to me humbly and think that I'll do everything you please. And you think this is an extremely generous offer. You are wrong, because it is I who will do what I please with you. For example, I would, by way of revenge for Thanedd, like to take at least one of your eyes, but I cannot, because I'm afraid that you would not survive."

Now or never, Ciri thought. She turned around and drew her sword, Swallow. Suddenly, the whole room began to spin, she fell and badly hit her knees. She lowered her forehead, almost touching the floor, struggling with the emetic reflex. The sword slipped from her numb fingers.

Someone picked it up.

"Now," Vilgefortz drawled, leaning his chin on his folded hands as if in prayer. "Where was I? Oh, yes, right, your offer. Life and freedom for your Yennefer… For what? For your voluntary surrender, willingly, without violence and coercion? I'm sorry, Ciri. What I need to do to you, without violence and coercion I simply cannot do."

He watched with interest as the girl coughed, wheezed and spat thick saliva to prevent vomiting.

"Yes, yes," he continued. "That's what I'll do with you, you'll never surrender willingly, I assure you. And that is why your offer is not only pathetic and ridiculous, but also worthless. For this reason, I reject it. Grab her and take her to the lab!"

***

The Laboratory was not much different from the one that Ciri knew of at the temple of Melitele in Ellander. It was brightly lit, clean, equipped with long tables with metal plates and shelves full of glass – flasks, test tubes, retorts, bowls and all sorts of other gadgets.

As in Ellander it also smelled strongly of alcohol, ether, formalin and something else, something that inspired terror. Even there, in the friendly temple, opposite the friendly priestess Nenneke and Yennefer, Ciri felt fear in the laboratory. And there, in Ellander, no one dragged her into the lab by violence; nobody held her arms in an iron grip. There, in Ellander, was no steel chair, whose shape was sadistically quite obvious. There were no white-dressed and clean-shaven-headed types, no Bonhart, no Skellen, excitedly licking his lips.

Nor were there Vilgefortz, with one good eye and one unnaturally small and terribly busy.

Vilgefortz turned away from the table where he had been arranging terrible instruments for a long time.

“You see, my wonderful,” he began, approaching her, “you are for me the key to power and dominance. Not only in this world, which is doomed anyway, but over all worlds. Over the myriad of places and times that arose after the conjunction. Surely you understand, because you yourself visited some of these places and times.”

Slowly he rolled up his sleeves and continued.

“I’m ashamed to admit, but I’m terribly attracted to power. It’s trivial, I know, but I want to be a ruler. A Sovereign, before whom all will fall on their faces and glorify him only because he exists, and worship as a god, if he deign to save their world from destruction – even if it is done on a whim. Oh, Ciri, my heart rejoices when I think about how I will generously reward the faithful, and how I will cruelly punish the disobedient and rebellious. Whole generations will pray to me and beg me for pardon, mercy and forgiveness. Generations of whole worlds.

“Listen, Ciri. Do you hear those prayers? Protect us from famine, plague, fire, was and your wrath, O Almighty Vilgefortz…”

He wiggled his fingers in front of her eyes and suddenly grabbed her face violently. Ciri cried out and tried to escape, but he held her firmly. Her lips trembled. Vilgefortz saw this.

“Child of Destiny,” he laughed and from the corners of his mouth dripped foam. “*Aen Hen Ichaer,* the Elder Blood… is now all mine!”

He straightened abruptly and wiped his mouth.

“Fools and mystics,” he said in his usual calm tone, “tried to find the secret of your existence in ancient legends and prophecies, in your genealogy they searched for the origins of your gene – a legacy of their ancestors. They have confused the night sky with the stars reflected on the surface of the water. The mystics believed that the gene would continue to develop, thanks to the evolution of new possibilities and achieve greater power in your child or in your child’s child. And around you grew a magical aura enveloping you in clouds of smoke from incense. They truth is, however, trivial, one might say organic – the important thing here is your blood. But in the literal sense, not the figurative sense of the word.”

He raised a glass syringe from the table about a half foot long. It ended in a

thin, slightly curved point. Ciri felt her mouth go dry. The sorcerer examined the instrument in the light of a lamp.

“My assistants will help you undress and get you settled in the chair… Yes, that chair which you have been so curiously eyeing. You will have to remain for sometime in a rather uncomfortable position, until I use this tool to inseminate you. It will not be so bad, during the whole procedure you’ll be under the influence of powerful elixirs that I will be injecting to ensure the proper implantation of the egg and to prevent an ectopic pregnancy. Don’t worry, I’ve had experience, I’ve done it a hundred times. You may be a child of the Elder Blood, but I do not suppose that your fallopian tubes are somehow anatomically different from the tubes of ordinary girls.”

Vilgefortz talked and talked, obviously relishing in his own words.

“And now for the most important thing, you may be upset, you may be happy, but know that your child will not be born. Who knows, maybe it would have been a great chosen one with extraordinary abilities, the saviour of the world and the king of all the nations. However, no one can guarantee this and besides I do not intent to wait that long. I need blood. More specifically, placental blood. Once you have developed a placenta, I’ll remove it. The rest of my plans and intentions, as you can understand, do not concern you, so there is no use in giving you useless information.”

He made a theatrical pause. Ciri could not stop her lips from trembling.

“And now,” the wizard gestured with a flourish, “I invite you to your chair, princess.”

“It would be worth it,” Bonhart sneered under his grey moustache, “to see the look on that bitch, Yennefer’s face. She deserves it.”

“Of course,” Vilgefortz wiped bubbly foam from his lips again. “Fertilization is a sacred, noble and solemn affair, in which the family should assist. And Yennefer is something like a mother to her. In all primitive cultures, mothers of the bride are present at this ritual. Quickly bring Yennefer here!”

“With regard to the fertilization,” Bonhart said bending over Ciri, who the sorcerer’s minions had already started to undress, “would it not be possible to do it the old, proven way, Lord Vilgefortz? In accordance with nature?”

Skellen snorted and shook his head. Vilgefortz frowned.

“No,” he said frostily. “It is not, Bonhart.”

Ciri, as if only now realising the seriousness of the situation, cried shrilly. Once, twice.

“Well, well,” the sorcerer clicked. “With head held high and a direct gaze you

entered the lion’s den, my dear, and now you are afraid of a thin glass tube. That’s a shame.”

Ciri ignored his admonitions and screamed until the laboratory glassware rattled.

And suddenly the whole of castle Stygga responded with cries of alarm.

***

“Woe to us,” said Zadarlik scrapping a spear through the manure between the stones in the courtyard. “Woe, woe.”

He looked at his companions, but none of the guards were saying anything. Nor was Boreas Mun, who had stayed with the guards at the gate. By his own will, because he had not been ordered to stay. He could have gone with the Owl like Silifant, could have seen with his own eyes what was going to happen to the Lady of the Lake and what fate awaited her. But he preferred to stay in the yard, in the open, away from the rooms and halls of the keep, where they had led the girl. He was sure her screams wouldn’t reach here.

“Those black birds are an evil sign,” Zadarlik pointed to the jackdaws sitting on the walls and roofs. “I get a bad feeling from the girl who came in on the black mare. This is ugly business serving the Owl, I tell you. Rumour has it that the Owl is no longer the imperial coroner, but an outlaw like us. That the Emperor has sentenced him to death. And when he is picked up, woe to all who are with him. Woe to us.”

“Ay, ay,” said a second guard, a bearded man in a hat decorated with feathers. “The stake awaits us! Not even the gods can stand before the imperial wrath.”

“Do not worry,” a third guard casually waved his hand, who had only come to castle Stygga recently with the last group of mercenaries. “The Emperor will not care about us, he has other worries. There is talk of a battle somewhere in the north. The Nordlings killed the Imperials, bled them properly.”

“In such a case,” said another, “it is good after all that we hold to the sorcerer and the Owl. Our kind are always better off with someone who has the upper hand.”

“Sure,” said the newcomer. “The Owl is the future. And we’ll go up with him.”

“You idiot,” said Zadarlik. “Do you have sawdust in your head?”

The black birds took flight. The flapping and squawking were deafening. They darkened the sky and began to circle the castle.

“What the devil?” Yelled one of the guards.

“Open the gate please.”

Boreas Mun suddenly noticed a strong smell of herbs – mint, sage and thyme. He swallowed and shook his head. He closed his eyes and opened them again. In vain. A skinny man, who looked like grizzled-looking tax collector, stood by his side and did not disappear.

He stood smiling with his mouth closed. Boreas felt his hair standing on end, nearly lifting his cap.

“Open the gate, please,” repeated the smiling man. “Immediately. Believe me; it will be better for you.”

Zadarlik dropped his spear which clattered on the ground. He stood frozen, his lips moving wordlessly. His eyes were empty. The others headed for the gate. They walked like unnaturally stiff puppets. They lifted the latch and opened both doors. Into the courtyard rode four riders.

One had hair as white as driven snow and a sword in his hands which flickered like lightning. Behind him rode a blonde woman who was drawing a bowstring. The third was a pretty young girl with a crooked sabre with which she slashed at Zadarlik.

Boreas Mun picked up the dropped spear and raised it over his head. The fourth horseman loomed over him like a mountain. On his helmet stretched the wings of a bird of prey. His raised sword glistened.

“Leave him, Cahir,” the white-haired man said sharply. “Save time and blood. Milva, Regis, this way…”

“No, not that way,” Boreas said, not knowing why he did so. “Not that way… That way leads to a blind barbican. You have to go up the stairs to the top of the castle. If you want to save the Lady of the Lake… You must hurry…”

“Thank you,” said the white-haired man. “Thank you, stranger. Regis, did you hear? Lead the way!”

After a moment there were just dead bodies in the courtyard. And Boreas Mun, still leaning on his spear. He could not release it. His legs were trembling. The jackdaws circling above castle Stygga were squawking and enveloped the towers and bastions like a black cloud.

***

Vilgefortz listened to the report of the mercenary who had rushed in breathlessly, with a stoic and calm face. But his restless and blinking eye betrayed him.

“Coming to her aid in the last minute,” he said grinding his teeth, “I do not believe it. These things do not happen. Or only come to pass in bad plays in little theatres. Make me happy, my good man; tell me it is all a joke.”

“I have not made any thing up,” the mercenary said indignantly. “I’m telling the truth! A few people have broken… A whole gang…”

“Okay, okay,” the wizard interrupted. “It was a joke. Skellen, personally take care of this matter. You will have the opportunity to show me how much your army is really worth that you hired with my gold.”

The Owl jumped up and waved his arms nervously.

“Do not take this lightly, Vilgefortz,” he shouted. “It seems you do not understand what threatens us! If someone is attacking the castle, they can only be Emhyr’s people! And that means…”

“It does not mean anything,” the sorcerer did not let him finish. “But I know what you’re doing. If my presence gives you courage, then you can stand behind my back. Let’s go! That goes for you too, Bonhart!”

Then he turned his terrible eyes on Ciri.

“As for you, forget your pointless hope. I know well, who has so unexpectedly appeared in a theatrical attempt to save you. I assure you that I will convert this farce into a scene of horror. Hey, you!” He motioned for one of his minions. “Put the girl in dimeritium, shut her in a cell with three bolts and do not open the door. Or it is your head. Got it?”

“As you command, my Lord.”

***

They entered a corridor, the corridor came to a large room filled with sculptures, a real lapidarium. Nobody was in the room, apart from a few servants that fled at the sight of them.

They race down a flight of stairs. Cahir kicked down a door. Angoulême burst into the room with a war cry, her sabre knocking the helmet from an empty suit of armour that she had taken for a sentry by the door. When she realised her mistake, she broke out laughing.

“Heh, heh, heh. Look…”

“Angoulême!” Geralt shouted. “Don’t just stand there! Continue!”

Opposite them was a door, beyond which they perceived silhouettes. Milva without thinking twice, tensed her bow and shot an arrow. Someone screamed and the door crashed shut. Geralt heard the sound of a bolt sliding home.

“Come on, come on!” He shouted. “There is no time to waste!”

“Witcher,” Regis said. “It makes no sense in running around blindly. I’ll… I’ll make a reconnaissance flight.”

“Fly.”

The vampire disappeared, as if the wind had carried him away. Geralt had no

time to marvel.

Again they met men, armed this time. Cahir and Angoulême rushed towards them shouting, but their opponents ran. More than anything, it seemed, thanks to Cahir's imposing winged helmet.

They ran into a gallery surrounding an inner lobby. The door on the opposite side of the gallery was scarcely twenty paces away when the walkway on the opposite side was swarmed with people. Cries echoed. And arrows hissed.

"Take cover," cried the witcher.

Arrows fell like a veritable hailstorm. The feathers hummed and the tips tore into the pavement raising sparks, and reduced the stucco walls to a fine powder.

"Get down! Over the railing!"

They fell to the ground, each with cover, behind decorative columns with carved floral motifs. However, not without injury. The witcher heard Angoulême scream. He turned and saw that she was holding her arm. From her sleeve blood was seeping.

"Angoulême!"

"It's nothing! The arrow pierced me cleanly!" The girl said, her voice trembling slightly, confirming what he had seen. If the tip had chipped a bone, Angoulême would have fainted from shock.

The archers, launching their arrows from the end of the gallery, called for reinforcements. Some ran around the sides, looking for better shooting angles. Geralt cursed and calculated the distance to the archway. It did not look good. But staying where they were meant death.

"We have to get the hell out of here!" He shouted. "Listen up! Cahir, help Angoulême!"

"They are going to mow us down!"

"We have to go! There is no choice!"

"No!" Milva exclaimed, rising with her bow in hand. She stood up and took a firing position. She looked like a statue, a marble Amazon with her bow. The archers in the gallery shouted.

Milva released the bowstring.

One of the archers flew backwards and smashed against the wall, and where he slumped to the ground, the red spot splashed to the plaster resembled an octopus. From around the gallery sounded a cry, a roar of anger, rage and horror.

"The Great Sun…" Cahir whistled. Geralt squeezed his arm.

"Let's go! Help Angoulême!"

From the gallery, a shower of arrows fell upon Milva. The archer did not

flinch when one arrow showered her in a cloud of plaster dust, or jump when marble fragments shattered around her. She quietly released the bowstring. A new cry and another archer collapsed like a puppet, spraying his fellows with brains and blood.

“Now!” Geralt cried, watching the guards flee from the gallery, and fall to the floor, taking cover from the incoming missiles.

Only the three bravest returned fire. An arrow hit the wall and dusted Milva’s hair in lime powder. The archer blew a strand of hair from her eyes and readied her bow.

“Milva,” Geralt called after Cahir and Angoulême had run to safety. “Enough! Run!”

“Just one more,” said the archer, with the feather of the arrow at the corner of her mouth.

The bowstring hummed. One of the brave three screamed in pain, leaned over the rail and fell against the pavement of the patio. Seeing this, the other two faltered. They fell to the ground and huddled. Those who were rushing into the gallery were apparently reluctant and stayed in safe shelter from Milva’s arrows.

With one exception.

Milva evaluated him on sight. Not very tall, dark complexion, brown-haired. With a glossy protector on his left forearm and a glove on his right hand. The girl saw that his compound bow was beautifully crafted, with a fitted handle and a curved staff as it tightened smoothly.

She could see how tense the cord was as it crossed his swarthy face, she saw the arrow’s feathers touch his cheek. She saw that he measured exactly.

Milva readied her bow, strung it deftly, and aimed. The string came up to her face, one of the feathers grazed the corner of her mouth.

***

“Harder, harder, Maria, to the mouth. Move your fingers on the bowstring so the arrow does not come loose from the notch. Let your hand rest on your jaw. Aim! Both eyes open! Hold your breath! Shoot!”

The bowstring, despite her protector, painfully bit into her left forearm.

Her father wanted to say something, but fell into a fit of coughing - dry, crisp, torturous.

The cough was getting worse, thought Maria Barring as she lowered the bow. *Worse and more frequent. He coughed yesterday, just as I aimed at a deer. And for lunch we had boiled cabbage. I hate boiled cabbage. I hate being hungry. And misery.*

The older Barring gasped and wheezed harshly.

“You hit an inch from the centre, oaf! A whole inch! I told you not to move or drop the bow! And you sit there wiggling as if someone had put a snail in your ass. And you spend too long aiming. You’ll get weary hands, just shoot! Or you’ll keep wasting arrows!”

“I hit it! And not a whole inch, but barely half a span from the centre!”

“Do not argue! The gods punished me when they sent me you instead of a son and moreover, awkward as a boob!”

“I’m not a boob!”

“Well, show me. Shoot again. And learn from what I’ve said. No wiggling, like you’re stuck in the ground. Aim and shoot without hesitation. Why are you crying?”

“Because you scrutinize me.”

“It’s a father’s right. Shoot.”

She tightened the bow. She was crying. He saw it.

“I love you Maria,” he said softly. “Never forget that.”

She let go of the string, the feathers barely touched the corner of her mouth.

Good,” said her father. “Good, my daughter.”

He began to cough in a terrible, rattling way.

***

The black archer was killed on the spot. Milva’s arrow struck him under the left arm and penetrated deeply, more than halfway down the shaft, shattering ribs, and smashing the lungs and heart.

He fired a fraction of a second earlier and the red feathered arrow struck Milva low in the abdomen. It tore into her guts and severed an artery and shattered her pelvis. The archer fell to the floor as if hit by a battering ram.

Geralt and Cahir cried out with one voice. Aware that the Milva was down, the archers in the gallery once again jumped up and fired a hail of arrows. One of the arrows hit Cahir’s helmet. A second, Geralt swore, combed his hair.

Milva left behind her a large, shiny trail of blood. In the place where she lay, in a blink of an eye, it had grown into a puddle on the floor. Cahir cursed, his hands were shaking. Geralt felt overwhelmed by despair. And rage.

“Auntie!” Howled Angoulême. “Auntie, don’t die!”

Maria Barring opened her mouth, coughed horribly and spit blood down her chin.

“I love you too, Dad,” she said clearly.

And she died.

***

Vilgefortz's shaved minions could not cope with the struggling and screaming Ciri. Some servants had to go to their aid. One received an accurate kicked that made him recoil, knees bent and clinging with both hands to his groin.

But this only served to infuriate the others. Ciri received a punch in the neck and a slap in the face. She turned and another one gave her a kick in the hip and someone sat on her legs.

One of the bald minions and a young man knelt on her chest, fingers tangling in her hair and pulling hard. Ciri howled.

The minion also howled. Ciri saw blood drip from his bald skull, staining the white outfit with a macabre drawing.

A second later the lab became a hell. The furniture was overturned with a crash. The strident pops and cracks from glasses bursting mixed with the hellish howls of the confused people. The decoctions, filters, elixirs, extracts and other magical substances spilled onto the tables and the ground, mixing and combining. Some, contacting, hissed and burst forth in clouds of yellow smoke. The room was immediately filled with a caustic stench.

Amid the smoke and tears produced by the stench, Ciri looked in shock at the thing that moved about the laboratory. A black figure resembling a gigantic bat. She saw the bat hook the minions into flight and release them high in the air, yelling as they fell. Before her eyes, it snapped up one of the servants that was trying to get away and slammed it against a table, where he began to howl and shake, spraying blood on retorts, stills, beakers and flasks.

A fluid from some broken container sprayed a lamp. It hissed, and the lamp exploded.

Ciri had to dodge the fireball headed at her face. She clenched her teeth to keep from screaming.

In the steel chair, which was prepared for her, sat a slender, gray-haired main in a black jacket. He gritted his fangs into the neck of a young minion, which rested on his knees and sucked his blood. The bald man groaned and his limbs twitched convulsively.

Pallid blue flames danced on the tables. Flasks, retorts and stills exploded in the heat, one after the other.

The vampire drew his fangs away from his victim's throat and look at Ciri with onyx black eyes.

"The opportunity arises", he said, as if in explanation, "when you just can't

resist the drink."

"Do not fear," he smiled where he saw her expression. "Do not worry, Ciri. I'm glad I found you. My name is Emiel Regis and I, although you may find it incredible, am a friend of the witcher Geralt. I came to this castle with him."

An armed mercenary ran into the burning lab. Geralt's companion turned his head towards him, hissed and bared his fangs. The mercenary screamed terribly. His scream soon faded into silence or the distance.

Emiel Regis dropped the minion's body to the ground, stood up and stretched just like a cat.

"Who would have thought?" He said. "Such an insect, and yet he had great blood in him. This is what we call a - hidden quality. Let's go, Ciri, I'll escort you to Geralt."

"No," Ciri said.

"Do not be afraid of me."

"I'm not afraid," she protested, bravely clenching her jaw so that he could not hear her teeth chattering in terror. "No, because… Because Yennefer is imprisoned somewhere here. I have to find her as quickly as possible. I fear that Vilgefortz… Please, sir…"

"Emiel Regis."

"Warn Geralt, good sir, that Vilgefortz is here. He is a sorcerer, a powerful sorcerer. Geralt has to be careful."

***

"You have to be careful," Regis repeated his warning, staring at Milva lying motionless. "Because Vilgefortz is a powerful sorcerer. She went to free Yennefer."

Geralt cursed.

"Come on," he shouted, to wake up the spirits of his companions. "Let's go!"

"Let's go," Angoulême stood up, wiping her tears. "Let's go! We need to kick some ass!"

"I feel in me," the vampire hissed with a sinister smile, "a power with which I could smash down this whole castle."

The witcher looked at him suspiciously.

"I don't think so," he said. "But try and break through to the upper levels and stir it up and try and lure away some attention from me. I'll look for Ciri. She has not been treated well, vampire and you left her alone."

"She demanded it," Regis explained quietly. "In a tone that ruled out any discussion. I admit, I was surprised."

“I know. Go to the upper floors. And hold on! I will try to find her and Yennefer.”

***

He found her. And it was fast.

He met them out of the blue, totally unexpected when running around a corner in the corridor. He was met with a sight that made his blood boil and the veins stick out on the back of his hands.

Yennefer was being dragged down the hall by a group of guards. She was ragged and bound in chains, but it did not prevent her from putting up a fight with her captors and swear at them like a porter.

Geralt did not let them recover from their surprise. He slashed once and only once, a short economical movement of his forearm. A guard howled like a dog, turned on the spot and smashed his head into the plate armour statue standing in the hallway alcove; he slipped to the ground and smeared blood over the armour.

His three companions released Yennefer and quickly backed away. But one grabbed the sorceress by the hair and held a knife to her throat just above the dimeritium collar.

“Stay away!” He shouted. “Or I’ll slaughter her! I’m not kidding!”

“Me either,” Geralt twirled his sword and looked the man in the eye.

The man could not stand it; he released Yennefer and ran back to his companions. All of them had their hands on weapons. One of them took an antique halberd from the wall. They spread out into a semi-circular attack position.

“I knew you’d come,” Yennefer said, straightening up proudly. “Geralt, teach these ruffians what a sword in the hands of a witcher can do.”

She raised her hands high, lifting the shackles. Geralt grasped Sihil in both hands, cocked his head slightly and took aim. He slashed. So fast that no one saw the blade move.

The shackles fell with a clatter to the floor. One of the guards sighed. Geralt tightened his grip, moving his index finger under the hilt.

“Don’t move, Yen. Tilt your head slightly to the side, please.”

The sorceress did not even blink. The sound of the sword striking metal was very faint.

The dimeritium collar fell beside the chains on the floor. On the sorceress neck appeared on tiny drop of blood. She rubbed her wrists and laughed. She slowly turned to the guards.

None of them held her gaze.

The one with the halberd carefully as if afraid to break it, laid it on the floor.

“With someone like that, he mused, “the Owl can fight her in person. I value my life.”

“We were ordered…” Muttered another, retreating. “We were ordered… The decision was not ours…”

“We have never treated you badly, ma’am,” said a third, his mouth going dry. “While in prison… Bear witness…”

“Be gone,” said the sorceress. Liberated from the dimeritium, she stood erect with her head held proudly and in their eyes she appeared as a giantess. It seemed to them that her tousled, black mane touched the roof of the vaulted corridor.

The guards fled. Hunched as if expecting an attack from behind, but none of them looked back. Yennefer returned to her normal size. She threw her arms around Geralt’s neck.

“I knew that you’d come for me,” she whispered, searching with her mouth for his lips. “That you’d come, even if…”

“Let’s go,” he said after a moment, gasping for air. “Now for Ciri.”

“Ciri,” she said and in her eyes for a brief moment blazed a fearsome purple fire. “And Vilgefortz.”

***

From around a corner a mercenary crossbowman jumped out, shouted and fired. He aimed for the sorceress. Geralt jumped as if driven by a spring and waved his sword. The arrow deflected and flew over the head of the archer, so close that he had to duck. He did not have time to stand again because the witcher jumped forward and skewered him like a carp.

Further along in the hallway stood two others, who also had crossbows and fired them, but their hands were shaking so they did not find their mark. In the next moment, the witcher was among them and they both died.

“Which way, Yen?”

The sorceress focused, closing her eyes.

“This way. After these steps.”

“Are you sure that’s a good way to go?”

“Yes.”

More mercenaries attacked them from just behind the corner of the hallway, near an ornate archway. There were more than ten and they were armed with spears and halberds.

And they were determined and stubborn. Despite this, they went down

quickly.

Yennefer immediately struck one in the chest with a ball of fire. Geralt spun in a pirouette and fell among the others, his Dwarven Sihil flashing and hissing like a snake. When four more had fallen, then others fled, clanging and clattering along the corridors.

“All right, Yen?”

“Could not be better.”

Under the archway stood Vilgefortz.

“I’m impressed,” he said quietly. “I’m really impressed, witcher. You are hopelessly naive and stupid, but your technique is really impressive.”

“Your underlings,” Yennefer said calmly, “just took off and left you. Give us Ciri and we’ll leave you alone.”

“You know, Yennefer,” sneered the wizard, “that is the second generous offer I’ve had today? Thank you, thank you. And here is my answer…”

“Look out!” Yennefer screamed and jumped. Geralt also jumped to the side at the last minute. A pillar of fire roared from the wizard’s hands and burst through the place Geralt stood a moment before, hissing and burning the area. The witcher wiped soot and the charred remains of an eyebrow from his face. He saw Vilgefortz again raise his hand. He dodged and ducked behind a column. The boom popped his ears. The whole castle shook on its foundations.

***

Echoes of the vast boom rolled through the corridors, halls and rooms of the castle. The walls trembled and rafters creaked. With a loud crack, a portrait with a heavy gilt frame fell from the wall.

In the eyes of the fleeing mercenaries was an unspeakable fear. Stefan Skellen mollified them with a threatening glare and called them to order with a stern look and voice.

“What is it? Report!”

“Mister Coroner…” grunted one of them. “This is terrible! They are demons… Every arrow kills one of us… Every slash sprays red blood… Death is coming for us… He butchered everyone! We lost ten men… Maybe more… Do you hear that?”

The boom repeated, the castle trembled again.

“Magic,” Skellen said through clenched teeth. “Vilgefortz… Well, now we’ll see who’s who.”

He approached another soldier. He was pale and covered with debris. For a while he was unable to bring himself to speak, when he finally spoke his voice

trembled.

“There… there… is a monster… Mister Coroner… Big black bat… Tearing at people’s heads. Blood ran in streams! And he flew around and laughed… And his teeth!”

“It could not carry the heads…” Someone whispered from behind the Owl.

“Mister Coroner,” Boreas Mun decided to speak. “There are ghosts. I saw… young Count Cahir aep Ceallach. And he is dead.”

Skellen looked at him but said nothing.

“Lord Stefan…” Dacre Silifant mumbled. “Who are we fighting here?”

“They are not men,” moaned one of the mercenaries. “They are demons from hell! A force no human can hope to stand against…”

The Owl crossed his arms and stared at the mercenaries with an authoritarian and determined look.

“Then,” he proclaimed loudly and clearly, “we will not meddle in the conflict between the forces of hell! Let the demons fight with demons, sorcerers with sorcerers and vampires can crawl out of their tombs. We won’t disturb them! We will stay here, quietly and await the outcome of the fight.”

The faces of the mercenaries shone. The mood grew palpable.

“This stair,” Skellen said in a strong voice, “is the only way out. We’ll wait here. Let’s see who tries to go down them.”

From above came a terrible boom. They could smell sulphur and smoke even here.

“It is dark in here!” The Owl shouted, loud and clear, to give encouragement to his troops. “Move, get some torches! We need light to shine on those stairs! Light a fire in those braziers!”

“We have no fuel, Sir!”

Skellen wordlessly pointed to the artworks on the wall in the hall.

“The artworks?” A mercenary asked incredulously. “We are to burn paintings?”

“Why not?” Said the Owl. “What are you looking at? Art is dead!”

The frames were broken down to chips and the images shredded. The well dried wood and the cloth saturated with varnish immediately caught flame.

Boreas Mun watched. Already fully committed.

***

A thunderous noise, a flash and the column from where they were hiding a moment before, crumbled apart. The core broke; the decorated column crashed to the floor and crushed a terracotta mosaic. From the side flew a hissing ball of

lightning. Yennefer stopped it, uttering spells and gesturing.

Vilgefortz walked towards them, his cloak billowing out behind him like dragon wings.

“I’m not surprised by Yennefer,” he said walking. “She is a woman, so she is evolutionarily lower and ruled by her hormones. But you, however, Geralt, you’re not only a man who is inherently reasonable, but a mutant, exempt from emotions…”

He gestured. Thunder. A flash. Lightning rebounded from Yennefer’s shield.

“But despite your better judgement,” continued Vilgefortz, passing fire from one hand to another, “you demonstrate a remarkable consistency and know nothing. You constantly want to paddle against the current and piss into the wind. It had to end badly. Know that today, here; in castle Stygga, you have pissed into a hurricane.”

***

Somewhere on the lower floors was furious fighting, someone shouted, screamed and then groaned in pain. Something burned, Ciri could smell the burning smell and smoke, a gust of warmer air was blown into her face.

Something banged with such forces that even the roof trembled on its support columns and stucco showered from the walls.

Ciri cautiously peered around a corner. The corridor was empty. She went quickly and quietly, flanked on both sides by statues in the wall niches. She had seen those statues before.

In her dreams.

She left the corridor and came face to face with a man armed with a spear. She stopped short, ready to jump and spin. But then realised that this was not a man but a woman with grey hair, skinny and bent. And she was not carrying a spear, but a broom.

“There is a prisoner here,” Ciri said, “a black-haired sorceress. Where is she?”

The woman with the broom was silent for a long moment, moving her mouth as if chewing something.

“And how would I know, my dove?” She mumbled finally. “I’m here to clean.”

She turned her back to the girl and began to sweep.

“I clean and I clean and I clean,” she repeated to herself. “And every time it just becomes dirty again. Just look at this mess, my dove.”

Ciri looked. On the floor, she saw a wide, winding bloody smear. It ran for a

few steps and ended at a wall, under a dead man. Nearby lay two more dead men, one twisted in his death throws, the second with outspread limbs. Next to them lay crossbows.

“There is mess again,” she said taking a bucket and rag, dropping to her knees, she began to mop the floor. “Such filth. And I already got it clean. Will it never end?”

“No,” said Ciri flatly. “Never. Such is the way of the world.”

The old woman stopped mopping, but did not turn her head.

“I clean,” she said. “Nothing more. But you, my dove, you should go straight and then left.”

“Thank you.”

The woman bowed her head lower and again wearily began to mop.

***

She was alone. Alone and lost in a maze of corridors.

“Lady Yennefer!”

So far she had kept silent, fearing that yelling would attract Vilgefortz’s people. But now…

“Yennefeeeeeer!”

It seemed to her that she heard something. Yes, definitely!

She ran into a gallery and then into a great hall with high porches. Again she smelt the burning smell.

Bonhart emerged like a spirit from a niche and hit her in the face with his fist. She stumbled, and he jumped on her like a hawk, grabbing her by the throat and pushing her against the wall with his forearm. Ciri looked into his pale fishlike eyes and felt her heart drop low in her chest.

“I would not have found you, if you were not calling out,” he croaked. “And how wistfully you called. Do you long for me so, my darling?”

Still against the wall, his hand slipped behind her neck. Ciri tossed her head. The Bounty hunter bared his teeth. He slid his hand over her chest, squeezing her breast, and brutally grabbed her crotch. The he released her and pushed, she fell to the floor.

He threw a sword at her feet. Swallow. And she immediately understood what he wanted.

“I would have preferred the arena,” he drawled. “As a culmination, the finale to your fine performances. The witcheress versus Leo Bonhart! Eh, people would pay to see something like that! Come on! Lift the steel and draw it.”

She obeyed. But did not draw the sword from its sheath, she slung the belt

over her shoulder so that the hilt was in reach.

Bonhart took a step back.

“I thought,” he said, “that my old eyes would be comforted by what Vilgefortz was going to do to you. I was wrong. I need to feel how your blood flows down my sword. To hell with vile sorcery and sorcerers, destiny, prophecies and the fate of the world, defiling elder and younger blood. What does all this divination and witchcraft mean to me? Shit! Nothing can compare with the pleasure…”

He did not finish the sentence. She saw his lips move and his eyes flash ominously.

“I’ll release the blood from your veins, witcheress,” he hissed. “And then, before it gets cold, we will celebrate. You’re mine. All mine. Raise your weapon!”

The castle shook from a distant rumble.

“Vilgefortz,” Bonhart announced gleefully, “is making mincemeat of your valiant rescuers. Well, darling, draw your sword.”

Flee, she thought, paralysed with fear, *flee to another place, to another time, far away from him. She felt shame. Run? Leave Geralt and Yennefer to their mercy? But common sense told her, dead I can do nothing to help them.…*

She concentrated, pressed her fists to her temples.

Bonhart immediately understood what was going on and rushed to her. But he reacted too late.

There was a flash and a murmur in her ears

I did it, she thought triumphantly.

She immediately realised that the triumph was premature. She realised that she could hear angry shouts and curses. The failure was probably caused by the evil, paralysing aura of this place. She had transferred, but only a small jump. She had not even gotten out of sight of the opposite end of the gallery. She was not far from Bonhart. But she was still beyond his reach and his sword. At least temporarily.

Dogged by his roar, she turned and ran away.

***

She ran along long, wide corridors, the dead eyes of the statues followed her. She turned once, then a second time. She wanted to get lost and confuse Bonhart; moreover, she was headed towards the sounds of battle. Where it was being fought, were her friends.

She entered into a large, circular room, in the middle of which stood a marble

plinth sculpture representing a woman with a veiled face, probably a goddess. The room opened onto two corridors, both quite narrow. She picked one at random. She chose the wrong path.

“The girl!” Roared one of the mercenaries. “We have her!”

There were too many of them to risk a fight, even in a narrow corridor. And Bonhart was probably close. Ciri turned and ran to escape. She entered the room with the marble goddess. And froze.

Before her stood a knight with a large sword, in a black coat and a helmet adorned with the wings of a bird of prey.

The city was burning. She could hear the crackling of the fire, could see the undulation of the flames, she felt the heat of the fire and the neighing of horses, the screams of the victims… Suddenly, there appeared a black bird flapping its wings, covering everything…

Help!

Cintra, she realised, returning to reality. And Thanedd island. He caught up to me here. He’s a demon. I’m surrounded by ghosts and phantoms from my nightmares. Bonhart is behind me, and him in front.

She could hear screaming and the pounding of boots.

The knight in the helmet with the feathers made a sudden move. Ciri overcame her fear. Swallow was yanked out of its sheath.

“Do not touch me!”

The knight stepped back and to Ciri’s amazement she saw that his cloak hid a blonde girl armed with a curved sabre. The girl slipped around Ciri and slashed with her sabre at a mercenary. The black knight, instead of attacking Ciri, swung a powerful slash and killed another mercenary. The other retreated into the hallway.

The blonde girl rushed to the door, but could not close it. She brandished her sabre threateningly and screamed, pushing the mercenaries from the portal. Ciri watched as one of the mercenaries stabbed her with a spear, she watched as the girl fell to her knees. She jumped forwards and swung Swallow, slashing the sword horribly across one of the mercenaries, the Black knight ran forward. The blonde girl, still on her knees, drew an axe from her belt and threw it, hitting one of the men in the face. Then she reached the door, slammed it and the knight bolted it.

“Uff!” Said the girl. “Oak and iron! It will take them some time before they can get through that door!”

“They will not waste the time, they’ll seek another way,” said the black

knight matter-of-factly, the frowned suddenly, seeing the blood seeping from the girl's leg. The blonde waved her hand, it was nothing.

"We have to get out of here," the knight took off his helmet and looked at Ciri. "I am Cahir Mawr Dyffryn, the son of Ceallach. I came here with Geralt. To rescue you, Ciri. I know that it is unbelievable."

"I've seen unbelievable things," Ciri said. "You have come a long way… Cahir… Where is Geralt?"

He stared at her. She remembered those eyes from Thanedd. Deep, blue, nice.

"He is saving the sorceress," he said. "Here…"

"Yennefer. Let's go."

"Yeah," said the blonde girl, knotting an emergency bandage around her thigh. "We have to kick a few asses! For Auntie!"

"Let's go," repeated the knight.

But it was too late.

"Run," Ciri whispered, seeing who was coming down the second passage. "It is the devil incarnate. But he wants me and will not chase you… Go. Help Geralt…"

Cahir shook his head.

"Ciri," he said mildly. "I'm surprised at you. I cross the whole world to see you, and now that I found you, to redeem myself, to save you and defend you. And you want me to run away now?"

"You don't know who you are dealing with."

Cahir tugged on his gloves, removed his coat and wrapped it around his left arm. He waved his sword and swung it until it whistled in the air.

"I would know."

At the sight of the trio, Bonhart stopped. But only for a moment.

"Oh," he said. "There was a rescue? Your friends, witcheress? All right. Two more or less, it does not make a difference."

Ciri suddenly thought of something.

"Say goodbye to your life, Bonhart," she cried. "This is your end. Here is your match!"

Undoubtedly she exaggerated. Bonhart caught the false note in her voice. He looked suspicious.

"The witcher? Really?"

Cahir swung his sword, standing in position. Bonhart did not waver.

"Well, well, the witcher is younger than I believed," he hissed. "Look here, boy."

He opened his mail shirt. On his chest glistened three silver medallions – an eagle, a cat and a wolf.

“If you’re a real witcher,” the Bounty hunter gritted his teeth, “know that soon your amulet will adorn my collection. And if you’re not the witcher, you’ll be dead before you can blink your eyes. It would be more sensible, in that case, to get out of my way and flee. I want this wench, I have nothing against you.”

“Strong words,” Cahir said calmly. “Let’s see what else you can do. Angoulême, Ciri, run!”

“Cahir…”

“Go,” he said, “help Geralt.”

They ran off. Ciri helped the limping girl.

“You asked for it,” Bonhart narrowed his pale eyes, as he did he twirled his sword.

“Asked for it?” Echoed Cahir Mawr Dyffryn aep Ceallach dully. “No. It is my destiny!”

They rushed towards each other and collided violently. The blades clattered against each other, the corridor carried the sound of steel banging on steel.

“Not bad,” Bonhart gasped when they moved apart. “Not bad boy. But you’re not a witcher, that little bitch wanted to deceive me. It’s your turn. Prepare to die.”

“Strong words.”

Cahir breathed deeply. The first encounter convinced him that his chances were slim. The old killer was too fast and strong. His only hope was that he rushed in order to chase Ciri, and clearly nervous.

Bonhart attacked again. Cahir parried, cut, ducked, jumped, grabbed his opponent’s wrist, pushed him to the wall and put his knee is his groin. Bonhart grabbed him by the face and slammed the hilt of his sword into the side of his head, once, twice, three times. Cahir blocked the third strike. He saw the flash of the blade and instinctively parried.

Too slowly.

***

There was a strict adherence to family tradition in the Dyffryn house that the body of a fallen relative was to be housed in the castle armoury and all the men in the family to visit and stay in an all day and night vigil. Women gathered in a remote wing of the castle, so as not to disturb the men, or distract them or interfere with their thoughts, with their sobbing and fainting spells.

Among the nobility of Vicovaro, sobbing and tears were not seen even

among the women. It was considered tactless and a great dishonour. But in the Dyffryn house there were different traditions and they would not change. And had no intention of doing so. At ten years old, Cahir's youngest brother, Aillil was killed in Nazair and was lying in the castle armoury, due to custom and tradition he was not considered to be a grown man.

He was not invited to a gathering of men over the open coffin, but was not allowed to sit silent alongside his grandfather Gruffyd, his father Ceallach, his brother Dheran or his uncles and cousins. Understandably, he was neither allowed to mourn and faint in with his grandmother, his mother, his three sisters or his aunts and cousins. Small Cahir preferred running around the walls and fighting with his peers from families who came with their parents for the funeral, burial and ceremony. Cahir was devoted to making mischief by the walls. He fought with the other boys who claimed their older brothers fought the bravest at Naziar and not Aillil aep Ceallach.

"Cahir! Come to me, my son!"

On the porch stood Mawr, the boy's mother and her sister, Aunt Cinead var Anahid. His mother's face was red and swollen from mourning and it frightened Cahir. It shook him that even such a comely woman, such as his mother, could look like a monster because of crying.

He firmly decided that he would never cry, ever.

"Remember, my son," Mawr sobbed, clutching her child to her breast so hard he could not breathe. "Remember this day. Never forget who put your dear brother Aillil to death. It was those damn Nordlings. Your enemies, my son. Be sure to hate them. Never stop hating that damn nation of murderers!"

"I will always hate, mother," Cahir promised, somewhat surprised. First, his brother, Aillil had fallen fighting with honour. It had been a death worthy and enviable of a warrior. Why, then, spill tears for him? Second, it was no secret that Grandmother Eviva, Mawr's mother, came from the Nordlings. His father in anger more than once had called his grandmother "she-wolf of the North". Naturally, behind her back.

But his mother now wanted…

"I hate them!" He cried enthusiastically. "I hate them all! And when I'm big and I have a real sword, I'll go to war and chop off their heads! You'll see, Mother!"

His mother took a deep breath and began to sob. Aunt Cinead steadied her.

Cahir clenched his fists, shaking with anger. Anger and hatred towards those who had wronged his mother, making her so ugly.

***

Bonhart's blow smashed his temple, cheek and mouth. Cahir dropped his sword and stumbled; the Bounty hunter swung again and slashed him between his neck and collarbone. Cahir fell at the feet of the marble goddess, his blood, like a pagan sacrifice, pooled at the base of the statue.

***

Rumbling, the floor shook beneath their feet, a decorative shield fell to the floor with a crash. The corridor was filled with acrid smoke. Ciri wiped her face. The blonde girl weighed on her like a millstone.

"Faster… Run faster…"

"I can't," breathed the girl and sat down heavily on the floor. Ciri stunned, watched the blood oozing from her leg. She was pale as death.

Ciri knelt and quickly took off her scarf and belt and tried to make a tourniquet. But the wound was large and deep, and very high on the leg, too close to the groin. The blood would not stop flowing.

The girl grabbed her hand. Her fingers were as cold as ice.

"Ciri…"

"Yes."

"I am Angoulême. I did not believe… I did not believe that we would find you. But I followed Geralt… Because it was impossible not to follow. Did you know?"

"I know. He is well."

"We found you… And I scoffed at Fringilla… Tell me…"

"Don't talk, please."

"Tell…" Angoulême's lips moved slower and with more difficulty. "Say, you're still a princess… In Cintra… I'll be rewarded, right? You'll make me… a Countess? Tell me. Do not lie… Can you? Tell me."

"Don't talk. Save your strength."

Angoulême sighed, suddenly leaned forward and rested her forehead on Ciri's shoulder.

"I knew…" She said quite clearly. "I knew a whorehouse in Toussaint was a better idea."

It took a long time before Ciri realised that she was holding a dead girl in her arms.

***

She saw him coming, watched by the dead eyes of the marble caryatids lining the arcade.

She finally realised that escape was impossible, that she could not escape him. That she would have to face him. There was no other choice.

But she was still scared.

She drew her weapon. Swallow's edge softly sang as she pulled it from the sheath. She knew this song.

She retreated into a wide corridor, he followed her, holding his sword in both hands, blood trickled down the blade, heavy drops dripped onto the floor.

"Dead," he said, stepping over the body of Angoulême. "Good. The boy also went down."

Ciri felt overwhelmed by desperation. Her fingers tightened painfully on the hilt. She retreated.

"You lied to me," Bonhart drawled. "The boy had no medallion. But something tells me that here in this castle is someone wearing a medallion. There will be someone old Leo Bonhart will find near the sorceress Yennefer. But first things first, viper. You and me. And our engagement."

Ciri decided. She twirled Swallow and moved into position. She moved in a semicircle around him, going faster, forcing the Bounty hunter to rotate on the spot.

"The last time," he said, "this trick was useless. Don't you know how to learn from your mistakes?"

Ciri quickened her pace. The soft flowing movements of her sword were meant to disorientate and mesmerize. Bonhart turned and spun his sword.

"This doesn't work on me," he spat. "I'm bored by it!"

He took two quick steps to shorten the distance.

"Music, maestro!"

Bonhart jumped and launched an attack, Ciri dodged with a pirouette, jumped and landed safely on her left leg and immediately struck. Even before her blade hit Bonhart's, she was spinning around him and launching a smooth cut. She struck again, without expansion, from an unexpected and unusual bending of her elbow. Bonhart parried and used the momentum to attack from the left. Ciri saw it coming and with a slight bend of her knees she avoided the blade, but only by an inch. She went quickly on the attack, chopping and cutting. But Bonhart was waiting this time and deceived her with a feint. Unable to stop, and nearly off balance, Ciri was only saved by a lightning jump, but did not prevent the reach of Bonhart's sword to her shoulder. At first she thought that the blade had only cut through the padded sleeve, but after a moment she felt warm liquid run down her arm.

The marble caryatids watched them with indifference.

Ciri retreated, but he stayed behind her, stooped over and flicking his sword from side to side like a scythe. Like a Grim Reaper, Ciri had seen in a fresco in the temple. The dance of Death, she thought. He approaches like the Grim Reaper.

She retreated. Hot, wet blood was running down her arm and onto her hand.

“First blood to me,” he said, looking at the trail of drops, which had been left behind on the floor. “Who will get the second, my princess?”

She retreated.

“Look closely. This is the end.”

Bonhart was right. The hallway ended suddenly at an abyss. This wing of the castle was damaged and the floor had collapsed. Leaving the supporting structure – columns, timbers and beams.

Below, the ground was littered with debris.

Ciri hesitated. She moved onto a horizontal beam, and kept retreating from him.

Bonhart’s eyes watched her every move. It saved her. Abruptly, he lunged at her, running across the beam, his sword flashing with cuts and feints. She knew his intention. One bad parry or any other error and she would lose her balance and fall down to the broken lower floor.

This time Ciri was not fooled by his feints. Just the opposite. Bonhart skilfully cut from the right. Seeing her rival hesitate a split second, she launched a new blow to his right hand, so fast and strong that Bonhart rocked the beam. He would have fallen if not for his height.

He stretched his left hand and caught hold of an overhead beam, keeping his balance. But he briefly lost his concentration. And for Ciri that was enough. She launched a powerful cut, straining her sword arm to its maximum length.

He did not even flinch when Swallow’s blade, with a whistle cut him from his chest to his left shoulder. He immediately struck back with such force that if Ciri had not jumped back, the blow would have split her in half. She jumped to an adjacent beam, falling into a kneeling position and raised her sword horizontally above her head.

Bonhart looked at his shoulder and raised his left hand, down which already ran a scarlet trickle. He watched the drops falling down into the abyss.

“Well, well,” he said. “Now I know you can learn from your mistakes.”

His voice trembled with rage. But Ciri knew him to well. He was calm, focused and ready to kill.

He jumped onto her beam his sword twirling and rushed at her like a storm, running confidently, without hesitation, not even looking at his feet. The beam creaked and dust trickled downwards. He pressed her with blows, forcing her to walk backwards. His attacks were so continuous that Ciri could not jump or spin; she simply had to stop the blows and try to avoid them.

She noticed a glint in his fish eyes. She knew what it was.

He was trying to corner her against a pillar, pushing her like a spider under a trestle.

Pushing her to a point where there was no escape. She had to do something. And suddenly she knew what.

Kaer Morhen. The Pendulum.

"You're not deflecting the pendulum, your deflecting yourself from it. You're intercepting its energy, which you need in order to deal a blow. Do you see?"

"Yes, Geralt."

Suddenly, swift as an attacking snake, she counterattacked. Swallow hissed through the air and collided with Bonhart's sword. At the same time Ciri bounced and jumped to an adjacent beam. She landed, miraculously keeping her balance. She ran a few steps and lightly jumped again, back to the Bonhart's beam, landing behind him. He turned just in time, slashing almost blindly where she had landed.

He missed her by a hair; the strength of the blow staggered him. Ciri struck like lightning. She slashed from a lunge and again fell to her knees. The slash was powerful and accurate.

He froze with his sword at his side. She watched the long, straight, smooth cut on his jacket start to ooze blood.

"You…" Bonhart shuddered. "You…"

He lunged at her. However, it was slow and clumsy. She escaped by jumping back and he could not keep his balance. He fell to one knee, but it slipped off the timber because the wood was slick with his blood. For a moment he looked at Ciri.

Then he fell into the abyss.

She watched as he fell to the floor, raising a geyser of dust, lime and blood. She saw his sword fall a few feet away from him. He lay motionless, with arms flung wide, tall and thin.

Badly wounded and quite vulnerable. But still scary.

It took a while, but he finally moved and groaned. He tried to lift his head. He moved his legs. He moved his hands. He crawled to a pillar and leaned

against its foot. He moaned again and probed his bloody chest and abdomen with both hands.

Ciri jumped. She landed a few feet away in a crouch, as softly as a cat. She saw his fish eyes widen in fear.

“You won…” He croaked, looking at Swallow’s blade. “You won, witcheress. It was a pity it was not in the arena… It would have been a spectacle…”

She did not answer.

“I gave you that sword, remember?”

“I remember everything.”

“Why me…” He moaned. “You will not hurt or murder a defenceless man… You are too… noble.”

She looked at him for a long time. A very long time. Then she bent down, his fish eyes nearly popped out of their sockets. But she only tore the medallions from around his neck – the eagle, the cat and the wolf. Then she turned and walked towards the exit.

He leaped at her with a knife in his hand, cunningly and treacherously. As quiet as a ghost. Only at the last moment, when his dagger was about to go into her back, did he scream. In it was all of his rage and hatred.

She avoided the cowardly attack with a half-turn and jumped away. She immediately shifted and struck, hard and strong, with her whole arm, strengthening the cut with a twist of her hips. Swallow whistled and cut with the tip of its blade. Bonhart clutched at his throat. His fish eyes bulged from their sockets.

“I told you,” Ciri said coldly. “I remember everything.”

Bonhart stared at her wide-eyed. Then he fell.

He fell backwards into the dust which billowed around him. He lay on his back, tall, skinny and skeletal and squeezed his throat with all his might. But no matter how firmly he held, his life slipped out between his fingers and the layer of grey dust under his body grew wet and black.

Ciri stood over him. Without saying anything. But ensuring that he saw. That this last image would be the image that accompanied him wherever he went.

He looked at her with hardening eyes. He convulsively reared up, digging his heels into the ground. Then he gurgled like a funnel emptying.

And that was the last sound he made.

***

The stone walls trembled, beams cracked and glass poured from lead frames.

“Watch out, Geralt!”

He dodged again at the last moment. Brilliant lightning ploughed a furrow in the ground, the air hissed with colour - murderously sharp fragments from broken windows. Lightning hit the column, behind which the witcher hid. The column broke up into three parts. It broke from the roof and collapsed to the floor with a deafening crash.

Geralt, lying flat on the floor, his head cupped in his hands, was aware of how miserable a shield this was from the falling debris. He prepared for the worst, but nothing happened. He jumped up and could see the glow of a magical shield around him, he realised Yennefer’s magic had saved him.

Vilgefortz threw a bolt of lightning at the other column behind which the sorceress was hiding. He roared furiously and a cloud of dust and smoke appeared. Yennefer deftly slipped between them and retaliated with her own flash of lightning, which bounced off of the wizard with no visible effect. He answered with a crushing blow that knocked Yennefer to the ground.

Geralt wiped the dust from his eyes and attacked. Vilgefortz turned his eyes towards him and pointed his arm, and from his hands roared fire. The witcher instinctively swung his sword. The dwarven blade, covered with runes, shielded him and cut the stream of fire in half.

“Ha!” Roared Vilgefortz. “Impressive, witcher! What do you say to this!”

The witcher said nothing. He was hit by an invisible battering ram, flew backwards, fell on the floor and slid until he found the base of a buttress. A pillar flew apart and again tumbled from the roof. This time he did not have Yennefer’s protection. The heavy carved block struck him in the side, fortunately, not fully, but even so it hurt and completely paralysed him.

Yennefer chanted spells and threw them at Vilgefortz one after another. However, none of them hit, and they all bounced harmlessly off of the wizard’s magical shield. Vilgefortz suddenly spread his arms wide. Yennefer wailed in pain and started rising from the ground.

The wizard clapped his hands together and his fingers started to twist as if squeezing a wet rag. The sorceress cried shrilly. And started to squirm.

Geralt clenched his teeth in pain and rose to return to the fight. But he was overtaken by Regis.

The vampire came flying from out of nowhere in the shape of a giant bat and rushed at Vilgefortz quietly. Before the sorcerer could raise a protection spell, Regis attacked his face with his claws; he missed the eye because it was so unnaturally small. Vilgefortz yelled and waved his arms in surprise. Yennefer

freed from the spell, fell with a scream of surprise into a pile of rubble, blood spurting from her mouth and down her chin and breasts.

Geralt was already close. He raised Sihil ready to deal a blow. But Vilgefortz had no intention of surrendering. He pushed the witcher with a powerful surge of energy and attacked the vampire with a dazzling white beam, which passed through a stone pillar like a hot knife through butter. Regis deftly evaded the beam and returned to his usual form. He materialised at Geralt's side.

"Be careful," the witcher grunted, trying to discern what was wrong with Yennefer. "Be careful, Regis…"

"Be careful?" Said the vampire. "I? That's not why I came here!"

With an incredibly long and fast leap he reached the wizard and grabbed him by the throat. His vampire fangs glistened.

Vilgefortz screamed with rage and terror. For a brief moment, it appeared this was the end of him. But it was premature. The wizard had an arsenal of weapons for every occasion. And against every opponent – even vampires.

The wizard hands grasped Regis and heated up like red hot irons. The vampire screamed.

Geralt also cried out, seeing that the wizard was literally tearing the vampire. He jumped to his friend's aid. But was too late. Vilgefortz pushed the vampire into a column, with both of his hands burning with white fire.

Regis screamed.

He screamed so loud that the witcher had to cover his ears with his hands. The remains of the windows shattered noisily. The column simply melted. And the vampire melted with it, turning into a shapeless stone.

Geralt cursed furiously and desperately. He jumped forward and swung Sihil. The wizard turned and hit him with magical energy. The witcher flew the entire length of the hall, hit a wall on the other side and slid down it.

He lay there gasping for air, like a fish out of water, wondering not what was broken, but what was whole.

Vilgefortz walked towards him. In his hand materialised a six-foot-long iron rod.

"I could reduce you to ashes with a spell," he said. "Or I could melt you into a glassy mass, as I did with that monster. But you, witcher, you deserve a different death. In combat. Maybe not a fair fight, but still."

Geralt did not believe he could stand up. But he did. He spat blood from his cut lip. He gripped his sword tighter.

"In Thanedd," said Vilgefortz, approaching him, twirling the rod, "I settled

for giving you a beating, in moderation, to serve as a lesson. But I can see that you have not learned anything, this time the beating with be thorough and I will not leave a healthy bone in your body. Nobody will be able to put you back together again."

He attacked. Geralt did not try to escape. He accepted the fight.

The rod flashed and whirled, spinning around the sorcerer. Both opponents dodged around each other in a deadly dance. The rod flicked like lightning. Geralt managed to parry the hammering blow. Vilgefortz skilfully deflected. Each time steel meet iron it groaned pitifully.

The wizard was quick and nimble like a demon.

Geralt was fooled by a swing at his torso and a mock punch from the left – the opposite end of the stick hit him in the ribs. Before the witcher could get his wind back, he received a strong blow to the hip that almost knocked him down. He dodged a blow to the top of his head, but did not escape the stab at his stomach. He was thrown against the wall. He had enough presence of mind to fall to the floor. Just at the moment the iron rod brushed his hair and it slammed into the wall raising sparks.

Geralt rolled; the rod drew sparks from the ground right next to his head. A second blow came and hit his shoulder. The shock sent numbing pain and weakness down his legs. The wizard raised the rod. His eyes burned in triumph.

Geralt clenched his fist around Fringilla's medallion.

The rod fell. It struck the floor, a few inches from the witcher's head. Geralt rolled to the side and quickly got up on one knee. Vilgefortz jumped after him and swung again. Again he missed by inches.

He shook his head unable to believe his eyes. He hesitated a moment. Then sighed, realising what was happening. His eyes twinkled and he leapt and swung his magical weapon.

But it was too late.

Geralt quickly slashed him across the stomach. Vilgefortz screamed, dropped the rod and took a few steps backwards. The witcher followed. Kicked him between the stumps of two columns and slashed his sword in a wide arc diagonally across the wizard's torso to his collarbone. Drawing blood.

The wizard screamed and fell to his knees. He lowered his head and look at his chest and abdomen. For a long time he could not look away from what he saw.

Geralt calmly waited with Sihil raised, ready to strike.

Vilgefortz lifted his head and wailed shrilly.

“Geraaaaaalt…!”

The witcher did not let him finish.

For a long time there was silence.

“I didn’t know…” Yennefer said, at last rising from the pile of rubble.

She looked pitiful. Blood smeared her chin and chest.

“I didn’t know,” she repeated, meeting Geralt’s puzzled gaze, “that you knew how to cast spells of illusion. And you were able to confuse Vilgefortz…”

“It was my medallion.”

“Oh,” she said suspiciously. “An interesting thing. But even so, we live thanks to Ciri.”

“What do you mean?”

“His eye. He did not regain full coordination. And often missed. Although I mainly owe my life…”

She fell silent, looking at the remains of the melted column in which she could recognise the outline of a person.

“Who was that, Geralt?”

“A friend. I’ll miss him very much.”

“Was he human?”

“He was an incarnation of humanity. How are you, Yen?”

“Some broken ribs, a concussion, a bumped hip and a bruised spine. Otherwise, I’m great. What about you?”

“I’m more or less the same.”

Without emotion he eyed Vilgefortz head, lying exactly in the middle of the floor of mosaics. The sorcerer’s little glassy eye watched them with mute reproach.

“Nice view,” she said.

“Nice,” he said. “But it’s not the first I’ve seen… Can you walk?”

“With your help, yes.”

***

They met in a place where the corridors came together to form a crescent. They met under the dead eyes of the statues.

“Ciri,” the witcher said, rubbing his eyes.

“Ciri,” Yennefer said, supported by the witcher.

“Geralt,” Ciri said.

“Ciri,” he answered, with a lump in his throat. “I’m glad to see you again.”

“Lady Yennefer.”

The sorceress released herself from the witcher’s arms and straightened with

a tremendous effort.

“What a sight you are, girl,” she said sternly. “Look at yourself and how you look. Fix your hair! Don’t slouch. Come to me.”

Ciri walked, stiffly over to Yennefer. Yennefer smoothed her collar and tried to wipe the dried blood from her sleeve. She fixed her hair, revealing the scar on her cheek. She hugged her tightly. Very tightly. Geralt saw the sorceress’s hands on Ciri’s back. He saw the deformed fingers. He did not feel anger, grief or hatred. He felt only fatigue. And a great desire to be done with it all.

“Mummy.”

“My daughter.”

“Let’s go,” Geralt decided to interrupt, but only after a long time.

Ciri sniffed noisily and wiped her nose with the back of her hand. Yennefer scolded her with a look and rubbed one of her eyes. Surely she had gotten a speck of powder in them. The witcher watched the corridor from which Ciri emerged, as if expecting someone else to come from there. Ciri shook her head. He understood.

“Let’s go,” he repeated.

“Yes,” said Yennefer. “I want to see the sky.”

“I’ll never leave you again,” Ciri said dully. “Never again.”

“Let’s go,” said Geralt. “Ciri help Yen.”

“I don’t need help!”

“Let me help you, mother.”

Before them was a staircase. Bathed in smoke and at the bottom flaming torches and braziers with fire. Ciri shivered. She knew those stairs. They had appeared in her dreams and visions.

Below armed men were waiting.

“I’m tired,” she said.

“Me too,” said Geralt as he drew Sihil.

“I’m tired of killing.”

“Me too.”

“Is there no other way?”

“No, there is no other way. Only those stairs. We have no choice, girl. Yen wants to see the sky. And I want to see the sky, Yen and you.”

Ciri looked at Yennefer, who if not for the railing she was leaning against, would have fallen down. She pulled out the medallions she took from Bonhart. The cat she hung around her neck, the wolf she gave to Geralt.

“I hope you know,” the witcher said, “it’s just a symbol.”

“Everything is just symbols.”

She drew Swallow from its sheath.

“Come on, Geralt.”

“Let’s go. Stay close to me.”

At the foot of the stairs Skellen’s mercenaries were waiting for them, clutching weapons in sweaty palms. The Owl with a quick gesture sent the first wave of attackers. The stair thundered with the sound of heavy boots.

“Slowly, Ciri, don’t rush. Stay close to me.”

“I know, Geralt.”

“And calmly, girl, quietly. Remember, no anger, no hatred. We have to get out of here to see the sky. And those who stand in our way, they die. Do not hesitate.”

“I will not hesitate. I want to see the sky.”

They reached the first landing without obstacles. The mercenaries fell back before them, amazed and surprised by their icy calm. But after a moment, three men leapt forward, waving their swords. They died instantly.

“Attack all at once,” the Owl shouted from below. “Kill them!”

Three more attacked. Geralt stepped forward, feinted at one, and cut another’s throat. He spun and Ciri dashed under his right arm. The girl slashed a second mercenary under his arm.

The third tried to escape by jumping over the railing. He did not make it.

Geralt wiped a few drops of blood from his face.

“Calmly, Ciri.”

“I am calm.”

Three more approached. A flash of swords, screaming, death.

Thick blood trickled down the smooth stone stairs.

A mercenary with a jacket with brass rivets rushed them with a spear. His eyes shone with narcotics use. Ciri, with a quick step, deflected the spear and Geralt slashed at the man. He wiped his face. They continued to walk, without looking back.

The second landing was close.

“Kill them!” Skellen shouted. “Kiillllll!”

Heavy footsteps on the stairs. The bright flashing of a blade, a shout, death.

“Excellent, Ciri. But calmly. Less excitement. And stay close to me.”

“I’ll never leave you.”

“Do not strike from the shoulder; you can do it from the elbow. Be careful.”

“I’m careful.”

The brightness of a sword, a cry, blood, death.

“Excellent, Ciri.”

“I want to see the sky.”

“I love you.”

“I love you too.”

“Watch out. It’s getting slippery.”

The flash of blades, screaming. They walked, overtaking the blood pouring down the steps. They continued down the stairs of castle Stygga.

One of the mercenaries slipped on the bloody stairs and fell straight beneath their feet. He wailed for mercy and covered his head with both hands. They walked around him without looking.

They reached the third and lowest landing and no one dared cross their path.

“Bows!” Stefan Skellen shouted from below. “Bows and crossbows! Boreas Mun was supposed to bring crossbows! Where is he?”

Boreas Mun – the Owl could not know – was already quite far away. He rode straight to the east, with his forehead to the mane of his horse, galloping as fast as he could.

Of the other men who were sent to get crossbows, only one had returned. When he fired, his hands shook and his eyes watered from fisstech. The first bolt hit the railing. The second one did not even hit the stairs.

“Higher!” The Owl ordered. “Get closer, you idiot! Shoot up closer!”

The crossbowman pretended not to hear. Skellen swore, grabbed the crossbow, jumped up the stairs, knelt and aimed. Geralt immediately covered Ciri with his body, but the girl slipped past him and as the rope from the crossbow twanged, she was already in position. She twisted her sword into the upper quarter and the bolt hit it so hard it hung in the air a long time before falling to the ground.

“Very good,” Geralt muttered. “Very good, Ciri. But if you ever do something like that again, you’ll get a spanking.”

Skellen threw the crossbow aside. He suddenly realised he was alone.

All of his men huddled at the bottom of the stairs and none were in a hurry to climb.

There even seemed to be less of them. Some had probably run off. For crossbows – no doubt.

The witcher and witcheress, calmly, without hurrying, walked down the blood slicked stairs of castle Stygga. They stood close to each other, shoulder to shoulder, beguiling the fast movements of their swords.

Skellen stepped back. And did not stop retreating until he reached the bottom. When he was surrounded by his men, he realised how far he had come. He cursed helplessly.

“Men!” He shouted, but his voice broke. “Forward! At them at once! Follow me!”

“Get them yourself,” growled one of them and raised his hand covered in fisstech to his nose. The Owl swung at him and he sprinkled white powered all over his face, sleeve and coat lapels.

The witcher and witcheress passed another platform.

“When they get down here, they will be easier to surround,” Skellen encouraged. “Men, to arms!”

Geralt looked at Ciri and almost screamed with rage when he noticed silver threads among her ashen hair. He restrained himself. This was not the time for anger.

“Be careful,” he said flatly. “Stay close to me.”

“I’ll always be close to you.”

“Down there it is going to be tricky.”

“I know, but we’ll be together.”

“We are together.”

“I’m here with you,” said Yennefer, walking down behind them on the slippery stairs.

“Together! All together!” Shouted the Owl.

The men who had run for the crossbows, quickly returned. Without the crossbows, but with horror in their eyes.

From the three corridors leading away from the stairs came the roar and banging of doors being broken down with axes. And the sound of heavy boots marching. All of a sudden from the three corridors flowed soldiers with black helmets, shields and the silver salamander on their coats. Skellen’s mercenaries, intimidated by their shouts and threats, threw down their weapons. Those who hesitated were threatened with crossbows and pikes. After a thundering call to drop all weapons, everyone listened, because they could see the black soldiers were burning for an excuse to do something. The Owl stood on a step and crossed his arms.

“The miraculous rescue,” Ciri said in a whisper.

Geralt shook his head.

The crossbows and spears were turned in their direction as well.

“Glaeddyvan Vort!”

Resisting was pointless.

Soldiers swarmed out of the mouth of the corridors like an army of black ants and both the witcher and the witcheress were very, very tired. But they did not throw down their swords. They carefully placed them on the steps. Geralt felt the warmth from Ciri's arm and could hear her breathing.

Above, avoiding the corpses and spilled blood, came Yennefer. She showed the soldiers her empty hands and sat down heavily on the step next to Geralt and Ciri. The witcher could felt the heat on his other arm. It is a pity it we could not stay this way forever, he thought.

And he knew he could not.

The Owl's men were tied up and led away. Suddenly among the soldiers appeared the high ranking officers, recognisable by the white plumes and the silver trim on their breastplates, and by the respect that the other soldiers gave them.

The soldiers before one of those officers, whose helmet had more silver ornaments than any other, parted with exceptional respect. Almost bowing.

He stopped in front of Skellen. The Owl – it was clearly visible even in the flickering light of the torches and braziers – went pale as a sheet of paper.

"Stefan Skellen," the officer said in a voice that rang metallically around the vaulted room. "I'll see you in court. You'll be sentenced for treason."

The Owl was led out, but his hands were not tied.

The officer turned around. Upstairs a burning tapestry tore itself from the wall, and floated down like a large fiery bird. The red flames gleamed on the silver ornaments on his helmet and his lowered visor, forged like all the helmets of the black soldiers into the monstrous form of a jagged mouth.

Now it's our turn, thought Geralt. He was right. The officer stared at Ciri. His eyes shone through the opening in his visor, watching everything without missing a detail. Her paleness. The scar on her cheek. The blood on her sleeve and hands. The white streaks in her hair.

Then he turned his eyes to the witcher.

"Vilgefortz?" He asked in a sonorous voice.

Geralt shook his head.

"Cahir aep Ceallach?"

Another shake of his head.

"A slaughterhouse," said the officer, looking at the staircase. "A bloody slaughterhouse. Well he who lives by the sword… At least you spared the hangman some work. You have travelled a long way, witcher."

Geralt did not respond. Ciri sniffed again and wiped her nose on the back of her hand.

Yennefer again scolded her with her eyes. The Nilfgaardian noticed it and smiled.

“You came from the other end of the world,” he continued. “For her and her. If only for that, something should be done. Lord de Rideaux!”

“At your service, Your Imperial Majesty!”

The witcher was not surprised.

“Find us a discrete chamber, where I can rest and talk undisturbed with Geralt of Rivia. During that time, please provide all available services and convenience to both ladies. Obviously under the constant watch of guards.”

“As you wish, Your Majesty!”

“Geralt, follow me, please.”

The witcher rose. He looked at Ciri and Yennefer, wanting to calm them, wanting to warn them not to try any nonsense. But it was not needed – they were both extremely tired. And resigned.

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“You have come a long way,” repeated Emhyr var Emreis, Deithwen Addan yn Carn aep Morvudd, the White Flam Dancing on the Barrows of his Enemies.

“I don’t know,” Geralt said calmly, “yours appears to have been longer, Duny.”

“You’ve recognised me,” the Emperor smiled. “A lack of beard and a change of behaviour changed me completely. The people who had seen me at Cintra, and came to Nilfgaard to have audience with me, no longer recognised me. And you saw me only once, after all, sixteen years ago. I was so etched in your memory?”

“I did not recognise you, you’ve actually changed very much. I figured out who you are already, some time ago. Not without outside help and guidance, I guessed what role you were to play in family incest with Ciri. And in one of my nightmares I once dreamed of hideous incest. And here you are, in the flesh.”

“You can hardly keep your feet,” Emhyr said coldly. “And your impertinence is forcing you to be even weaker. I invite you to sit in the presence of the Emperor. I grant you the privilege of… life.”

Geralt, with relief, sat. Emhyr stood leaning against a carved cabinet.

“You saved my daughter’s life,” he said. “Several times. I thank you for that. On behalf of me and on behalf of my descendants.”

“You leave me speechless.”

“Cirilla,” Emhyr said ignoring the sarcasm, “is going to Nilfgaard. In due time she will become the Empress. Like dozens of girls who become queens, without previously knowing her husband. Often times even without a good concept of the first encounter with their husband. Often they are disappointed by the first few days… and nights of marriage. Cirilla is not the first.”

Geralt declined to comment.

“Cirilla,” continued the Emperor, “will be happy, like most of the queens I just spoke about. It will come with time. I will not demand love from her but will transfer it to the son that Cirilla will bear for me. Archduke and future Emperor. An Emperor, who will beget a son. A son who will be ruler of the world and who will save the world from destruction. So says the prophecy, whose precise content, only I know…”

The White Flame thought for a moment and continued.

“It is clear that Cirilla must never know who I really am. The secret must die. Along with those who know it.”

“Sure…” Geralt nodded. “It could not be clearer.”

“You cannot help noticing,” Emhyr said after a moment, “the hand of fate in everything that has happened. All of it. Also in your actions. From the very beginning.”

“Rather, I see the hand of Vilgefortz. It was he who sent you to Cintra, right? When you were an enchanted hedgehog? It was he who made Pavetta…”

“You are shooting in the dark,” Emhyr interrupted abruptly, throwing his salamander cloak over his shoulder. “You don’t know anything. And you don’t need to know. I did not ask you here to relate the story of my life. Nor to explain myself to you. The only thing you deserve is to ensure that the girl will come to no harm. I do not have any debts to you, witcher. No…”

“You!” Geralt interrupted. “You broke a signed contract. You broke your word! You lied! These are your debts, Duny! You broke your oaths as a prince, and you have debts as an Emperor. With imperial interest. For ten years!”

“Is that all?”

“That’s it. Because that is all that is mine, nothing more. But no less! I had to introduce myself to collect the girl when she turned six. I waited on the agreed upon date, but you wanted to steal the child before that time. But the fates, of which you speak, have mocked you. During the next ten years you tired to fight destiny. Now it is your turn, you have Ciri, your own daughter, who you once shamefully deprived of parents and with whom you now want to shamelessly spawn incestuous offspring. You don’t ask for her love? Pah, you don’t have the

right to her love! Between us, Duny, how can you look her in the eyes?"

"The end justifies the means," the Emperor said flatly. "I do it for the future of the world. For its salvation."

"If you have to save the world like this," the witcher lifted his head, "this world would be better off disappearing. Believe me, Duny; it would be better to perish."

"You are weak," Emhyr var Emreis said gently. "Do not get excited, you look like you're about to faint."

He moved from the cabinet, pulled up a chair and sat down. The witcher's head was indeed spinning.

"The Iron Hedgehog," Emhyr var Emreis said calmly and quietly, "was a way of forcing my father to cooperate with the usurper to the throne. After the coup, my father, the Emperor was deposed, imprisoned and tortured. He did not break; however, because the usurping Duke devised something else – before his eyes, he had a hired sorcerer turn his only son into a monster. The sorcerer also had a sense of humour. In our language, Emhyr means hedgehog. My father did not break then, so he was killed. I was driven by mockery and insults to the forest and chased by dogs. Fortunately they did not pursue me too fiercely, because the sorcerer botched the job, and from midnight until dawn I returned to human form, it saved my life. I was just thirteen years old. I knew several people on whose fidelity I could rely on. But even so, I had to flee the country. A crackpot astrologer called Xarthisius had read in the stars that the cure to the spell could be found in the North, beyond the Marnadal Steps. Later, as the Emperor, I gave him in payment for his services a tower and good equipment. At that time he had to work with borrowed equipment. As for what happened at Cintra, you already know, and I won't waste your time. The truth is that Vilgefortz had nothing to do with it. First, I still didn't know him. And second, I still felt a deep aversion to sorcerers. To this day, I still do not like them. Oh by the way, when I reclaimed the throne, I apprehended the sorcerer who had served the usurper and who had turned me into a monster in front of my father. I, too, showed a sense of humour. The sorcerer's name was Braathens, which in our language is the same as the word 'fried'.

"Well, enough digression, back to the subject at hand. After the birth of Ciri, Vilgefortz secretly visited me in Cintra. He introduced himself as a confidant of those who remained faithful to me in Nilfgaard. He offered me his help and soon demonstrated that he *could* help. When I asked incredulously the motives for his actions, he did not deny relying on my gratitude. His plans were to win wealth

and power, which the future Emperor of Nilfgaard would provide him – me. A mighty ruler who would rule half the world and raise offspring, who would dominate the whole world. The wizard bluntly admitted that he wished to achieve a high position. Then he pulled out a scroll tied with snakeskin and acquainted me with the content. So I knew of the prophecy, I learned about the future fate of the world and I realised what I must do. And I have come to believe that the end justifies the means."

"Of course."

"Meanwhile, in Nilfgaard," Emhyr ignored Geralt's comment, "my business was on track. My supporter had gained more and more influence and had won a group of army officers and cadets over to our side and prepared for a coup. However, I was also imperative. In person. The rightful heir to the throne and imperial crown, the rightful Emreis of the Emreis lineage. I would be the flag of revolution. Between you and me, a lot of revolutionaries harboured a hope that that was all I would be. Those who are still alive still can't get over it. But I digress. I had to go home. It was time that Duny, Prince of Maecht and false prince of Cintra, claim his heritage. However, I had not forgotten about the prophecy. I had to go back there with Ciri. But Calanthe was very carefully looking over my shoulder."

"She never trusted you."

"I know. I think she knew something about the prophecy. She would do anything to stop me and Cintra was in her power. It was clear, I had to go back to Nilfgaard, but in a way that no one would know that I was Duny and that Ciri was my daughter. Vilgefortz suggested a way. Duny, Pavetta and their child were to die, disappear without a trace…"

"The faked sinking ship."

"Right. While sailing from Skellige to Cintra we had been driven by magic to the Sedna Abyss, where Vilgefortz pulled our boat into the maelstrom. I, Pavetta and Ciri would be closed in a specially protected cabin and survive. The crew…"

"They would not survive," finished the witcher. "Then began your journey over the corpses."

"It started a little earlier," he said after a moment in a dull voice. "When it became clear that Ciri was not on board."

Geralt raised his eyebrows.

"Alas," said the Emperor flatly. "I underestimated Pavetta in my plans. This melancholy girl with downcast eye constantly watched me and my intentions. Just before leaving she smuggled our daughter back to the mainland. I raved.

She, too. She had an attack of hysteria. In the scuffle… she fell overboard. Before I could jump in behind her, Vilgefortz pulled the ship into the maelstrom. I hit my head and lost consciousness. I survived only by a miracle, caught in the rigging. I woke up and bandaged up. I had a broken arm and…"

"I wonder," said the witcher coldly, "what a man feels after murdering his wife?"

"Worse than a mangy dog," Emhyr replied promptly. "I felt worse than a mangy dog, like a true scoundrel. Even the fact that I never loved her didn't change that. The end justified the means. However, I regret her death, I did not want it and I did not plan it. Pavetta died accidentally."

"You're lying," Geralt said dryly, "and it does not become an Emperor. Pavetta could not live. She would have denounced you. She would never let you do what you intend to do to Ciri."

"She would have lived," Emhyr contradicted him. "Somewhere else… Somewhere far away. There are many remote castles… perhaps Darn Rowan… I would not have killed her…"

"Even for the purpose that justifies the means?"

"Always," the Emperor rubbed his forehead, "you use a less drastic solution. There are always many options available."

"Not always," said the witcher, looking into his eyes. Emhyr avoided his gaze.

"Just what I thought," Geralt nodded. "Finish your story. Time is running out."

"Calanthe guarded her granddaughter like the apple of her eye. I could not even dream of kidnap… My relationship with Vilgefortz had cooled considerably, and I still held a grudge against other sorcerers… But the military and aristocracy were pushing me to go to war, encouraging me to attack Cintra. The nation needed living space and the *voxpopuli* would consider this my test as Emperor. I decided to kill two birds with one stone. I would take in one fell swoop, Cintra and Ciri. The rest you know."

"Yes, I know," said Geralt. "Thanks for the chat, Duny. Appreciate that you take the time, but let's not wait any longer. I am very tired. I've seen the death of friends who followed me here from the end of the world. To save your daughter. They did not even know her; except for Cahir; none of them had seen her. They came to save her because there was something in them that was worthy and noble. And for what? To find death. I don't think that is fair. And if anyone is interested, I'm not satisfied. Because a story in which good people die and the

rogues live is bullshit. I have no more strength, Emperor. Call your men."

"Witcher…"

"The secret must die along with those who know it, you said so yourself. You have no other way out. There are no other solutions. If I escape from prison I'll come for Ciri. It is the price I must pay and you know it."

"I know it."

"You can spare Yennefer's life. She does not know the secret."

"She," Emhyr said seriously, "would pay any price to take my Ciri. And to avenge your death."

"True," said the witcher. "I almost forgot how much she loves the girl. You're right, Duny. We cannot escape our destiny. I have a request…"

"I'm listening."

"Let me say goodbye to both of them. Then I am at your disposal."

Emhyr stood up, walked to the window and stared out the dark portal.

"I cannot deny this. But…"

"Do not worry; I won't say anything to Ciri. It would hurt her severely, if I told her who you are. And I cannot hurt her."

After a long silence, Emhyr turned from the window.

"Maybe I do have some debt to you," he turned on his heel. "Listen to what I have to offer. Once, long ago, when people still valued truth, honour and pride, they stood behind their words and feared only shame, it would happen that a person sentenced to death could escape humiliation by being handed a dagger or razor, and stepping into a tub of warm water and opening a vein. Do you think that…"

"Command a tub to be filled."

"Do you believe," the Emperor said quietly, "that the Lady Yennefer would accompany you in the tub?"

"I'm pretty sure. But I will have to ask. She has quite a rebellious nature."

"I know."

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Yennefer agreed without hesitation.

"Full circle," she said, staring speculatively at her wrist. "Uroboros is biting his own tail."

***

"I don't understand," Ciri spluttered like an angry cat, "I don't see why I should go with him! Why? Where are you going?"

"My daughter," Yennefer said quietly. "This is your destiny. You'll see, it

cannot be otherwise.”

“And you?”

“Us,” Yennefer looked at Geralt, “a different destiny awaits us. Nor can it be otherwise. Come to me, my daughter. Hold me tight.”

“They want to kill you! I will not allow it! After all, we have only just been reunited! This is not fair!”

“He who lives by the sword,” Emhyr var Emreis said dully, “dies by the sword. They both fought with me and lost. But they lose with dignity.”

Ciri, in three steps stood before him, Geralt silently gasped. He heard Yennefer sigh.

Bloody hell, he thought, *anyone can see it! Everyone in the Black Ones army will see it! The same attitude, the same sparkling eyes, the same gesture with her mouth, the way she crosses her arms over her chest. Fortunately she inherited her mother’s ashen mane. But even so, those who aren’t blind can see whose blood she is.*

“You,” Ciri said, directing an angry look at Emhyr. “You won. And you think you won with dignity?”

Emhyr var Emreis did not respond. He just smiled and eyed the angry girl. Ciri clenched her teeth.

“So many dead, so many dead for this end? And they lost with honour? Death is an honour? Only a beast would think so. I have looked at death up close and have not become a beast. And it will never happen.”

He did not answer. He looked at her, seeming to drink her in.

“I know,” she hissed, “what you are up to. What you want to do with me. I’ll tell you now – I will not let you touch me. And if you do… I’ll kill you. Even if tied up. When you sleep, I’ll bite through your throat…”

The Emperor with a quick gesture silenced the murmuring of his officers.

“This will happen,” he drawled, not taking his eyes from Ciri, “as intended. Say goodbye to your friends, Cirilla Fiona Elen Riannon.”

Ciri looked at the witcher, Geralt made a dismissive motion with his head. The girl sighed. She hugged Yennefer and they whispered together for a long time. Ciri then approached Geralt.

“A pity,” she said quietly. “It seemed that everything was beginning to improve.”

“It seemed to be so,” said the witcher.

They embraced.

“Be brave.”

“He will not have me,” she whispered. “He will not have me, don’t worry. I will escape him. I know a way…”

“Do not kill him. Remember, Ciri. You cannot!”

“Fear not, I didn’t even think about it. You know, Geralt, I’ve had enough of killing. There has been altogether too much.”

“Too much. Goodbye, witcheress.”

“Goodbye, witcher.”

“Don’t cry.”

“That is easy for you to say.”

***

Emhyr var Emreis, Emperor of Nilfgaard escorted the witcher and the sorceress to the bath chamber, to a large marble bathtub filled with warm, fragrant water.

“Goodbye,” he said. “Take your time. I’m leaving, but I will leave people her to carry out my orders. When you are ready, call out. A Lieutenant will bring a knife. But as I said, do not rush.”

“We appreciate it,” Yennefer said seriously. “Imperial Majesty?”

“I’m listening.”

“I would ask you not to hurt my daughter. I do not want to die with the notion that she is crying.”

Emhyr was silent for a time. A very long time. He bowed his head and leaned on the door.

“Lady Yennefer,” he finally said, an unreadable expression on his face. “You can be sure that I will not hurt your’s and Geralt’s daughter. I have trampled the corpses of people and danced on the barrows of my enemies. I thought that was all I could look forward to. But your suspicions are unfounded - will never be able to hurt her. I know that now. Thank you to you both. Goodbye.”

He walked out of the bath chamber and quietly closed the door. Geralt sighed.

“Should we undress?” He looked at the steam rising above the tub. “I’d hate for them to pull me out as a naked corpse…”

“I imagine it does not matter how they pull us out,” Yennefer pulled off her shoes and socks and with quick movement began to unbutton her dress. “Even though this is my last hour, I will not bathe dressed.”

She pulled her shirt over her head and jumped into the tub, splashing the water.

“Well, Geralt? Why are you standing like a statue?”

“Because I had forgotten how beautiful you are.”

“You’re very forgetful. Now, get in the water.”

When he sat down beside her, she immediately threw her arms around his neck. He kissed her, stroking her waist above the water and under it.

“Is this,” he asked for the record, “the right time?”

“For this,” she murmured, dipping one hand under the water and touching him, “every time is appropriate. Emhyr repeated twice that we were not to rush. What better way to spend the last few moments we have been given? Why mourn and lament? It’s not worth it. Why examine our consciences? It is stupid and trivial.”

“That’s not what I meant.”

“Then what?”

“If the water cools down,” he murmured caressing her breasts, “then the cuts will be painful.”

“For pleasure,” Yennefer dipped a second hand below the water, “it is worth paying a little pain. Are you afraid of pain?”

“No.”

“Me neither. Come, sit on the edge. I love you, but I will not, damn it, dive.”

***

“Oh, oh…” said Yennefer tilting her head so that he wet hair arched over her back.

“Wow…”

***

“I love you, Yen.”

“I love you too, Geralt.”

“It’s time. Let’s call.”

“Let’s call.”

They called out. First the witcher called and then the sorceress after him. When they received no response, the shouted in unison.

“We are ready! Give us the knife! Hey! Damn it! The water is cooling!”

“Then get out of it,” Ciri said, peering into the bath chamber. “They’re all gone.”

“What?”

“Yes. They are all gone. Besides the three of us, there is not a soul here. Get dressed. You look awfully ridiculous naked.”

***

As they dressed, their hands began to tremble. Both of them. With utmost

difficulty they dealt with the buckles, hooks and buttons. Ciri chattered.

“They are gone. Except for ourselves. Each and every one of them. They took all the prisoners, mounted their horses and left. They left no one behind.”

“They left no one?”

“Nobody.”

“Incomprehensible,” Geralt shook his head. “I don’t understand it.”

“And nothing happened,” Yennefer cleared her throat, “to explain this?”

“No,” Ciri replied quickly, “nothing.”

She lied.

***

At first, she had tried to appear fine. Erect, proud, head held high and her face impassive, while being pushed into the gloved hands of the Black knights, while throwing bold and challenging looks and those helmets which made her so afraid. No one was touching her now, after the officer with the silver ornament on his helm growled at his officers.

She walked between two rows of soldiers who escorted her to the gate. Their boots stomped loudly, their chainmail clinked and their weapons rattled.

After advancing a few steps, she looked back for the first time, a little time later; she did it a second time. She would never see them again anymore, she suddenly realised with terrifying clarity.

Neither Geralt nor Yennefer. Never again.

That awareness, in one fell swoop wiped away her fake mask of courage. Ciri’s face contracted and contorted her eyes filled with tears, and her nose ran. The girl fought with all her might, but in vain. A wave broke the dam as the tears made an appearance.

The Nilfgaardians in salamander cloaks looked on silently. And amazed. Some had seen her on the stairs covered in blood, had seen her talking with the Emperor. A witcheress with a sword, who was defying the Emperor himself. And now they were stunned, seeing a simple girl crying and sobbing.

She was aware of their gazes. Their eyes were burning like fire, prickling her skin. She struggled, but to no avail. The more she tried to restrain herself, the more she cried.

She slowed and then stopped. The escort also stopped. But only for a moment. A grouchy officer grabbed her with iron hard hands under her arms. Ciri glanced over her shoulder again. She offered no resistance. But wailed louder, more desperate.

The Emperor, Emhyr var Emreis stopped, this dark man whose face had

awakened strange and confusing memories. With a sharp order, he ordered her loose. Ciri sniffed and wiped her eyes with her sleeve. Seeing the Emperor approach he stifled a sob and proudly raised her head. Although even at the time she realised how ridiculous she must look.

Emhyr watched her for a long time. Without a word. Then he approached and reached for her.

Ciri, whose reactions to such movements were to instinctively recoil, did not react this time to her surprise. Even greater was her surprise to find that the contact with this man was not distasteful.

He touched her hair, as if to count the snowy strings. He touched her cheek, his fingertips running along the old scar. Then he hugged her, cuddling her close to his chest, stroking the back of her head. And she, shaking and crying uncontrollably, let him.

“A strange thing, fate,” she heard him whisper faintly. “Goodbye, my daughter.”

***

“What did he say?”

Ciri’s face clouded.

“He said, *Va Faill, luned*. In the elder speech – Goodbye, my daughter.”

“I know,” Yennefer nodded. “What happened then?”

“Then… Then he let me go, he turned around and walked away. He shouted orders. And they all left. They passed me, quite indifferently, stomping, pounding and rattling in their armour, out the gate. I heard neighing and galloping. I d… don’t understand. Although if you think about it…”

“Ciri.”

“What?”

“Do not think.”

***

“Castle Stygga,” repeated Philippa Eilhart, looking out from under her long eyelashes at Fringilla Vigo.

Fringilla did not blush. In the last three months she had been able to product a magic cream which acted on blood vessels. Thanks to that cream the blush on her face didn’t show, and no one could know that she was ashamed.

“Vilgefortz was hiding in castle Stygga,” Assire var Anahid confirmed. “It is in Ebbing on the shore of a mountain lake whose name, my informant, a common soldier, cannot remember.”

“You used the past tense,” Francesca Findabair said.

“Correct,” Philippa took control again. “Because Vilgefortz is dead, my dear colleague. He and his companions are dead. This service was provided by our good friend the witcher Geralt of Rivia. Obviously we underestimated him. We all do. We made a mistake. We all do. Some more than others.”

All the sorceresses as if on command looked at Fringilla, but the cream was working reliably. Assire var Anahid sighed. Philippa slapped her hand on the table.

“Although it may seem like an excuse,” she said dryly, “our activities associated with the war and the preparation of the peace negotiations, and the fact that the Lodge was not involved with the case and final solution of Vilgefortz, have to be considered as a failure on our part. Something like this must not be repeated, dear ladies.”

The Lodge – except for Fringilla who was pale as a corpse – shook their heads.

“At the moment,” Philippa said, “Witcher Geralt is somewhere in Ebbing. Along with Yennefer and Ciri. We will need to consider how to find them…”

“And the castle?” Sabrina Glevissig interrupted. “Have you forgotten to do something about that, Philippa?”

“No, I have not forgotten. If there is going to be a legend, one must have the proper version and one in our favour. I’ll entrust this task to you, Sabrina. Take Keira and Triss and take care of it. See that no trace is left.”

***

The explosion was heard in Maecht, the flash – because it happened at night – was visible even in Metinna and Geso. A series of earthquakes caused by the explosion were felt even further. In virtually all corners of the world.

Congreve, Estella vel Stella, – The daughter of Otto of Congreve, married to the old Count Liddertal. Upon the death of the latter, rapidly recovered, managed her inheritance most judiciously, amassing for herself a not inconsiderable fortune. Enjoying the esteem of the emperor Emhyr var Emreis (sic), she was considered a person of great importance by the court. While she had no official duties, it was generally believed that the emperor was in the habit of paying considerable attention to her words and opinions. Because of her close personal relationship with the young Empress Cirilla Fiona (sic), whom she loved like her own daughter, she was jokingly referred to as the 'Imperial mother-in-law'. She outlived both the Emperor and the Empress, and died in 1331; as to her huge fortune, it fell to distant relatives on the Liddertal side of the family, called the Whites; being stupid and short-sighted, they squandered every bit of their inheritance.

Effenberg and Talbot
Encyclopaedia Maxima Mundi, Tome III

CHAPTER TEN

The man stealthily approaching the camp was very clever and cunning. His position changed quickly and he moved silently and swiftly so that his approach would not be noticed by anyone. Anyone but Boreas Mun. Boreas was very skilful in approaching manoeuvres.

“Show yourself, stranger,” he called, making sure to make his voice sound confident and bold. “Your tricks won’t work on me. I can see you out there!”

One of the boulders on the hillside against the starry sky moved and turned into the silhouette of a human figure.

Boreas turned the spit roast as the meat was burning. Pretending to comfortably support himself, he put his hand on the grip of his bow.

“My property is not worth much,” he said in a calm tone with a thread of warning. “I only have a few things, but I do not intend to lose them. I will defend them to the death.”

“I’m not a thief,” said the deep voice of the man hiding among the rocks. “I am a pilgrim.”

The pilgrim was tall and robust, measuring almost seven feet and Boreas noticed quite the stomach on him. He held a cane in his hand that was a thick as a pole carts and looked like an ordinary pilgrim stick. Boreas Mun wondered how suck a big, hulking man could move with such agility.

He became concerned. His bow, a composite bow with seventy pounds of pressure, which could dispatch an elk at a hundred paces, suddenly seemed like a fragile child’s toy.

“I am a pilgrim,” the figure repeated. “I have no evil…”

“The other one,” Boreas interrupted sharply, “can come out too!”

“What other…” The pilgrim stuttered and stopped, seeing from the darkness on the opposite side of the fire, emerge a slim, noiseless shadow.

This time Boreas Mun was surprised. The other man was an elf – his expert trackers eye detected it right away by the way he moved. And being surprised by an elf had no shame.

“I apologise,” the elf said, his voice slightly hoarse. “I did not hide from the

two of you out of malice, but out of caution. Um, I'd recommend you turn the spit a bit."

"He's right," said the stranger, leaning on his cane and sniffing audibly. "The way the meat smells, it's over done."

Boreas turned the spit, sighed, cleared his throat and sighed again.

"Gentlemen, please sit down," he said finally. "Wait a few minutes and the roast will be done. I say, it is a knave who refuses hospitality to pilgrims on the road."

Grease dripped into the fire and the flame blazed brighter. The pilgrim wore a felt hat with a wide brim, which hid his face quite effectively in shadow. The elf wore around his head a colourful scarf, which did not hide his face. When they saw him in the firelight, the tracker and the pilgrim winced. They made no sound, just held their breaths at the sight of his face, which was once beautifully elven, but now was disfigured by an ugly scar that ran diagonally across his forehead, brow, nose and cheek to chin.

Boreas Mun grunted and turned the spit again.

"The smell," he did not ask, but made a statement of fact, "is what attracted you to my camp."

"Indeed," said the pilgrim with the hat, "I don't want to brag, but I smelled your roast at quite a distance. But I kept a proper vigilance. The fire, that I approached yesterday, the ragged savages were roasting a woman."

"That is true," said the elf. "The next morning I found human bones in the ashes."

"The next morning?" The tall pilgrim repeated.

"How long have you been following in my footsteps, my Lord elf?"

"A long time."

"What kept you from revealing your presence?"

"Caution."

"The Elskerdeg Pass," Boreas Mun said turning the spit and breaking the awkward silence, "does not enjoy the best reputation. I have also seen bones in fires, corpses on stakes and hanging from trees. In the surrounding mountains are hidden outlaws, outcasts and the followers of perverted cults. And creatures who only see a man by himself as food. Supposedly."

"Not supposedly," said the elf. "Definitely. And the further east you go into the mountains, the worse it gets."

"Are you also headed east? For Elskerdeg? To Zerrikania? Or even further, to Haakland?"

Neither the pilgrim or the elf answered. Boreas Mun didn't really expect it. First, the question was indiscreet. Second, it was stupid. From where they were standing it was only possible to head east. Through the Elskerdeg Pass. Where he was headed.

"The roast is ready," Boreas, with a deft movement, which was also intended as a warning, flicked open a butterfly knife. "Come, gentlemen, don't be shy."

The pilgrim took out a hunting knife and the elf a stiletto which was by no means a kitchen implement. All three, however, used their blades to cut the food. For some time all that could be heard was the crunch and crackle of eating and the sizzle of bones thrown into the fire.

The pilgrim belched dignifiedly.

"Interesting animal," the pilgrim said, looking at the shoulder that he had just cleaned as if he had spent three days in an anthill. "The taste reminds me of lamb, but it was a tender as a rabbit… I do not remember ever having eaten anything like it before."

"That was a skrekk," the elf said while crushing a bone between his teeth. "But it does not resemble anything I have ever eaten."

Boreas quietly cleared his throat. The barely perceptible undercurrent of amusement in the elf's voice proved that he knew that he was eating a huge mountain rat, with blood red eyes and sharp incisors, whose tail measured one and a half cubits. The tracker was not going to catch the giant rodent, but shot it in self-defence. He then, however, decided to roast it.

He was a wise man, the thought coldly. *He never would have eaten a rat that fed on garbage and waste. But the nearest community to the Elskerdeg Pass that was able to produce waste was over three hundred miles away. The rat - or the skrekk as the elf had called it - has been clean and healthy. It had no contact with civilization. Therefore it had not been dirty or carrying disease.*

Finally they finished the last of the meat, the ribs and bones went into the fire. The moon rose over the jagged peaks of the mountains. The wind fanned the flames and sparks flew, they would die off between the myriad of twinkling stars.

"Have you gentlemen been on the road long?" Boreas Mun allowed himself another indiscreet question. "How long since you went through the Solveig Gate?"

"Long ago, or recently," said the pilgrim. "What does it matter? I passed through Solveig two days after September's full moon."

"For me it has been six days," said the elf.

“Ha,” the tracker said, emboldened by their answers. “I’m surprised that we did not meet there, because I was passing through at the same time. But I was on a horse.”

He paused, quenching gloomy thoughts and memories of his horse and its loss. He was sure that his casual companions had similar adventures. They could not have travelled the whole way on foot to catch him here in the vicinity of Elskerdeg.

“I gather,” he continued, “that you gentlemen started travelling just after the war and after the conclusion of the peace of Cintra. Naturally, I don’t care, but I dare to presume that you, gentlemen were not satisfied with the order of things established at Cintra.”

Silence reigned for a long time around the fire but was eventually broken by the distant howl. A wolf, probably, although around the Elskerdeg Pass you could never be sure of anything.

“To be honest,” the elf said unexpectedly, “I found after the peace of Cintra there was no reason why the world should love me. Or me the new layout.”

“My own case,” said the pilgrim, crossing his arms over his powerful chest. “Was the same. Although I learned of it, as a friend of mine says, *post factum*.”

There was a long silence. The howling had ceased in the pass.

“In the beginning,” continued the pilgrim, although Boreas and the elf were convinced that he would not, “everything pointed to the fact that the peace of Cintra would bring changes for the better and set tolerable living conditions for this world. If not for all, at least for some…”

“The kings,” grunted Boreas, “travelled to Cintra in April, if I recall.”

“Exactly, April second,” said the pilgrim. “I remember it was the new moon.”

***

Along the entire wall located under dark beams within a gallery, hung a row of shields with the colourful figures of heraldic emblems and the coats of arms of the nobility of Cintra.

One glance was enough to detect the difference between the old faded coats of arms of the nobility of Cintra and the newly promoted families from the reign of Dagorad and Calanthe.

The latter had vibrant colours which had not yet faded and you could not detect the slightest sign of woodworm.

However, the most intense colours appeared on the shields that had been put up most recently, those with the coat of arms of the Nilfgaardian nobles. Those who had distinguished themselves during the conquest of the country and had

proven themselves during the five year imperial administration.

Once we again hold Cintra, thought King Foltest, *we will need to ensure that these coat of arms are not destroyed in a fervour of restoration. Politics is one thing, aesthetics another.*

Changes to a regime do not justify vandalism.

So this is where it all began, thought Dijkstra, looking around the large hall. The famous engagement feast, during which appeared an iron hedgehog demanding Princess Pavetta's hand… And Queen Calanthe hired a witcher…

How amazing are the interwoven fates of humans, thought the spy, *surprised by the banality of his own thoughts.*

It's been five years, thought Queen Meve. *Five years ago, the blood and brains of Calanthe, the Lioness of Cintra, exploded on the flagstones of that courtyard, which I can see through this window. Calanthe whose portrait we saw proudly hanging in the foyer, the last of the royal bloodline. After her daughter, Pavetta drowned, she was left with only her granddaughter Cirilla. And if it is true that Cirilla also died…*

"Please," Cyrus Engelkind Hemmelfart the hierarch of Novigrad, waved his trembling hand. By virtue of his age, position and widespread respect he was to preside over the discussions. "To your places please."

They sat at a round table, where the seats were identified by mahogany tablets. Meve, Queen of Rivia and Lyria. Foltest, King of Temeria and his vassal, King Venzlav of Brugge. Demavend, King of Aedirn. Henselt, King of Kaedwen. Ethan, King of Cidaris. The young King Kistrin of Verden. The Duke Nitert, head of the regency council of Redania. And the Earl Dijkstra.

We should seek to get rid of this spy and remove him from the table of discussions, thought the hierarch. *King Henselt and King Foltest, and even young King Kistrin, have already allowed themselves a few sour comments to our Nilfgaardian representatives. This Sigismund Dijkstra is a person of dubious origins with an unacceptable past and reputation. We cannot afford to have such a person distorting the atmosphere of the deliberations.*

The head of the Nilfgaardian delegation, Baron Shilard Fitz-Oesterlen, who sat at the round table directly opposite Dijkstra, greeted the spy with a curt diplomatic bow. Seeing that everyone was already seated, the hierarch of Novigrad also sat. Not without the help of a few pages that held his trembling hands. The hierarch sat on a chair made years ago for Queen Calanthe. The chair had a beautifully carved backing, towering over the other chairs.

Even though this was a round table, it was known who was the boss.

***

So it was here, thought Triss Merigold, *looking around the room, looking at the tapestries, painting and numerous hunting trophies. Here in this room, after the devastation of the throne room, a memorable conversation took place between Calanthe, the witcher, Pavetta and an enchanted hedgehog. Here the Queen agreed to a strange marriage. After all, the princess was already pregnant and Ciri was born less than eight months later… Ciri, the heiress to the throne, the young lion with the Lioness's blood… Ciri, my little sister. Who is now apparently far away to the south. Fortunately, no longer alone, she is with Geralt and Yennefer. She's safe.*

Unless they have lied to me again.

"Take a seat, ladies," Philippa Eilhart said, who Triss had been watching suspiciously for some time. "The sovereigns of the world will in a moment begin to recite their inaugural speeches. I would not want us to miss a single word."

The sorceresses, interrupting their gossip and quickly took their seats. Sile de Tancarville, wore a silver boa, a feminine accent to her austere black outfit. Assire var Anahid was dressed in a violet silk dress, which was graceful and combined simplicity and modest elegance. Francesca Findabair was majestic as ever. Ida Emean aep Sivney was mysterious as usual. Margarita Laux-Antille was dignified and serious. Sabrina Glevissig was adorned with turquoise. Keira Metz was dressed in green and lemon yellow. And Fringilla Vigo - Depressed, sad, pale, morbid and with a literally corpse-like pallor.

Triss sat next to Keira and opposite Fringilla. On the wall behind the Nilfgaardian witch was a picture of a rider galloping down an alley of alders. The trees limbs reached towards the rider and their black cavities that served as mouths laughed. Triss shivered involuntary.

Set in the middle of the table was a telecommunicator. Philippa, with a spell, adjusted the image and sound.

"As you can see and hear," she said somewhat bitterly, "in Cintra's throne room, just below us, on the ground floor, the sovereigns of the world are about to decide its fate. And we, here, one floor above them, will watch to make sure they don't make a mistake."

***

The howling in the pass was joined by other voices. Now Boreas had no doubt, they were certainly wolves.

"I too," he said, trying to encourage more conversation, "did not expect much from these negotiations in Cintra. The truth is that no one I know counted on

these negotiations bringing anything good."

"The important thing was," said the pilgrim, "that the negotiations had begun. The common man, for that's what I consider myself to be, were well aware that the warring kings and emperor would destroy each other if they could, relentlessly. To stop the killing and sit down around the table. It meant that they no longer had the strength. They were, simply speaking, powerless. And that powerlessness meant that no soldiers would kill the common man, burn his house, kill his children, rape his women or sell his whole family into slavery. No, instead they gathered in Cintra and negotiated. Let us rejoice!"

The elf looked up from the burning logs which he was prodding with a stick.

"Even the common man," he said with obvious sarcasm, "even in his moments of joy, should know that politics is also a war, only by other means. It should also be understood that such negotiations are merely a form of trade. It is conducted in an identical manner. Success in negotiation is based on concessions obtained. Something is given, something is lost. In other words, in order to buy something, something must be sold."

"Indeed." The pilgrim said after a moment. "Something so plain and obvious can be understood by even the simplest of men."

***

"No, no, a thousand times, no!" Cried King Henselt, smashing his two fists into the tabletop, overturning his drink and making the inkwell jump. "I will not hear any more discussions about it! No more haggling! No more, I say, *deiraedh*!"

"Henselt," Foltest said quietly in a conciliatory tone, "don't hinder. And do not embarrass us by screaming in front of His Excellency."

Shilard Fitz-Oesterlen, the negotiator on behalf of the Empire of Nilfgaard, bowed with a false smile, that suggested that the antics of the King of Kaedwen did not irritate or ultimately interest him.

"Are we going to start attacking each other," continued Foltest, "like a pack of rabid dogs? Shame on you, Henselt."

"We have made arrangements with Nilfgaard in the thorny matter of Dol Angra," said Dijkstra. "It would be foolish…"

"I resent such comments!" Roared Henselt so loud he could have competed with a buffalo. "I resent such rude comments, particularly from some fucking spy! I am the fucking anointed King!"

"It can't be seen at first glance," Meve muttered.

Demavend, turned away from looking at the shields on the rooms walls,

smiling with distain, as if not concerned about the future of his kingdom.

“Enough!” Wheezed Henselt, his eyes rolling. “Enough, by the gods. As I said, I won’t give up an inch of land. Not one, not a single claim! I do not agree to the depletion of my kingdom by even a span, not even half an inch of earth! The gods have entrusted me with Kaedwen and therefore I would only be willing to surrender it to the gods! The Lower Marches is my territory… It has for centuries…”

“Upper Aedirn,” Dijkstra spoke again, “has only been part of Kaedwen since last summer. More specifically, from the twenty-fourth of July last year. From the moment that Kaedwen sent in occupational forces.”

“I ask,” said Shilard Fitz-Oesterlen, “that it be recorded *ad futuram rei memoriam*, that the Empire of Nilfgaard had nothing to do with this annexation.”

“Except that at that time you were plundering Vengerberg.”

“Nihil ad rem!”

“Really?”

“Gentlemen!” Foltest admonished.

“The Kaedwen army,” fumed Henselt, “entered the Lower Marches as liberators! My soldiers were greeted with flowers! My soldiers…”

“Your bandits,” said Demavend calmly, but his face betrayed the effort it cost to stay calm. “Your bandits invaded my kingdom, murdered, raped and looted. Lady and gentlemen, we are gathered here for a week to discuss the future of the world. By the gods, is it to be the face of crime and looting? Should it be maintained in the lawless status quo? Should stolen goods remain in the hands of thugs and robbers?”

Henselt grabbed a map from the table, tore it in two and with a rapid movement threw it at Demavend. The King of Aedirn did not even move.

“My armies,” Henselt spluttered, his face turning the colour of a well aged wine, “won the Marches from the Nilfgaardians. Your pitiful reign at that time was already in the past, Demavend. You probably don’t realise, but if not for my troops, you would not even be ruling today. I’d like to see how you’d drive the Black Ones back over the Yaruga without my help. Without exaggeration I can say that you are only a king because of my kindness. But now my kindness ends! I will not let my kingdom be depleted!”

“Neither will I,” Demavend stood. “We will never reach an agreement!”

“Gentlemen,” in conciliatory tone, Cyrus the hierarch, who until then had been dozing, spoke. “No doubt, we can always reach some compromise…”

“The Empire of Nilfgaard,” said Shilard, “does not intend to accept any

solution that would harm the country of the elves of Dol Blathanna. If necessary, My Lords, I will re-read the content of the memorandum…”

Henselt, Foltest and Dijkstra snorted, but Demavend looked at the Imperial ambassador calmly, almost benevolently.

“For the good of the people,” he said, “and to maintain the peace, I acknowledge the autonomy of Dol Blathanna. But not as a kingdom, rather as a duchy. The condition is that the Duchess Enid an Gleanna pay me homage, and is committed to the equality of elves and humans rights and privileges. I am willing to do this, pro bono.”

“Here,” said Meve, “are the words of a true king.”

“Salus publica lex suprema est,” added hierarch Hemmelfart, who for some time had sought for an opportunity to boast of his knowledge of diplomatic vocabulary.

“I would like to add, however,” Demavend continued, looking at the bloated Henselt, “that Dol Blathanna’s concession is not a precedent. This is the only breach of the integrity of my lands that I will accept. I will not recognise any additional distributions. The army of Kaedwen, which breached my boarders as an aggressor and occupier, has one week to leave the fortresses and castles that they have illegally occupied in Upper Aedirn. That is the condition for me to continue to take part in these negotiations. And *verba volant*, my secretary will add an official protocol in that sense.”

“Henselt?” Foltest gave him a questioning look.

“Never!” bellowed the King of Kaedwen, overturning his chair and jumping like a chimpanzee stung by a hornet. “I will never give up the Marches! You’ll have to go over my corpse! I will not give it up! Nothing can force me! Nothing! Over my dead body!”

And to prove that he was a scholar he shouted.

“Non possumus!”

***

“I’ll give him *non possumus*, the fool!” Snapped Sabrina Glevissig in the chamber one floor above. “Don’t worry ladies, I’m going to make this stubborn fool surrender Upper Aedirn. His army will leave within ten days, it is clear. There is no question about it. If any of you ladies doubt this, I have a right to feel offended.”

Philippa Eilhart and Sile de Tancarville expressed their appreciation by bowing. Assire var Anahid thanked her with a smile.

“Let us return to the problem of Dol Blathanna,” said Sabrina. “We know the

content of the memorandum of Emperor Emhyr. The kings down there have not have time to thoroughly discuss this issue, but they have already hinted at their approaches. The king whose voice carries most interest, you might say, is King Demavend."

"Demavend's position," Sile adjusted the fur boa around her neck, "can be described as extremely helpful. I consider his position to be thoughtful and balanced. Shilard Fitz-Oesterlen will be no small trouble trying to argue in the direction of greater concessions. I don't know whether it can be done."

"It will be," said Assire var Anahid. "Such are his instructions. The presentation of an official note will have them tangling for at least a day. After that time, he will begin to make concessions."

"That is the normal procedure," said Sabrina. "According to him, they want to meet in a separate negotiation and come to an agreement. That's what we expect. We'll decide how much we'll allow. Francesca! Speak! After all, this is about your country."

"That is why," said the Daisy of the Valley with a smile, "I am silent, Sabrina."

"Break your pride, please," Margarita Laux-Antille asked seriously. "We really need to know what we can allow the kings."

Francesca Findabair smiled more beautifully.

"For the cause of peace and pro bon public," she said. "I agree with the proposal of King Demavend. From now on, my dear friends, you can stop titling me, Your Majesty, Your Grace will be enough."

"Elven jokes," said Sabrina. "I never laugh, probably because I don't understand them. What about Demavend's remaining requirements?"

Francesca blinked.

"I agree with the repatriation of the settlers and the restitution of their property," she said gravely. "I guarantee equal rights for all races…"

"By the gods," Philippa Eilhart laughed, "don't be so accommodating! Submit your own terms!"

"I will," the elf suddenly turned serious. "I will not pay tribute to the Aedirn king. I want Dol Blathanna to be a freehold. Without the bond of vassalage, beyond the pledge of allegiance and not to act against the sovereign."

"Demavend will not accept this," Philippa said laconically. "He will not give us the profits and revenues from the Valley of Flowers."

"On that issue," Francesca raised her eyebrows, "I am willing to engage in bilateral negotiations, I'm sure we can reach a consensus. A freehold is not

required to pay tribute, but payment is not necessarily prohibited or excluded."

"And what about succession rights?" Asked Philippa. "What about the right of primogeniture? Agreeing to a freehold, Demavend will require guarantees of the indivisibility of the Principality."

"Demavend," Francesca smiled again, "may be fooled by my skin and figure, but you surprise me, Philippa. It has been a long, long time since I passed the age of being able to get pregnant. As far as birthrights and succession, Demavend has nothing to fear. I am the *ultimus familiae* of the royal house of Dol Blathanna. However, despite the age difference between me and Demavend, I will not be dealing with him, but his grandchildren's great-grandchildren. I assure you, ladies that in this respect there are no disputes."

"In this, no," said Assire var Anahid looking the elven sorceress in the eyes. "But what about the Squirrels? What about the elves that fought on the side of the Empire? If I'm not mistaken, Lady Enid, they are most of your subjects?"

The Daisy of the Valley stopped smiling. She looked at Ida Emean the elf from the Blue Mountains.

"Pro bono public…" she began, but did not finish. Assire nodded her head seriously, indicating that she understood.

"What can we do?" She said slowly. "Everything has its price. War requires sacrifice. As it turns out, so does peace."

***

"It cannot be denied," the pilgrim said, looking thoughtfully at the elf, who sat motionless with his head down. "Peace negotiation are like a flea market. A bazaar. To buy something, others must be sold. That's how the world works. The point is not to buy something that is too expensive…"

"Or to sell for too cheap," finished the elf, not raising his head.

***

"Traitors! Vile bastards!"

"Sons of bitches!"

"An'badraigh aen cuach!"

"Nilfgaardian dogs!"

"Silence!" Hamilcar Danza yelled, banging his fist on the railing of the porch.

The crossbowmen in the gallery turned their weapons on the elves who crowded in the cul de sac.

"Peace!" Danza yelled even louder. "Enough! Shut up, officers! More dignity!"

“You have the audacity to talk about dignity, scoundrel?” Shouted Coinneach Da Reo.

“We spilled blood for you, cursed *Dh’oine!* This is how you repay us? You send us to the oppressors of the North? As if we were criminals? Murderers?”

“I said enough!” Danza thumped his fist into the railing again. “Let’s be very clear about one thing, gentlemen! The agreements signed in Cintra, which were recorded as the conditions of peace, impose an obligation on the Empire by the Nordlings to issue war criminals…”

“Criminals?” Shouted Riordain. “Criminals? You filthy *Dh’oine!*”

“War criminals,” Danza repeated carefully, ignoring the shouts and clamour of the encircled elves. “Those officers who are accused of terrorism, killing civilians, the torture of prisoners, massacring the wounded in hospitals…”

“You sons of bitches!” Shouted Angus Bri Cri. “We killed because we were at war!”

“We killed following your orders!”

“Cuach’te aep ass, bloede dh’oine!”

“The decision is made!” Danza insisted. “Your insults and cries will not change anything. Please individually approach the guardhouse, please do not resist when being put into chains.”

“We had to stay behind while they fled to the Yaruga,” Riordain gritted his teeth. “We had to stay and fight as commandos. We were fools, gullible fools, we wanted to keep our military oath. Well now we will!”

Isengrim Faoiltiarna, the Steel Wolf, the legendary leader of the Squirrels, and now an imperial colonel, tore the silver rays of the Vrihedd brigade from his sleeves and threw them on the patio. Other officers followed suit. Hamilcar Danza, who was watching from the gallery, frowned.

“This demonstration is unnecessary,” he said. “In your place I would not so rashly abandon the imperial insignia. It is my duty to inform you that the negotiated peace will guarantee a fair trial, mild sentences and early amnesty for imperial…”

The cul de sac of elves burst into a grim laugh, thundering between the stone walls.

“Furthermore, I want to warn you,” Hamilcar Danza said curtly, “that we will only send thirty-two officers to the Nordlings. We will not surrender any of the soldiers, who you commanded, not one.”

The laughter ceased as if cut by a knife.

***

The wind blew on the fire, sending up a shower of sparks and smoke which filled the eyes. They heard a howl from the pass.

“With the trade,” the elf said, breaking the silence, “everything was for sale. Honour, loyalty, a noble’s oath, common decency… simple goods have value only as long as there is demand for them. If there was not, then it was thrown in the dustbin.”

“On the rubbish heap of history; said the pilgrim. “You’re right, sir elf. That’s what I found, there in Cintra. Everything had a price. And was worth as much as what you could get in return. Each morning began like a stock market. And like a real stock market sudden ups and downs were continuously occurring. It was difficult to escape the impression that someone else was pulling the strings.”

***

“Did I hear you right?” Shilard Fitz-Oesterlen asked slowly, his tone and facial expression giving the impression of mistrust. “Are my ears deceiving me?”

Berengar Leuvaarden, special envoy of the emperor, did not bother to respond. He leaned back in his chair, holding his cup of wine which he rocked rhythmically from side to side.

Fitz-Oesterlen was offended; he then put on a mask of contempt.

“Either you’re lying, you son of a bitch, or you want to dupe me. Either way, I’ve uncovered you. So I’m to understand,” he sniffed, “that after far-reaching concessions on borders, war captives, the recovery of loot, on the question of the Vrihedd brigade officers and Scoia’tael commandos, the emperor commands me to reach an agreement and accept the impossible demands of the Nordlings regarding the repatriation of settlers?”

“You understand perfectly, Ambassador,” said Leuvaarden, characteristically dragging out his syllables. “Indeed, I am full of admiration for your comprehension.”

“The Great Sun, Lord Leuvaarden, do you in the capital ever meditate on the consequences of your decisions? The Nordlings are already whispering that our empire is a colossus with feet of clay! Even now they cry out that they won, beat us and drove us out! Does the Emperor realise that to give further concession will mean accepting their arrogant and unreasonable ultimatum? Does the Emperor understand that they will treat this as a sign of weakness which could have dire consequences in the future? Does the Emperor understand, finally, the fate of several thousand of our settlers in Brugge and Lyria?”

Berengar Leuvaarden stopped rocking his cup and stared at Shilard, his eyes

as black as coal.

“I have given My Lord Baron an imperial order,” he said. “When the Baron returns to Nilfgaard he can personally ask the Emperor why he issued such unreasonable orders. He may also want to reprimand the Emperor. Scold him. Why not? But alone, without my mediation.”

Oh, thought Shilard. *I know. Sitting here before me is a new Stefan Skellen. And I’ll have to deal with him just like Skellen. But it is clear he did not come here for no reason. The order could have been brought by a regular messenger.*

“Well,” he said, outwardly calm and confident. “Woe to the vanquished. The imperial order is clear and specific, I will therefore execute it. I will do everything to make it look like the outcome of negotiations and not complete defeatism. I understand these things; I’ve been a diploma for thirty years. And my family for four generations. We are a significant, influential and rich… family…”

“I know, I know, of course,” Leuvaarden interrupted with a smile. “That’s why I’m here.”

Shilard bowed slightly and waited patiently.

“My dear Baron,” began the envoy, rocking his cup again, “your difficulties in understanding the imperial order arose because you surmised that the victory in the war is inextricably bound up with an absurd waste of material resources and human lives and is achieved by someone waving a flag and shouting, ‘Everything I see is mine! I won!’ A similar opinion is, unfortunately, fairly widespread. But for me and the people who have put their trust in me, we don’t think so. Victory is supposed to look like this – the defeated have to buy goods from the winners, and do it gladly, because the goods of the winners are better and cheaper. The winner’s currency is stronger than the currency of the defeated and the vanquished, and they begin to have more confidence in their own. Do you understand me, Baron Fitz-Oesterlen? Are you slowly beginning to distinguish the winners from the losers?”

Ambassador Fitz-Oesterlen nodded to confirm.

“But in order to strengthen and legitimise the victory,” Leuvaarden said dragging out his syllables, “a peace must be signed. A soon as possible and at any cost. Not a ceasefire or truce, but a real lasting peace. A strong contract that will build and exclude implementation of economic blockades, retaliatory tariffs and trade protectionism.”

Shilard nodded earnestly.

“We destroyed their industry and agriculture, according to a predetermined

plan," Leuvaarden continued calmly. "We did this in order to deprive them of their own goods so they have to buy ours. But our merchants and products will not cross through closed or hostile borders. What will happen then? I will tell you what will happen, dear Baron. We will create the crisis of overproduction, because our manufactures are working full speed, hoping to export. Large losses will also be felt by the maritime trade, the result of cooperation with Novigrad and Kovir. Your influential family, dear Baron, have significant participation in such societies. And family, as you are no doubt aware, dear Baron, are the basic building blocks of such societies. Did you know?"

"I know," Shilard Fitz-Oesterlen lowered his voice, even though he knew that the chamber was reliably secure against eavesdropping. "I understand. However, I would have assurance that I'm following the orders of the Emperor… And not some… corporation."

"Emperors pass," said Leuvaarden. "Corporations remain. And survive. I understand your concern, Baron. You can be sure you are fulfilling the order of the Emperor, which was issued in the interest and for the good of the Empire. I do not deny, however, that our Emperor was issued some advice from certain corporations."

The envoy unbuttoned his collar and pulled out a gold medallion, on which was displayed a burning star inside a triangle.

"An impressive decoration," Baron Fitz-Oesterlen showed his understanding. "Without a doubt, very expensive… and elitist… Is it possible to buy it somewhere?"

"No," replied Berengar Leuvaarden. "It is necessary to earn it."

***

"If the gentlemen and the lady will allow," Shilard Fitz-Oesterlen's voice took on a familiar tone which testified that what he was about to say, was considered important. "If the gentlemen and lady will allow, I will read the contents of the message from His Majesty Emhyr var Emreis, by the Great Sun, Emperor of Nilfgaard…"

"No, not again," Demavend gritted his teeth. Dijkstra quietly moaned. None of this escaped Shilard's attention.

"The imperial message is long," he admitted. "I will summarise it, and limit myself to the most important points. The Imperial Majesty expresses his satisfaction over the course of the deliberations so far and welcomes the achieved compromises and reconciliations. His Imperial Majesty wishes to make further progress in the negotiations and to conclude them with mutual benefit…"

“Let’s get to the point,” said Foltest, “And quickly! Let’s conclude the mutual benefits and return home.”

“That’s the spirit,” Henselt said, who was farther from home than anyone. “Let us get this over with, or we’ll be here until winter.”

“We have one more compromise,” said Meve. “An issue that we have touched on only a few times in passing. Perhaps out of fear that it would cause us to quarrel. It is time to overcome that fear. The problem will not disappear by not talking about it.”

“Right,” said Foltest. “We must resolve the status of Cintra, the inheritance to the throne and Calanthe’s successor. The issue is complicated, but I have no doubt we can handle it ourselves, right, Your Excellency?”

“Oh,” Fitz-Oesterlen smiled diplomatically and enigmatic. “I’m sure the question of succession to the throne of Cintra will go smoothly. The solution is simpler than you probably expected.”

***

“I submit for discussion,” Philippa Eilhart announced in a tone that did not invite discussion, “the following proposal – the territory of Cintra’s trusteeship. I entrust this mandate to Foltest of Temeria.”

“Foltest’s holdings are growing too fast,” Sabrina Glevissig said with a scowl. “Brugge, Sodden, Angren…”

“We need,” said Philippa, “a strong state at the mouth of the Yaruga. And in the Marnadal Stairs.”

“It cannot be denied,” Sile de Tancarville nodded, “we need it. But they need Emhyr var Emreis. And I recall that our goal is compromise, not conflict.”

“A few days ago Shilard suggested,” recalled Francesca Findabair, “that Cintra will be divided with lines into two demarcation zones, a southern zone and a northern zone…”

“A foolish idea,” said Margarita Laux-Antille. “Such a division does not have any meaning and only becomes the seed for future conflict.”

“I believe,” said Sile, “that Cintra should be turned into a condominium state. Administration of the territory should be engaged by both commissioners from the northern kingdoms and the Empire of Nilfgaard. The citadel of Cintra would acquire the status of a free port… You wish to say something Lady Assire? I’m used to representing my thoughts coherently and in full form, but for now… I’m listening.”

All the sorceresses turned their sights to Assire var Anahid, the Nilfgaardian witch did not look the least bit embarrassed.

“I recommend,” she said in her pleasant, calm voice, “that we focus on other issues. And leave Cintra alone. I have been told about something, which I have not had time to tell you ladies. The case of Cintra, dear colleagues, is already resolved and settled.”

“What?” Philippa’s eyes narrowed. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

Triss Merigold sighed audibly. She already knew. She had already guessed what it meant.

***

Vattier de Rideaux was sad and depressed. His beautiful and passionate lover, golden-haired Cantarella was leaving him, suddenly and unexpectedly, without giving a reason or explanation. For Vattier, this was a low and terrible blow, he had been left crestfallen, nervous, distracted and dazed. He had to pay attention, be careful and on guard and not to say something stupid while talking to the Emperor. Times of great change did not favour the nervous and incompetent.

“The merchants guild,” Emhyr car Emreis said frowning, “we have already paid for their invaluable help. We have granted them sufficient privileges, more than what they got from the previous three emperors together. In addition, we are indebted to Berengar Leuvaarden for his help in uncovering the conspiracy. He has received a high and lucrative position. But if he is incompetent, despite his merits, he will be shot from a catapult. Make sure that he knows this.”

“I will, Your Majesty. And what of Dijkstra? And his mysterious informant?”

“Dijkstra would sooner die than reveal who his informant is. However, give Dijkstra a fee for the information, which literally fell from the sky… But what? Dijkstra would not take anything from me.”

“If You Majesty will allow…”

“Speak…”

“Dijkstra would be happy to accept other information. Something that he doesn’t know, but would like to know. We could reward him with just such information.”

“Excellent, Vattier.”

Vattier de Rideaux sighed with relief. Because he had discreetly turned his head away, he was the first to notice the approaching ladies, the Countess Liddertal and the young blonde that was entrusted to her care.

“They’re coming,” he pointed out with a movement of his eyes. “Your Majesty, let me remind you… The reasons of state… In the interest of the Empire…”

“Enough,” Emhyr var Emreis interrupted reluctantly. “I said, I will consider.

Think about the case and make a decision. And then I will inform you what the decision is."

"Very well, Your Majesty."

"Anything else?" The White Flame of Nilfgaard said impatiently, tapping his glove on his hip. "What are you waiting for, Vattier?"

"The issue of Stefan Skellen…"

"No mercy. Death to traitors. But after a fair trial."

"I understand, Your Majesty."

Emhyr deigned not to look at him as he said goodbye with a bow and withdrew. Stella Congreve was waiting. And so was the blonde girl.

Here comes the interest of the Empire, he thought. *The false princess, the false Queen of Cintra. The sovereign to the area around the mouth of the Yaruga River, which is so important to the Empire. Here she comes, looking down, terrified, in a white silk dress with green sleeves and a necklace in shallow neckline. At Darn Rowan I complimented her dress and jewellery selection. Stella knows my tastes. But what am I supposed to do with this doll? Put her on a dresser or mantle?*

"Honoured ladies," he bowed first. Outside of the throne room of Nilfgaard, the rules of civility and courtesy to women were obliged, even by the Emperor. They answered him with curtsies and bows of their heads.

They were standing in front of a polite, but still Emperor.

Emhyr had had enough protocol.

"Stay here please, Stella," he said dryly. "And you, girl, come with me for a walk. Take my arm. Cheer up. It's just a walk."

They walked side by side down an alley. Imperial Guardsmen, members of the elite 'Impera' brigade stayed away, but always at the ready. They were trained to protect the Emperor, and knew when not to interfere.

They passed a pond, empty and sad. A very old carp brought by Emperor Torres, had died two days earlier. *We will have to release a young, strong, carp,* Emhyr decided. *We'll make a medal with his portrait and the date. Vaesse deiraedh aep eigean. Something ends, something begins. This is a new era, new times. Let there also be a new carp.*

Lost in thought, he almost forgot about the girl he was holding on his arm. He remembered her presence due to her warmth, the smell of lilies and the interest of the empire. In that order.

They stopped by the pond, in the middle rose an artificial island, with a rock garden, a fountain and a marble sculpture.

“Do you know what this figure represents?”

“Yes, Your Majesty,” she did not immediately answer. “It represents a pelican, whose beak tears at its own breast to feed its children with blood. It is an allegory of a noble sacrifice. And also…”

“I’m listening carefully.”

“Also of great love.”

“Do you think,” he held her by the shoulders and turned her to face him, “that a torn chest hurts less?”

“I don’t know…” she stammered. “Imperial Majesty… I…”

He took her hand. He felt her twitch, the tremor ran through her hand, arm and shoulder.

“My father,” he said, “was a great ruler, but never paid attention to myths and legends, he never had the time for such things. He always confused them. Whenever he would bring me here, to the park, he said that the sculpture of the pelican was rising from the ashes. At least smile, girl, when the Emperor tells you stories from his childhood. That’s better, thank you. I would be sad to think that you are not enjoying your walk with me. Look into my eyes.”

“I’m happy… to be here… Your Majesty. It is a huge honour for me… Also a large joy. I am very happy…”

“Really? This is not just courtly flattery? Etiquette from Stella Congreve’s classes? Admit it, girl.”

She was silent, her eyes downcast.

“Your Emperor asked you a question,” said Emhyr var Emreis. “And when the Emperor asked, no one dares be silent. Naturally, no one dares lie.”

“Really,” she said in a melodious voice. “I’m really happy, Imperial Majesty.”

“I believe you,” Emhyr said after a moment’s thought. “I think. Although, I am surprised.”

“I also…” She whispered. “I am also surprised.”

“What? Speak up, please.”

“I wish we could… walk more often. And talk. But I understand… I understand that this is impossible.”

“You understand well,” he bit his lip. “Emperors rule the world, but two things they don’t have control over. Their heart and their time. Both belong to the empire.”

“I know that,” she said, “all too well.”

“I will not be here long,” he said after a moment of heavy silence. “I have to

go to Cintra, to grace them with my presence at the peace celebration. You will have to go back to Darn Rowan… Cheer up, girl. For the second time, lift your head in my presence. What is that I see in your eyes? Tears? This is a serious breach of etiquette, I will have show Countess Liddertal my highest displeasure. Lift your head, I said…"

"Please… forgive Lady Stella… Imperial Majesty, this is my fault. Only mine. Lady Stella has taught me… and prepared me well."

"I've noticed, and I appreciate it. Fear not, Stella does not run the risk of falling from grace. She never runs the risk. I was just joking with you. Poorly."

"I noticed," replied the girl, terrified by her own boldness. But Emhyr just laughed. Somewhat forced.

"Well, I like you," he said. "Trust me. You are brave. Much like…"

He stopped.

Much like my daughter, he finished in his head. A feeling of guilt struck him like a dog bite.

The girl held his gaze. *It's not just the work of Stella*, thought Emhyr. *This really is her nature. And despite appearances, she is a diamond that doesn't scratch. No I will not authorise Vattier to kill this girl. Cintra, this business interests the Empire, but this issue seems to have only one sensible and honourable solution.*

"Give me your hand."

It was an order delivered in a stern voice and tone. But even though, he could not help feeling that she would have done it willingly. Without coercion.

Her hand was small and cold. But not shaking anymore.

"What is your name? Please do not tell me it is Cirilla Fiona."

"Cirilla Fiona."

"I feel like punishing you, girl. Severely."

"I know, Your Majesty. I deserve it. But I … I must be Cirilla Fiona."

"I think that you" he said, still holding her hand, "regret not being her."

"I"m sorry," she whispered. "I regret that I am not her."

"Really?"

"If I was … truly Cirilla, perhaps, Your Majesty would have been kinder to me. But I am just a fake. An imitation. A doppelganger who is not worthy of anything. Nothing …"

He whirled around and grabbed her arm. Then he released her and stepped back.

"Would you like a crown? A position?" he spoke quietly, but quickly,

pretending not to see her violently shake her head. "Tribute? Compliments? Luxury?"

He paused. He did not see the that the girl shook her head, denying his unjust accusations, perhaps even more unjust by the unspoken ones.

He breathed loudly and deeply.

"Do you know, little moth, that what you see in front of you is the flame?"

"I know, Your Majesty."

They were silent for a long time. The smell of spring suddenly whirled in their heads. Intoxicating.

"Being the Empress," Emhyr finally said dully, "is not easy, contrary to appearances. I do not know if I"ll be able to love you."

She nodded to indicate that she knew this. He saw a tear on her cheek. Just like then, in the Castle Stygga, he felt like a sliver of glass was stuck in his heart.

He hugged her, pressing her hard against his chest, stroking her hair which smelled like lilies.

"My poor child," he said in an unnatural voice. "My poor reason of state."

* * *

Bells rang throughout Cintra. Dignified, deep and solemn. But strangely mournful.

An unusual beauty, thought hierarch Hemmelfart, looking like everyone else, at the hanging portrait, that would measure, like the rest, half a fathom by a fathom, if not more. *An unusual beauty. A half-breed I bet, she has in her veins the cursed blood of elves.*

Pretty, appreciated Foltest, *prettier than those thumbnails shown to me by my secret service. But portraits are usually flattering.*

Quite unlike Calanthe, thought Meve. *Quite unlike Roegner. Quite unlike Pavetta … Hmmm … There were rumours … No, it"s not possible. She must be the royal blood, a legitimate ruler of Cintra. She must. It is required by reasons of state. And history.*

She was not like I"ve seen in my dreams, thought Esterad Thyssen, King of Kovir. *I"m sure she is not the same. But I will not tell anyone. I"ll keep this to myself and my Zuleyka, together we can decide how we can use this knowledge the dreams have given us.*

That was close, she was to be my wife, this Ciri, thought Kistrin of Verden. *I would have been the prince of Cintra and heir to the throne, according to custom … I probably would have died with Calanthe. Oh well, it is good that she ran away from me.*

Not for a moment do I believe the fables of love at first sight, thougth Shilard Fitz-Oesterlen. *Not for a moment. And yet now Emhyr has married the little barbarian. He rejected the possibility of reconciling with imperial nobility and marring their daughters and married Cirilla of Cintra. Why? To dominate a small country, that half, if not more, Nilfgaard would have gained during negotiations? In order to consolidate his power at the mouth of the Yaruga, which is essentially in the hands of the Nilfgaard-Novigrad-Kovir maritime trading companies? I do not understand this political necessity, so I suspect they did not tell me everything.*

Sorceresses, Sigismund Dijkstra thought. *This is the work of sorceresses. But why would it not be? Undoubtedly, it was written that Ciri would be Emhyr"s wife, Queen of Cintra and Empress of Nilfgaard. No doubt it was her destiny.*

Keep it this way, Triss Merigold thought happily. *It is a good solution. Ciri will be safe. And eventually they"ll forget her. They let her live.*

The portrait was finally put in place, the servants who were hanging it withdrew, taking the ladder with them.

At the end of a long line of dark and dusty Cintran nobles, beyond the portrait of Cerbin, Coram and Corbett, past, Dagorad and Roegner, beyond proud Calanthe and melancholy Pavetta, hung the last portrait. It showed the reigning Empress, the heiress of the royal blood and the crown. A slim girl with blond hair and sad eyes in a white dress with green sleeves – Cirilla Fiona Elen Riannon, Queen of Cintra and Empress of Nilfgaard.

Destiny, thought Philippa Eilhart, watching Dijkstra"s eyes.

Poor child, thought Dijkstra, looking at the portrait. *She probably thinks this is the end of her afflictions and misfortunes. Poor child.*

In Cintra the bells tolled, frightening the gulls.

* * *

"Soon after the conclusion of the negotiations and the signing of the peace," the pilgrim continued his story, "a celebration was held in Novigrad, which culminated in a large military parade. As befitting the first day of a new historical epoch, the weather was beautiful."

"We are to understand," the elf ask sarcastically, "that you were at it? That you attended the parade?"

"I was a little late," the pilgrim was obviously not someone who was bothered by a little sarcasm. "Like I said, it was a beautiful day. It promised to be such from dawn."

* * *

Vascoigne, commander of the fort of Drakenborg and until recently deputy commander for political affairs, eagerly slapped his whip on his boots.

"Move, move," he urged his executioners. "They"re expecting more. In Novigrad you can celebrate, but here we have to work."

The executioners place the nooses around the prisoners necks and withdrew. Vascoigne swung his whip again.

"If anyone wants to say something," he said dryly, "this is your last chance."

"Long live freedom," said Cairbre aep Diared.

"The court was biased against me," said Orestes Kopps a marauder, pillager and murderer.

"Kiss my ass," said Robert Pilch a deserter.

"Tell Lord Dijkstra, that I"m sorry," said Lennep, a former agent convicted of bribery and fraud.

"I did not, I did not want too …" cried Istvan Igalffy, swaying on a stump, former commandant of the fort, removed from the post and brought before a tribunal for excessive acts which are not permitted against the prisoners.

The sun, like molten gold, exploded over the stockade of the fort. The posts of the gallows threw elongated shadows. In Drakenborg, began a new day, beautiful and sunny.

The first day of a new era.

Vascoigne"s whip lashed his boot. He raised and lowered his hand.

The stumps were kicked out from under the feet of the condemned.

* * *

Throughout Novigrad bells rang. The sound was carried over the mansard roofs of merchant houses, until it came to the narrowest and most remote streets. Whistling rockets and exploding firecrackers. The crowd cheered, yelled, throwing hats in the air, waving handkerchiefs, scarves and flags.

'Long like the Free Company!'

'Long live!'

'Glory to the Condottieri!'

Lorenzo Molla saluted the crowd and blew a kiss to the beautiful girls.

'If we are paid with the same enthusiasm with which we are cheered,' he shouted to be heard above the uproar, 'then we'll be rich!'

'It's too bad,' Julia Abatemarco's throat constricted, 'that Frontino couldn't see this …'

The marched down the main street, Julia Abatemarco, Adam "Adieu" Pangratt and Lorenzo Molla, leading a festively dressed Company, who were

formed in rows of four, so none of the horses, sleek and shiny, moved forward an inch in front of the others. The horses of the condottieri were like their riders - calm and haughty, not frightened by the cheers and the shouting of the crowd and the only reaction to the coins and flowers flying towards them was to shake their heads slightly, almost imperceptibly.

'Long like the Condottieri!'

'Long live Adam "adieu" Pangratt! Long live Pretty Kitty!'

Julia surreptitiously wiped away a tear, and caught a carnation that had been thrown from the crowd.

'I never would have dreamed …' she said. 'We won … Poor Frontino …'

You're moved, Julia,' Lorenzo Molla smiled. 'I never knew you were such a romantic soul.'

'Well, yes. Attention, company! Face … left!'

They stood at attention in their saddles, turning the horses heads to face the grandstand and the seats and thrones arranged there.

I can see Foltest, Julia thought. *The one with the beard must be Henselt of Kaedwen, and the handsome man is Demavend of Aedirn … That Matron must be Queen Hedwig … And the boy by her side, Crown Prince Radovid, son of the king that was killed … Poor kid …*

* * *

'Long live the condottieri! long like Julia Abatemarco! Long live Adam Pangratt! Long live Lorenzo Molla!'

'Long live Constable Natalis!'

'Long live our monarchs! Long live Foltest, Demavend and Henselt!'

'Long live Lord Dijkstra!'

'Long live His Holiness!' A few voices came from the crowd, obviously bribes. Novigrad's hierarch Cyrus Englekind Hemmelfart rose and blessed the people and the army with his outstretched hands, while irreverently covering Queen Hedwig and young Radovid with the skirts of his robe.

Nobody shouts, "Long live Radovid", thought the prince covered by the hierarch's fat ass. *No one even looks at me. No one is screaming in honour of my mother. No one remembers my poor father. Even today, at a day of triumph, which he so richly deserved. After all, that's why he was murdered.*

He felt a gaze on his neck. Delicate like someone he did not know - or knew, but only in his dreams. Something that was soft like a brush of a woman's warm lips. He turned his head. He discovered the dark unfathomable eyes of Philippa Eilhart fixed on him.

Wait, thought the prince, looking away. *Just wait.*

No one could predict or guess then that this boy of thirteen years, which at that time was a person without any relevance in a country ruled by the Regency Council and by Dijkstra, would become king. A king who, after he paid all the insults that had been given to his mother and him, would go down in history with the name Radovid the Stern.

The crowd cheered. The ground beneath the hooves of the horses of the condottieri were carpeted with flowers.

* * *

'Julia?'

'Yes, Adieu?'

'Marry me. Become my wife.'

Pretty Kitty did not answer for a long time, she was surprisingly speechless. The crowd cheered. The Novigrad hierarch, sweating and gasping for breath like a big catfish, blessed from the stands the burghers and soldiers, the city and the world.

'You're married, Adam Pangratt.'

'we have long lived separately. I'm getting a divorce.'

Julia Abatemarco did not answer. She turned her head.

Surprised.

Confused.

And very happy. Without really knowing why.

The crowd cheered and threw flowers. The rockets and fireworks burst in artificial light above the rooftops and between the noise and the smoke the bells of Novigrad sounded like a whimper.

* * *

She's a woman, thought Nenneke. *She went to war a child. And has come back a woman. Confident. Realising who she is. Quiet. Relax. A woman.*

She won the war. By not letting the war destroy her.

'Deborah,' Eurneid continued listing quietly, 'died of typhus in a camp in Mayena. Prune drowned in the Yaruga when a boatload of wounded capsized. Myrrhe was killed by elves, Squirrels, during an attack on the hospital in Armeria … Katja …'

'Tell me, child,' Nenneke gently urged.

'Katja,' Eurneid cleared her throat, 'met a wounded Nilfgaardian in the hospital. After the conclusion of the peace, when the prisoners where exchanged, she went with him to Nilfgaard.'

'I've always said,' sighed the priestess, 'that love knows no boundaries. And what about Iola the Second?'

'Alive,' Eurneid hurried to explain. 'She is in Maribor.'

'Why did she not come back?'

The adept bowed her head.

'She will not return to the temple, Mother,' she said quietly. 'She is at a hospital with Mister Milo Vanderbeck , the surgeon, a halfling. She said that she wants to care for the sick. This is what she wants to dedicate her life to. Forgive her, Mother.'

'Forgive?' cried the priestess. 'I'm proud of her!'

* * *

'You're late,' Philippa Eilhart said through clenched teeth. 'You're late to a feast that has the presence of kings. Bloody hell, Sigismund, your distain for protocol is well known, and you do not need to flaunt it, on a day like this …'

'I have my reasons,' Dijkstra responded with a look from Queen Hedwig and the raising of his eyebrows from the hierarch of Novigrad. He also caught the scowl on the face of priest Willemer and the sneer on the face of King Foltest. 'Can I have a word with you Phil?'

'Alone, I imagine …'

'That would be best,' Dijkstra smiled. 'But, if you prefer, I have no objection to more eyes watching. for example, the beautiful eyes of the ladies of Montecalvo.'

'Lower your voice,' the sorceress mutter, without erasing the smile from her lips.'

'When will you grant me an interview?'

'I'll think. I'll let you know. Now leave me alone, this is a ceremony. A great feast. I'll remind you, if you hadn't noticed.'

'A great feast?'

'We are on the threshold of a new era, Dijkstra.'

The spy shrugged.

The crowd was cheering. Fireworks went off. The bells of Novigrad rang, signalling the victory and as a sign of great glory.

But the ringing was strangely mournful.

* * *

"Hold the reins, Jarre," Lucienne said. "I"m getting something to eat. Wrap the reins around your hand. I know you only have one."

Jarre felt a blush of shame and humiliation on his face. He was still not used

to the constant feeling that people had nothing better to do but to stare at his stump and his sleeve which was sewn shut. That the world noticed him at all hours, pitying his injury and hypocritically lamenting his fortune, while in the depth of their souls despising him as something that dared to tamper with his ugliness, the beautiful reigning order.

Lucienne, he had no choice but to admit, was quite different, in that sense, than the rest of the people. She neither pretended not to see or fell into mannerisms that degraded or humiliated him. Jarre several times found himself thinking that this blonde girl treated him naturally and normally. But that idea constant fought back. He Refused to accept it, because he could not bring himself to behave normally or naturally.

The wagon carrying the war amputees squeaked and rattled. After a short rainy season had come the sweltering heat. The potholes formed by the passage of continuous military convoys had dried and hardened, becoming ridges, edges and protrusions of fantastic shapes, and they rolled over these pulled by four horses. The wagon swung and swayed like a ship in a storm. The mutilated, most lame and legless soldiers cursed and swore hoarsely. Lucienne held onto Jarre, hugging him, sharing her magical warmth, his prodigious softness and exciting mix of smells – horse, leather, hay, oats and girlish sweat.

The wagon jumped at the next pothole. Jarre pulled on the rein wrapped around his wrist. Lucienne, alternately eating bread and sausage clung to his side.

"Well, well …" she noticed his brass medallion and craftily took advantage that Jarre"s one hand was occupied with the reins. "What have we here? A love charm? So you were tricked as well? The guy, who invented this trinket, had to be a pretty darn good trafficker. The demand for these were great during the war, especially after too much vodka. What is the name of the girl you wear inside? Let me see …"

"Lucienne," Jarre blushed like a tomato, "do not open it, please … I"m sorry, but that is my personal thing. I do not want to offend you, but …"

The wagon jumped and Lucienne snuggled into Jarre silently.

"Ci …ril …la," he said with effort, he did not expected a peasant girl to have far-reaching knowledge.

"You will not forget about her," she shut the locket and let it go, then looked at the boy. "This Cirilla, that is. If you truly loved her. Amulets and spells are useless. If she loves you, she will be faithful and waiting."

"For this?" Jarre raised his stump.

The girl narrowed her eyes, blue as forget-me-nots.

"If she really loves you, she"ll be waiting," she said firmly. "And nothing else matters. I know this."

"You have a lot of experience?"

"It"s none of your business," Lucienne blushed this time. "I had, what I had and with whom. But do not think I belong with those who nod their head and lie down on their back and spread their legs. But I know what I know. If a girl loves a man, so loves all of him and not little pieces. Therefore, she loves him even when a piece is missing."

The wagon jumped.

"You are oversimplifying it," Jarre said through clenched teeth. "Oversimplifying and idealising, Lucienne. You"re forgetting the little detail, that is when a man is whole, he is supposed to be able to support his wife and family. As a cripple I cannot …"

"Bah, do not cry into my apron," she said without a fuss. "The Black ones took your hand, not your head. What are you looking at? I"m from the country, but I have eyes and ears. I"m bright enough to know by the way you talk that you are a scholar. In addition …"

She cleared her throat. Jarre also cleared his throat, and breathed her scent. The wagon jumped.

"Besides," finished the girl, "I heard what you were saying to others. That your are learned. That you were a scribe in a temple. So the hand … Bah …"

The wagon had been driving for a while without hitting any potholes, but Jarre and Lucienne seemed unaware – they remained firmly pressed together.

"Well," she said after a long pause, "I"m lucky with scholars. There was one … I used to … He walked behind me … He knew a lot, and had gone through an academy. It even showed in his name."

"What was his name?"

"Semester."

"Hey, girl," called Sergeant Derkacz from behind them, a creepy looking man who was crippled during the battle of Mayena. "Crack the whip over those geldings heads, this cart is crawling along like snot down a wall!"

"Yeah, pick up the pace," added a second cripple, scratching under his pants leg at a stump covered with shiny pink skin. "We"ve had enough of these wastelands. I miss the taverns. You don"t know what I"d do for a beer! Can we not go faster?"

"I can," Lucienne turned around on the wagon box. "But if I break a hole in

the wheel or the axle, you won"t be drinking beer, only rain water. You"ll be waiting a week before we can bring any more wagons for you."

"Too bad," grinned Derkacz, "because the other night I had a dream that we were married. You could carry me on your back …"

"You smelly goat," cried Lucienne. "The plague take you …"

She stopped, seeing all the faces of the disabled men travelling in the wagon suddenly turn deathly pale.

"The gods!" cried one of them. "And we were so close to home …"

"We are lost," Derkacz said quietly and without any fuss. He was simply stating a fact.

And they said, Jarre thought to himself, *that there were no longer any Squirrels. That we had killed them all. That the issue with the elves had been resolved.*

There were six horses. But on closer inspection there were eight riders. Two of the mounts carried two people. All the horses had a stilted, arrhythmic gait, their heads bowed low. They looked exhausted.

Lucienne sighed deeply.

The elves approached. They looked even worse than their horses. Nothing remained of their pride, their disdainful superiority or charismatic differences. Their clothing, usually decorative even in the guerrilla squads, was dirty and ragged. Their hair, their pride and glory, was matted, sticky with dirt and dried blood. Their big eyes, usually devoid of any expression, were now abysses of panic and despair.

Nothing remained of their differences. Death, fear, hunger and adversity had made them ordinary. Very ordinary.

They did not inspire fear.

Jarre, for a moment thought that they would linger, but they simply cross paths and disappear into the woods, without bothering to look at the wagon and its passengers. They only left behind them a smell, an unpleasant smell that Jarre remembered from the field hospitals – the smell of misery, urine, and festering wounds.

They passed by without bothering to look at them.

But not all.

An elf with long dark hair, caked with dirt and dried blood, stopped her horse near the wagon. She sat in her saddle hunched over, her arm was in a bloody bandage which flies climbed on.

"Toruviel," said one of her comrades, "*En"ca digne, luned*."

Lucienne quickly realised what was happening. She knew what she was seeing in the elf, having been raised in a village, she had known the livid spectre of hunger. Therefore, she reacted instinctive and unequivocal. She offered the elf some bread.

"*En"ca digne,* Touruviel," repeated the elf. He was the only one of all the company wearing an emblem on his torn jacket sleeve of the silver lightning of the Vrihedd brigade.

The cripples in the wagon had remained still, not moving a muscle until that instant, suddenly shivering as if a spell had released them. In their hands, held out to the elves, as if by magic, appeared food, bread, cheese, slices of bacon and sausages.

And the elves, for the first time in a thousand years, spread their hands towards humans.

Lucienne and Jarre were the first people who saw the elves cry. Great choking sobs, not even trying to wipe the tears from their dirty faces. Refuting the claims that elves did not have tear ducts.

"*En"ca … Digne,*" repeated the elf with the lightning bolt on his sleeve. He then reached out and took the bread from Derkacz.

"Thank you," he croaked, finding it difficult to adjust his lips to the strange language. "Thank you, man."

After a while, seeing that everyone was finished, Lucienne clicked at the horses and jerked the reins. The wagon began to creak and rattle. They were silent.

It was approaching evening when they met armed horsemen. They were led by a woman with white, short-cropped hair, her face disfigured by scars. One bisected her face from the corner of her mouth in an arc to her eye. The woman was missing half of her right ear and her left arm below the elbow ended in a leather cuff with a brass hook, which the reins were wrapped around.

The woman, with a hostile look that betrayed her fierce desire for revenge, asked about the elves. About the Scoia"tael. The terrorists. The fugitives, survivors from a commando unit destroyed two days ago.

Jarre, Lucienne and the cripples in the wagon avoided eye contact with the white-haired, one-handed rider and indistinctly mumbled that they had not seen any elves or met anybody on the road.

You lie, thought the woman who was once Black Rayla. *I know you are lying. You lie out of pity. But even so that will not help them, because I, White Rayla, do not know pity.*

* * *

"Hooray, dwarves! Long live Els Barclay!"

In Novigrad the pavement rumbled beneath the shod boots of the veterans of the Volunteer Army. The dwarves marched in a formation of five, waving their flags which depicted crossed hammers.

"Long live Mahakam! Long live the dwarves!"

"Glory and honour to them!"

Suddenly, someone in the crowd laughed. And soon everybody was laughing.

"This is a scandal …" gasped Hemmelfart. "An affront … It is unforgivable …"

"Vile people," hissed the priest Willemer.

"Pretend you do not see them," Foltest told them calmly.

"We should not have skimped when dividing the spoils," said Meve sourly. "And refused to supplement the rations."

The dwarven officers retained their seriousness and form, and stood before the grandstand and saluted. The non-commissioned officers and soldiers of the Volunteer Army, however, expressed their discontent against the austerity measures imposed by the kings and hierarch. Some of them, once past the grandstand, showed the kings a bent elbow, other made one of their favourite gestures – a clenched fist with an upright middle finger. Scholars describe the gesture as *digitus infamis*. Common people called it something worse.

The blush on the faces of the kings and the hierarch showed that they were familiar with both names.

"We should not have insulted their greed," Meve insisted. "There people are very fastidious."

* * *

The howling around Elskerdeg became a gruesome chant. None of the men sitting by the fire paid any attention.

The first to speak after the long silence was Boreas Mun.

"The world has changed. Justice has been done."

"You overdid it a bit with the justice, my friend," the pilgrim smiled. "However, I agree that the world has changed. Adjusting to the fundamental laws of physics."

"I wonder," said the elf, "if we are thinking of the same laws."

"Every action," said the pilgrim, "has a reaction."

The elf chuckled, but it sounded friendly.

"A point to you, human."

* * *

"Stefan Skellen, son of Bertram Skellen, former Imperial Coroner, stand up. The Supreme Court of the eternal Empire by the grace of the Great Sun finds you guilty of crimes and abuse, of which you were charged. For the treason and active participation in a conspiracy against the Empire as well as the person of the Imperial Majesty. Your guilt has been ratified and proven and the Tribunal has found without any extenuation circumstances. Also His Imperial Majesty has exercised his right not to grant a pardon. Stefan Skellen, son of Bertram Skellen, you will be transported from this courtroom to the Citadel, where you will be held until the proper time comes. As a traitor to your homeland of Nilfgaard, you are unworthy to tread upon its ground; you will be laid on a wooden skid and dragged by horses to Millennium Square. As a traitor to his homeland of Nilfgaard, you are unworthy to breathe the air; you will be hanged by the neck on the gallows between heaven and earth. So you will stay there until you die. Then your body will be cremated and the ashes scattered to the winds on the four sides of the world. Stefan Skellen, son of Bertram Skellen, traitor. I the Chairman of the Supreme Court of the Empire, sentence you and this is the last time I will speak your name. From now on, let it be forgotten."

* * *

"We did it, we made it!" Professor Oppenhauser shouted as he burst into the dean"s office. "We did it, gentlemen! Finally! Finally! It works! It moves! It works!"

"Really?" Jean La Voisier, professor of chemistry, called Carbonstinker by his students, asked sceptically. "Is it really possible? And how, out of curiosity, does it work?"

"Perpetual motion!"

"Perpetuum mobile?" exclaimed Edmund Bumbler, the elderly zoology lecturer. "You"re not exaggerating, my dear colleague?"

"Not at all!" Oppenhauser exclaimed, jumping like a goat. "Not at all! It works! I"ve launched a functional mobile and it works! Without stopping! Perpetually! For ever and ever! There are no words to describe it, colleagues, you have to see it! Come with me, hurry!"

"I"m eating breakfast," Carbonstinker protested, but his protest was lost in the commotion, excitement and widespread bustle.

The teachers, graduates and students stood up to collect their togas, capes and gowns and ran to the door, led by the shouting and gesticulation Oppenhauser. Carbonstinker dismissed them with a *digitus infamis* and returned to the roll on

his plate.

The group of scholars were on the march ready to see the fruit of Oppenhauser"s thirty years of efforts, they ran quickly towards the office and were about to open the door when suddenly the ground trembled. Noticeably. And strongly. Very strongly.

It was a seismic shock, one of a series of shocks caused by the destruction of the castle Stygga the hiding place of the sorcerer, Vilgefortz. The seismic wave from far off Ebbing had reached here to Oxenfurt.

With a clatter, several panes of stained glass fell from the front of the Department of Fine Arts. The dusty bust of Nicodemus de Boot, the first rector of the academic institution, fell from its pedestal. Carbonstinker"s cup of tea fell from the table where he was eating his roll. From a banana tree a freshmen from the physics department, Albert Solpietra, fell while trying to impress the female medical students.

The perpetual motion machine of Professor Oppenhauser, the legendary inventor, moved for the last time, before standing still. Forever. And it was never possible to restart it.

* * *

"Long live the dwarves! Long live Mahakam!"

What a band, what soldiers, thought the hierarch Hemmelfart, as he bless the parade with his trembling hands. *Who are they cheering here? The venal condottieri, the obscene dwarves, what kind of madness is this? In the end, who won this war, them or us? By the gods, I have to warn the monarchs. When historians and scribes are put to work, we must subject their works through censorship. Mercenaries, witchers, murderers for hire, non-humans and all kinds of suspicious items should disappear from the annals of mankind. We have to erase them. Not a word about them. Not a word.*

And not a word about him too, he thought, clenching his lips and looking at Dijkstra, watching the parade with a clearly bored expression.

It will be necessary, thought the hierarch, *to issue a command to the kings about Dijkstra. His presence is an insult to decent people. This atheist and villain. Let him disappear without a trace. And let him be forgotten.*

* * *

This is what you think, you sanctimonious purple pig, thougth Philippa Eilhart, effortlessly reading the hierarch"s mind. *Do you want to rule, do you want to dictate and influence? Would you like to decide? Never! The only thing you can decide about is your haemorrhoids and even that is on your own ass,*

and you decisions there will not be relevant either.

And Dijkstra remains. As long as I need him.

* * *

Once you make a mistake, thought the priest Willemer, fixing his eyes on the shiny red lips of Philippa Eilhart. *Or any of you make a mistake. And you"ll lose your conceit, arrogance and pride. The plots that you weave. Your immorality. Your atrocity and perversions to which you surrender, in which you live. All light will eventually leave, and the pestilence of your sins will spread when you make a mistake. The moment will come.*

Because even if you do not make a mistake, I will find a way to defame you. Some misfortune will befall mankind – a curse, a plague, a pestilence of perhaps an epidemic … Then all the blame will be on you. You will be punished for not having been able to prevent the plague, by not knowing how to avoid its consequences. You will carry with you all the blame.

And then I will light the fire.

* * *

The old tomcat, called Ginger because of the colour of his coat, died. Ugly. Convulsing in agony, clawing, vomiting blood and pus and suffering from bloody diarrhoea. He meowed, even though he knew it was beneath his dignity. His meow was pitifully weak. He was losing strength quickly.

Ginger knew why he was dying. Or at least figured out what had killed him.

A few days ago a strange freighter entered the harbour at Cintra, an old grimy hulk, which carried on the bow a barely legible inscription “Catriona”. Ginger – obviously - could not read the name. A rat, walking down a mooring rope, came down to the dock. Just one. It was a mangy and dirty looking rat. And it was missing an ear.

Ginger bit the rat. He was hungry, but his instinct stopped his from devouring this abomination. However, several large, black, shiny fleas jumped from the rat and settled in his fur.

"What happened to this cat?"

"Probably been poisoned."

"Ugh, it stinks! Remove it from here, woman!"

Ginger stiffened and noiselessly opened his bloody mouth. He no longer felt the broom which the lady of the house thanked him with for his eleven years of catching mice. He was expelled from the house, dying in a gutter full of suds and urine. Dying and also wishing those ungrateful people would also fall ill. To suffer as much as he was.

His last wish was soon fulfilled. On a large scale. A scale so large a cat"s mind could not even imagine.

The woman, who expelled Ginger out into the gutter, paused and pulled her skirt up so she could scratch above her knee. It itched.

A flea had bitten her.

* * *

The stars twinkled brightly over Elskerdeg. The sparks from the fire vanished into this background.

"Neither the peace of Cintra," said the elf, "nor the more pompous parade at Novigrad can be considered a turning point or milestone. What are their meaning? Governments do not create history with revenues and decrees and no one will accept their authority as truth. One of the brighter manifestation of human arrogance is your so-called historiography, trying to deliver opinions and verdicts on “past events” as you call them. This is typical of you humans, who nature has given an existence as fleeting as that of an insect or an ant, with your ridiculous life-spans under a hundred years. Your fleeting existence is trying to adapt to the complexity of the world. You refuse to take note that history is a process that constantly continues and never ends; it cannot be divided into sections from here to here, from date to date. It is not impossible to define history , let alone change it, by a proclamation by a monarch. Even if you win the war."

"Do not undertake a philosophical discourse," the pilgrim said. "As I said, I am a simple man. I will, however, draw attention to two things. Firstly, a short life protects us against decadence, forcing people to live intensely and fully to take advantage of every moment of life and enjoy it. I speak as a human being, but that same thought probably occurred to the long lived elves who were going off to fight in the Scoia"tael commandos. Correct me if I"m wrong."

The pilgrim waited a reasonable amount of time, but no one corrected him.

"Secondly," he continued, "it seems to me that the governments, thought not being able to change history, can with their interference create the illusion which is quite convincing. They have the tools and the methods."

"Oh yes," said the elf, turning his face away. "The powerful have tools and methods. And there is no arguing with them."

* * *

The galley, bumped against the rail of the pier that was covered in piles of seaweed and shells. The moorings were thrown. There were shouts, oaths and commands.

Gulls collected garbage that floated on the surface of the water. On the shore a crowd was waiting –mostly soldiers.

"End of the lines, elves," said the Nilfgaardian commander. "We are in Dillingen. The soldiers are waiting for you."

He was right, they were waiting for them.

None of the elves – and certainly not Faoiltiarna – did not believe the assurances that they would receive fair trails and amnesty. The Scoia"tael officers from the Vrihedd brigade did not have any false hopes about the fate that awaited them after the Yaruga. Most were reconciled, stoically accepting it and resigned themselves. They were convinced that nothing else could surprise them.

They were wrong.

They were shoved from the galley. Their chains rattled noisily. They were driven down the pier and led to a boardwalk, between two rows of armed soldiers. There were civilians there too, whose quick eyes jumped from one prisoners face to another.

They will carry out the selection, thought Faoiltiarna. He was not mistaken. The chances of his scarred face being overlooked were not possible.

"Isengrim Faoiltiarna. The Iron Wolf. What a nice surprise!"

The soldiers dragged him out of the crowd of prisoners.

"*Va Faill*," Coinneach Da Reo called after him, who was also identified and dragged off by other men who wore the bade of the red eagle of Redania. "*Se"ved, caerme se dea!*"

"You"ll see him," growled the civilian who had picked out Faoiltiarna, "but only in hell! They are already waiting for him in Drakenborg. Wait! Isn"t that Riordain? Take him!"

The next to be selected was Angus Bri Cri.

They had only selected three of them. Only three.

Faoiltiarna realised what was happening and suddenly, to his surprise, he began to feel afraid.

"*Va Faill!*" Angus Bri Cri shouted, as he was dragged away with his other brethren. "*Va Faill, fraeren!*"

A soldier pushed him brutally.

They did not take them far. They came to a hut close to the marina. Just off the dock, which swayed with a forest of masts.

The civilian nodded. Faoiltiarna was pushed up against a pole, under a beam over which they had thrown a rope. They began to attach an iron hook to the rope. Riordain and Angus sat beside him on a bench.

"Mister Riordain, Mister Bri Cri," said the civilian coldly. "You have been covered by the amnesty. The court has decided to be gracious. Justice must be satisfied, however," he added without waiting for a response. "for the families for those you have killed. The verdict has been handed down."

Both elves did not have time to scream. From behind them a noose was thrown around their necks and pulled. They fell off of the bench and were dragged across the floor. With their hands cuffed they were unable to loosen the ropes. Executioners knelt on their chests. Knives flashed, drawing blood. The noose was not able to mute the sounds that made hair stand on end.

It took a long time. It always did.

"Your verdict, Mister Faoiltiarna," said a third civilian to the elf, "has come with an additional specialty. Something extra …"

Faoiltiarna was not going to wait for any specialty. The locked handcuffs, which he had worked on for the last two nights, now opened as if by magic.

A terrible blow from the heavy chain toppled both of the soldiers guarding him. Faoiltiarna next jumped up and hit a civilian in the face with his chains, then jumped through a small window covered in cobwebs, sweeping away the glass and frame, and leaving remains of his blood and shreds of his clothes.

He clattered onto the planks of the pier. He tumbled, rolled and dived into the water, among the fishing boats and barges. The thick chains which were still attached to his right wrist, dragged him to the bottom. Faoiltiarna fought with all his strength to fight for his life, that until recently he thought he hadn"t cared about.

"Catch him!" the soldiers tore out of the shed. "Catch him! Kill him!"

"There!" shouted others, coming from further down the pier. "To the boats!"

"Shoot him!" shouted the civilian hoarsely, trying to stem the blood with both hands that flowed from his eye. "Kill him!"

He heard the click of crossbows. Gulls flew past, squealing.

The dirty water between the barges began to spay with the impact of arrows.

* * *

"Hurray!" The parade was lengthening and the multitudes of Novigrad were showing symptoms of fatigue and hoarseness. "Hurray!"

"Glory to the kings!"

Philippa Eilhart looked around, making sure that no one unauthorised was listening and leaned in towards Dijkstra.

"What did you want to talk to me about?"

The spy also looked around.

"The assassination of King Vizimir in July last year."

"I"m listening"

"The half-elf who murdered the king," Dijkstra lowered his voice even more, "was definitely crazy. But he was not alone."

"What are you saying?"

"Quiet," hissed Dijkstra. "Hush, Phil."

"Do not call me Phil. Do you have evidence? What? From where?"

"You"d be surprised, Phil, if I told you where. When can I expect an audience with Your Ladyship?"

Philippa Eilhart"s eyes were like two black bottomless lakes.

"Soon, Dijkstra."

Bells rang. The crowd cheered hoarsely. The troops marched. The petals of flowers fell like snowflakes on the pavement of Novigrad.

* * *

'Are you still writing?'

Ori Reuven flinched and made a splash. He had served Dijkstra for nineteen years, but he was still not used to the stealthy movements of his boss, his sudden appearance and where or how he did it.

'Good evening, ahem, ahem, my lord …'

'Shadow People,' Dijkstra read the front of the manuscript that he had taken from the table. 'Or the story of His Majesty's Secret Service, written by Oribasius Giafranco Paolo Reuven, law grad … Oh, Ori. At your age, such nonsense …'

'Ahem, ahem …'

'I came to say goodbye, Ori.'

Reuven looked at him in amazement.

'You see, my faithful friend,' said the spy, without waiting for the clerk to cough, 'I am old, and besides that, I am stupid. I said a word to one person. Only one. And only one word. It was one word too many, and one person too many. Pay attention, Ori. Do you hear?'

Ori Reuven rolled his astonished eyes and shook his head. Dijkstra was silent for a moment.

'You do not hear,' he said after a moment. 'And I hear them. In the corridors. Rats running around the city of Tretogor. Here we have them. Approaching on their soft little paws.'

* * *

They emerged from the darkness of the shadows. Black, masked and fast as rats. The guards and sentries in the antechamber succumbed without a cry to the

lightning strikes of their stilettos with narrow angular edges.

Blood ran over the floor of the Palace of Tretogor, on its swept and stain wooden floors, seeping into the rare carpets from Vengerberg.

They came down all corridors, leaving a trail of corpses.

'There,' said one, pointing to a door. His voice was muffled by a scarf that covered his face up to his eyes. 'Through there. Through the office where old Reuven works.'

'There is no escape,' said the one who was in charge, his eyes shone through the velvet masks openings. 'Behind the desk is a blind room, it does not even have a window.'

'All the corridors are covered. All the doors and all the windows. He cannot escape. He is in our trap.'

'Forward!'

The door swung open and weapons gleamed.

'Death! Death to the murderous torturer!'

'Ahem, ahem?' Ori Reuven rolled his myopic and fearful eyes. 'What do you want? How can I, ahem, ahem, help you, gentlemen?'

The murderers went to the door to Dijkstra's private chamber rushing around the room like rats, penetrating every nook and cranny. They flew over the floor, picking at tapestries, painting and panels. With their stilettos they tore the curtains and upholstery.

'He's gone!' shouted one, running from the office. 'He's gone!'

'Where is he?' asked the leader, leaning over Ori and drilling him with a look from behind the holes of his black mask. 'Where is that bloody dog?'

'Not here,' said Ori Reuven, without fear. 'You can see that for yourself.'

'Where is he? Speak up! Where is he?'

'I don't know, ahem, ahem,' Ori coughed. 'Am I my brother's keeper?'

'You will die, old man!'

'I am an old man. I'm sick. And very tired. Ahem, ahem. I do not have any fear of your knifes.'

The murderers left the room at a run. And disappeared as quickly as they appeared.

They did not kill Ori Reuven. They were following orders. And among those orders where nothing concerning Ori Reuven.

Oribasius Giafranco Paolo Reuven, spent six years in various prisons, interrogated repeatedly by successive judges, who questioned him on various topics, which often did not seem to make any sense.

After six years he was released. At that time he was very ill. Scurvy had left him without teeth, anaemia hairless, glaucoma sightless and asthma without breath.

During the interrogation they broke the fingers on both hands.

He lived for less than a year in the wild. He died in a temple hospice. In misery. Forgotten.

The manuscript of his book *Shadow People, or the story of His Majesty's Secret Service* disappeared without a trace.

* * *

The sky was getting light to the east, the tops of the trees had a pale aura that heralded dawn.

There had been silence around the bonfire for a long time. the pilgrim, the elf and the tracker watched the dying fire and said nothing.

Elskerdeg was again silent. The howling spectre had moved on, tired of howling at them, having finally understood that the three individuals sitting around the fire had seen too many horrors to worry about a single spectre.

'If we are to travel together,' Boreas Mun said suddenly, his eyes still lingering on the embers of the fire, glowing ruby-red, 'we ought to overcome our misgivings. Leave behind everything that happened. the world has changed. We have a new life ahead of us. Something ends, something begins … We hoped …'

He paused and coughed. He was not used to talking about these things and was afraid of ridicule. But his companions were not taking it as a joke or laughing. On the contrary, Boreas felt warmth emanating from them.

'We hoped that beyond Elskerdeg Pass,' he continued, 'that the we will be safer in Zerrikania or Haakland. We expect a long and dangerous journey. If we are going to explore it together … we must overcome our misgivings. My name is Boreas Mun.'

The pilgrim with the brimmed hat stood, straightening his powerful frame, and shook the outstretched hand towards him. The elf also rose. A strange grimace appeared on his macabre disfigured face.

After shaking hands with the tracker, the pilgrim and the elf also shook hands.

'The world has changed,' said the pilgrim. 'Something ends. I'm Sigi Reuven.'

'Something begins,' the elf with the scarred face grimaced in what, according to all indications, was a smile. 'My name is … Wolf Isengrim.'

They shook hands quickly. forcefully, even with abruptness.

For a moment it seemed like a preamble to a battle, more than a gesture of

harmony. But only for a moment. The wood in the fire threw up sparks, celebrating the event with lively fireworks.

'The evil take me,' grinned Boreas Mun, 'if it's not the beginning of a beautiful friendship.'

…As well as many of the other faithful, St. Philippa was also besmirched with betraying the Kingdom, inducing riots and plotting a coup. Willemer, a heretic and sectarian, unlawfully appointed himself the title of archpriest, and ordered St. Philippa to be thrown into a dark dungeon, and to plague her with cold and hunger, until she confessed to her sins of which she was accused and repented. Also various instruments of torture were used to try and break her spirit. But St. Philippa with disdain, spit in his face and accused him of sodomy.

The heretic had her disrobed and whipped her with barbed wire and placed sharp splinters under her nails. While unceasingly preaching about his faith and denouncing the Goddess. But St. Philippa laughed at him and recommended to him to heal his sick mind.

Willemer then gave the order to have her taken to the rack and stretched, while tearing her body with sharp hooks and burning her with candles. Although thus tormented, St. Philippa showed no weakness in body and indeed her resistance and endurance seemed almost superhuman. The executioner's arms went limp and with fear they retreated from her. Then the filthy heretic, Willemer, began to threaten them and told them to continue the torment. They burned St. Philippa with red-hot irons, pulled her limbs out of their joints and pulled at her breasts with blacksmith tongs. And although she passed away from this torment, she confessed nothing.

The shameless heretic Willemer, we read in the books of our holy fathers, later suffered for this punishment and it was that lice and worms began to eat him alive, his entrails rotted away and he died miserably. His carcass carried with it a foul stench and nobody wanted to bury him, and so he was dropped in a swamp.

For the suffering and death of St. Philippa the eternal memory of a martyr's crown rightfully belongs. Let us give the Great Mother Goddess praise for her lessons and teachings. Amen.

The Life of St. Philippa, Martyr of Mons Calvus

The Book of Martyrs Compiled in the Breviary of Tretogor, For the Contemplation of the Holy Fathers and Mothers.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

They galloped at breakneck speeds like madmen. They rode through vibrant spring days.

The horses were flying, and people who were toiling, straightened their bent necks and backs and could not believe their eyes – did they just see riders or ghosts?

They galloped at night, in the dark, damp nights and through the warm rain. People awoke in bed and looked around terrified, fighting against the pain that grew in them, in their throats and chests. They jumped out of bed at the sound of the pounding of the shutters, the crying of the children and the howls of the dogs. They peered through the windows, not believing their eyes – were these riders or ghosts?

In Ebbing stories began to circulate about the three demons.

***

The trio of riders appeared suddenly, out of nowhere, as if by magic, catching by surprise The Lame, who had no opportunity to escape. Neither did he have time to turn for help. More than five hundred paces separated the cripple from the first row of houses of the village. Even if it were closer, the cripple would receive no help from the residents of Jealousy. It was siesta time, which in this sleepy hamlet usually lasted from late morning to early evening.

Aristotle Bobeck, nicknamed the Lame, a local beggar and philosopher knew that during siesta time the villagers would not respond anything.

The riders were three. Two women and a man. The man had white hair and a sword lying across his back. One of the women was dressed in black and white and had inky black, curly hair. The youngest, had ashen hair and a disfiguring scar on her cheek. She rode a beautiful black mare. The Lame had a sense of seeing the horse before.

The youngest girl spoke first.

“Are you from here?”

“I did nothing,” said the Lame, his teeth chattering. “I collect morels here. Have pity, do not hurt a cripple.”

“Are you from here?” She repeated, her green eyes flashing with warning.

The Lame started to cringe.

“Yes, my lady,” he said. “I come from here, from Brika. I mean, Jealousy. I was born here and here I will surely die…”

“Were you here last summer and fall?”

“Where else would I be?”

“Do not answer me with questions!”

“I was here, my lady.”

The black mare shook its head and pricked up its ears. The cripple felt the glares from the white-haired and the black-haired woman sting like thorns. He feared the white -haired man the most.

“Last year,” the girl with the scar told the cripple, “in September, more specifically September ninth, during the first quarter of the moon, six young people were murdered here. Four boys… And two girls. Do you remember this?”

The Lame swallowed. He suspected for some time, now he was sure.

The girl had changed. It was not just the scar on her face. She was not the same now as she was back then when she was tied to the pole and Bonhart forced her to watch as he cut the heads off of the Rats. Not the same as when she was forced to undress in the *Chimera’s Head* Inn and the Bounty Hunter beat her. Those eyes… Those eyes had changed.

“Speak!” Snapped the woman with the black hair. “Tell us what we ask!”

“I remember, my lady,” said the Lame. “I remember the six kids being killed. Last year it was. In September.”

The girl was silent for a while. Not looking at him but at some point in the distance, above his shoulder.

“So, you most likely know…” she said at last, with effort, “where the young ones where buried. At the bottom of which stockade… under which dumpster or what dunghill… Or if the bodies were burned… If they were taken to the forest and left for the foxes and wolves… Take me there. Do you understand?”

“I understand, my lady. Follow me, it is a short walk.”

He limped forward and felt the hot breath of the horses on the nape of his neck. He never looked up. Something told him that he should not.

“Here we are,” he pointed after a while. “This is our village cemetery. And here are the ones that you asked about, Lady Falka.”

She took a deep breath. The Lame looked at her to see the expression on her face. Black-hair and white-hair were silent, their faces like stone. She stared at

the long low mound of the common grave, neat, tidy and topped with sandstone slabs. The spruce that had adorned the mound was discoloured and the flowers that someone had placed here long ago were now dry and yellowish.

The girl jumped down from her horse.

“Who?” The girl asked quietly, still staring at the mound.

“Well,” the Lame cleared his throat, “a lot of the locals from Jealousy contributed. But mostly it was the widow Goulue and young Nycklar. The widow has always been a good and kind woman. And Nycklar… he was haunted by terrible dreams. Until he gave the dead a proper burial.”

“Where can I find the widow and Nycklar?”

The Lame was silent for a long moment.

“The widow is here buried behind that twisted birch,” he said finally, looking fearlessly into the green eyes of the girl. “She was taken by pneumonia this winter. And Nycklar was drafted into the army. We heard that he supposedly died in the war.”

“I had forgotten,” she whispered. “Forgotten that their fate had been linked to mine.”

She approached the mound and knelt, or rather fell to the ground. She bent low, almost touching her face to the sandstone slabs. The Lame noticed that the white-haired man made a motion as if to dismount, but the dark-haired lady caught him by the arm and held him with a gesture and a gaze.

The horses snorted, tossing their heads and rattling their bridles.

For a long time the girl knelt over the graves, he lips moving in a silent litany. She rose, faltered. The Lame inadvertently caught her elbow. She started strongly, and yanked her arm away. She looked at him angrily through her tears. But did not say a word. She even nodded with thanks when he held her stirrup.

“Well, my lady Falka,” he dared. “The strange wheel of destiny is turning. You were at that time in a dreadful position. Few of us here in Jealousy thought that you’d escape with your life. And here you are today, alive and well, while Goulue and Nycklar are in the other world. Who can you express your gratitude to for the grave…”

“My name is not Falka,” she said sharply. “My name is Ciri. And in regards to my gratitude…”

“You can feel honoured because of her,” the dark-haired one spoke chillingly, making the Lame shiver. “For her grace, for humanity has come to you all, to your entire village, and that is your reward. And you do not know how big that is.”

***

On the ninth of April, shortly after midnight, the first inhabitants of Claremont awakened to a bright red glow flickering through the widows of their homes. The rest of the inhabitants of the town rushed out of bed to screaming, a commotion and the ringing of an alarm bell.

Only one of the buildings was on fire. A large wooden building of the former temple, once dedicated to a deity, whose name was not even remembered by the oldest of old women. The temple, that was now converted into a amphitheatre, which occasionally held circus spectacles, fighting and other diversions used to pull the Claremont villagers out of boredom, melancholy and lethargy.

The amphitheatre was now in flames and shaking with explosions. From all the windows shot tongues of flames.

“Put it out! Roared the owner of the amphitheatre, a merchant named Houvenaghel, running about and waving his hands, his powerful paunch shaking. He was in a nightcap and a heavy fur-lined coat which he had thrown on over his dressing gown. He ran barefoot through the mud in the streets.

“Put it out! Men! Get water!”

“This is the punishment of the gods,” said one old lady. “For the grievances that took place in their former abode.”

“Aye, aunt. It certainly is.”

From the burning building radiated heat which evaporated puddles of stinking horse urine, with hissing sparks. Suddenly a wind sprang up.

“Put it out! Houvenaghel screamed wildly, seeing the fire spread to the brewery and granary. “Men! Get buckets for the water!”

There was no shortage of volunteers. Claremont even had its own fire department, equipped and maintained by Houvenaghel. They did everything in their power to put out the fire. But it was useless.

“We cannot handle it,” the fire brigade commander groaned, rubbing his soot smeared face. “This is no ordinary fire… It is a fire from hell.”

“Black magic…” coughed another fireman.

From the burning building they head an ominous creaking and the sound of rafters and beams cracking. There was a thunderous rumble and sparks and flames shot high into the sky.

The roof broke and fell into the arena. The whole building bent as if bowing to an audience.

Then the walls collapsed.

With effort the fire-fighters and volunteers managed to save part of the

granary and about a quarter of the brewery.

Dawn came smelly and pungent.

Houvenaghel sat in the mud and ashes, his nightcap and gown sooty and dirty. He cried bitterly, pouting like a child. Naturally he had insured the theatre, the brewery and the granary. The problem was that the insurance company was owned by Houvenaghel. Nothing, not even tax fraud, could compensate for his losses.

***

“Now where?” Geralt asked, looking at the column of smoke that clouded the rosy morning sky. “Where else do you want to visit, Ciri?”

She looked at him and he soon regretted asking. Suddenly he wanted to hug her, he dreamed of holding her in his arms, cuddling her and caressing her hair. To protect her. And never allow her to be alone. To not suffer any more evil. And that nothing would happen to her that would make him crave revenge.

Yennefer was silent. Yennefer was often silent lately.

“Now,” Ciri said quietly, “we go to a village called Unicorn. The name comes from the straw unicorn that protects the town. A poor and ridiculous puppet. I would like that, as a reminder of what happened there, let the inhabitants have… if not valuable, at least a more dignified idol. I would like to ask for your help, Yennefer, because without magic…”

“Sure, Ciri. What next?”

“The Pereplut Swamps. I am confident that I will be able to… find a cabin in the middle of the swamp. I will find the remains of a man. I want those remains to rest in a decent tomb.”

Geralt said nothing. But didn’t look away.

“After,” continued Ciri, without the slightest difficulty withstanding his look, “the village of Dun Dare. The local tavern has probably been burned and it is possible that the innkeeper has been murdered. It is my fault; I was blinded by hatred and revenge. If he had a family, I’ll try and make it up to the survivors.”

“You cannot make it up,” Geralt said, still looking at her.

“I know,” she said sharply, almost angrily. “But I will stand in front of them with humility. I will remember the look in their eyes. I hope that the memory of those eyes will protect me from similar mistakes. Do you understand, Geralt?”

“I understand, Ciri,” Yennefer said. “Both of us, we understand you very well, my dear. Let’s go.”

***

The horses ran as if carried by the wind of a magic storm. Alarmed by the

trio of riders, a pilgrim on the road lifted his head. A merchant with a wagonload of goods, a felon fleeing the law, a settler who had been thrown out of his land. A bum looked up, a deserter and a wander with a staff. They raised their heads, astonished and frightened. Not believing their eyes.

In Geso in Ebbing, stories began to circulate. About the Wild Hunt. About three ghostly riders. Rumours were invented and spun in the evenings, in smoky pubs that smelled of fried onions and butter and in meeting rooms and huts. Rumours were invented, told and exaggerated. A great war of heroism and chivalry, of honour and friendship as well as meaningless treachery. With sincere and faithful love, which always wins out in the end, about crime and punishment of criminals that are always struck by justice.

The truth, as always rises up, like oil on water.

They invented lies and enjoyed these fables. They revelled in pure fantasy. Because out in the real world, everything worked out the opposite.

The legend grew. People listened as if in a trance, captivated by the emphatic words of the storyteller who told the story of the witcher and the sorceress. The story of the Tower of Swallows. Of Ciri, the witcheress with the scarred face. Of Kelpie, the magical black mare.

Of the Lady of the Lake. That came many years later.

But for now, like a seed soaked by rain, the legend sprouted and grew among the people.

***

They did not realise when May came. They first noticed at night time, when they saw the bright, distant fires of Belleteyn. When Ciri, with strange excitement jumped onto Kelpie's back and galloped towards the fires, Geralt and Yennefer took advantage of the intimate moment.

After removing the necessary clothes, they made love on a sheepskin on the ground. They made love urgently, in silence, without words. They made love quickly, however.

And then along came the climax and fulfilment, trembling and kissing each other's tears, amazed at that fate had given them time to express their love.

***

"Geralt?"

"I'm listening, Yen."

"When we… When we were not together, were you with other women?"

"No."

"Not once?"

“Not once.”

“Your voice did not tremble. So I do not know why I don’t believe you.”

“I am only for you, Yen.”

“Now I do.”

***

Without realising it, May had arrived. Dandelions grew in the meadows and the trees were white and fluffy and thick with flowers. The oak, too noble to rush, remained dark, but on the edges, green leaves were beginning to show.

***

One night that they spent under the open sky, the witcher awakened from a nightmare. It seemed as if he was paralysed and helpless, a great grey owl was clawing at his face and with its sharp hooked beak, trying to peck his eyes out. He awoke. But he was not sure if he had moved from one nightmare to another.

Over their encampment poured bright light that startled the horses. In the midst of the brightness a room was visible – a columned hall in a castle. Around a table sat ten figures.

Ten women.

He could hear words. Snippets of sentences.

“…Bring her to us, Yennefer. We command you.”

“You cannot give me orders. You cannot give orders to her. You don’t have any power over her!”

“I’m not afraid of them, mother. They cannot do anything. If they wish, I will stand before them.”

“We will meet on June first. At the new moon. We command you both to appear. We warn you, we’ll punish any disobedience.”

“I will come now, Philippa. Let her stay with him. Don’t leave him alone. Just a couple of days. I will come immediately. As a show of good faith. I have vowed, Philippa. Please.”

The light began to throb. The horses snorted, crazed and kicked at the ground.

The witcher awoke. This time for real.

***

The next day Yennefer confirmed his fears. After a long meeting, which they excluded Ciri from.

“I’m leaving,” she said dryly. “I have to. Ciri will stay with you. For a time. Then it will come time for her to leave as well. And then we’ll all meet again.”

He nodded. Reluctantly. He’d had enough of nodding silently, agreeing with

every decision. But he nodded. One way or another, he loved her.

“It is imperative,” she said mildly, “that you not resist. Nor can you postpone it. It is necessary to comply. I’m doing this for your own good. And especially for the good of Ciri.”

He nodded.

“Until we meet again,” she said almost tenderly, “I’ll make it up to you, Geralt. There has been too much silence between us. Now instead of nodding, give me a hug and kiss.”

He obeyed. One way or another, he loved her.

***

“Now where?” Ciri asked, she had barely spoken since Yennefer had disappeared with a flash through her portal.

“The river…” Geralt coughed, conquering the pain under his breast bone. “The river in front of us is called the Sansretour. We are going upstream. To a place that I want to show you. It is a land of fairytales.”

Ciri frowned. Her saw her clench her fists.

“All fairytales,” she said, “end badly. There does not exist a fairytale land.”

“There does. You’ll see.”

***

It was the day after the full moon, when they saw Toussaint, bathed in green and the sunlight. When they saw the hills, slopes and vineyards. The roofs of towers and castles, shining in the morning sun.

The view did not disappoint. It was impressive. As it always was.

“This is beautiful,” Ciri said with delight. “Wow! Those castles are like toys… Like glazed decorations on a cake… It is tempting to lick!”

“The architecture is by Faramond,” Geralt wisely instructed. “Wait until you’ve seen up close the palaces and gardens of Beauclair.”

“Palace? We’re going to the palace? You know the local king?”

“Duchess.”

“The Duchess,” she said wryly, watching him intently from beneath her fringe, “doesn’t have green eyes? Short black hair?”

“No,” he snapped, looking away. “She looks completely different. I don’t know where you got that idea…”

“Let’s not talk about it Geralt, all right? How do you know the local Duchess?”

“As I said, I know her. A little bit. Not very well, if you’re interested. But, I know the local prince consort or candidate for consort. You also know him,

Ciri.”

Ciri kicked Kelpie in the sides, making her dance in the road.

“Don’t make me suffer!”

“Dandelion.”

“Dandelion? With the Duchess? How is that possible?”

“It’s a long story. We left him here, alongside his beloved. We promised him to visit on our return visit, when…”

He paused and became serious.

“There was nothing you could do,” Ciri said quietly. “Do not torture yourself, Geralt. It’s not your fault.”

Yes it is my fault, he thought. Mine. *Dandelion will ask. And I’ll have to answer. Milva. Cahir. Regis. Angoulême.*

The sword of destiny cuts both ways.

By all the gods, that’s enough. Enough. We must end this once and for all!

“Come on, Ciri.”

“In these clothes?” She said. “To the palace?”

“I don’t see anything wrong with our clothes,” he interrupted. “We are not going to a ball. We can meet Dandelion in the stables.” He saw the look on her face and quickly added. “I have to go down to the bank. I’ll pick up some cash. In the squares and streets you’ll find a lot of tailors and dressmakers. You can buy what you want and dress up how you please.”

“Good,” she playfully cocked her head. “You’ve got cash?”

“You can buy yourself whatever you want,” he repeated. “Even ermine. And basilisk shoes. I know a shoemaker, who should have some in stock.”

“How did you make so much money?”

“By killing. Let’s go, Ciri, let’s not waste time.”

***

In the bank of Cianfanelli, Geralt requested a transfer, credit allocation and took some money. He wrote letters that were given to fast couriers that were riding for the Yaruga. He politely excused himself from the dinner invitation from the attentive and polite banker.

Ciri waited in the street watching the horses. The street, which was empty a moment ago, was now swarming with people.

“I think today is a holiday,” Ciri nodded with her head towards the square where the crowd was heading. “Or a fair…”

Geralt took a quick look.

“That’s not a fair.”

“Ah…” Ciri stood up in her stirrups and looked around. “So it’s…”

“A execution,” he confirmed. “The most popular post-war entertainment. What are the reasons, Ciri?”

“For desertion, treason, cowardice before the enemy,” she recited fluently. “And for economic crimes.”

“Supplying the army with mouldy biscuits,” said the witcher. “During the war, an enterprising merchant can easily get into trouble.”

“This does not look like the execution of a huckster,” Ciri pulled on Kelpie’s reins, submerging herself in the middle of the crowd, “Look, the scaffolding is covered with cloth and the executioner has a new, clean hood. He is executing someone important, perhaps a noble. So it could be cowardice in the face of the enemy…”

“Toussaint,” Geralt shook his head, “did not have an army that faced the enemy. No, Ciri, I guess this has to do with the economy. The condemned is probably guilty of some scam in a wine shop and damaged the foundation for the local economy. Let’s go, Ciri. We don’t need to watch this spectacle.”

“How do you expect me to move?”

Indeed, it was impossible to keep riding. They had become stuck in the crowd gathering in the square, and were unable to make their way to the other side of the market.

Geralt looked back and swore. He discovered that they could not even turn around, people clogged the streets behind them. The crowd carried them like a river, but stopped in front of a solid wall of halberds standing around the gallows.

“Here they come!” Someone shouted and the crowd surged like a waved, picking up the cry. “Here they come!”

The pounding of hooves and the rattle of a cart were fully covered by the buzz of the crowd, which sounded like the hum of bumblebees. So they were caught completely by surprise by the appearance of a cart from an alley, drawn by two horses. On the cart, trying to maintain his balance with difficult was…

“Dandelion…” Ciri groaned.

Geralt suddenly felt ill. Very ill.

“It’s Dandelion,” Ciri said uneasily. “It’s him.”

This is an injustice, thought the witcher. *A damn injustice. This cannot be. This should not be. I know I was stupid and naive to believe that after all I had endured and experienced that destiny owed me. It was not only stupid, but egocentric. But I am aware, there is no need for destiny to persuade me. To*

prove it to me. Especially in this way. This is an injustice.

"It cannot be Dandelion," he said flatly, staring at Roach's mane.

"It's him," she said again. "Geralt, we have to do something."

"What," he asked bitterly. "Tell me what?"

The guard driving the cart treated Dandelion fairly, with surprising civility, without brutality, even deferentially, as much as they could afford. At the foot of the steps to the gallows, they untied his hands. The poet nonchalantly scratched his ass and without hesitation began to climb the steps.

One of the steps creaked suddenly and began to sag. Dandelion barely managed to keep his balance.

"Damn!" He exclaimed. "This needs to be fixed! You'll end up killing someone with these stairs! That would be a disaster!"

Once Dandelion reached the gallows, two of the executioners henchmen in leather vests grabbed him. The executioner, a hulk with arms as wide as the bastions of a castle, watched the condemned through the slits cut in his hood. Nearby stood a man in rich, though mournful black clothing. He face was no less mournful.

"Citizens of Beauclair and people from the surrounding countryside," he read in a troubled voice from parchment. "Notice is hereby given that Julian Alfred Pankratz, Viscount de Lettenhove, aka Dandelion…"

"Pankratz what?" Ciri asked in a whisper.

"…according to the Supreme Court ruling of this County has been found guilty of all crimes, offences and misdeed of which he was accused, insulting Her Majesty, treason of the state and dishonouring the establishment of the nobility through perjury, libel, and slander, also for dissipation and indecency, furthermore, obscenity and whoredom. The Tribunal had decided that Viscount Julian et cetera, et cetera, shall receive the following punishment – First, mortification of his coat of arms, a thick black line through his shield. Second, confiscation of all his property, both movable and immovable, including lands, forests, castles and palaces…"

"Castles and palaces?" Said the astonished witcher. "What?"

Dandelion snickered, making it blatantly clear what he thought of the judicial decree.

"Third, the maximum penalty… our Ladyship Anna Henrietta, Duchess of Toussaint and Castilian of Beauclair, has kindly switched the penalty for the above crimes, namely being dragged by horses and dismemberment, by substituting it for decapitation by the axe. Let justice be done!"

From the crowd came a few incoherent cries. Women standing in the first row pretended to weep and lament. Adults lifted children in their arms or put them on their shoulders, that even the smallest child would not miss the upcoming spectacle. The executioner's assistants rolled a stump into the centre of the scaffold covered with cloth. There was much excitement when someone swiped the wicker basket designed to collect the severed head, but another was soon found.

At the foot of the scaffold four ragged urchins held out a scarf to collect the blood in. There was a great demand for this type of souvenir, and good money could be earned.

"Geralt," Ciri said in a low voice. "We have to so do something…"

He did not answer.

"I wish to speak to the people," Dandelion said proudly.

"Keep it short, Viscount."

The poet walked to the edge of the scaffold and raised his arms. The crowd began to murmur and grew still.

"Hey, folks" Dandelion called. "What's new? How are you?"

"Well," someone from the crowd said after a moment.

"I'm glad," nodded the poet. "In that case we can begin."

"Master Executioner," the bailiff said pathetically. "Do your duty!"

The executioner approached, and according to ancient custom, knelt and bowed his hooded head to the condemned.

"Forgive me, my good man," he said gloomily.

"I?" Dandelion said, surprised. "You?"

"Mhm."

"Not for anything in the world."

"Huh?"

"I will not forgive you for anything in the world. Why should I? Hear that, joker! In a moment, you will cut off my head, and you want me to forgive you? Are you kidding me or what? Shame on you! In such a sad moment."

"But sir," said the executioner. "This is the custom… It is your last duty in the world… The condemned should forgive his executioner. Good lord, forgive me, please…"

"No."

"No?"

"No!"

"I will not kill him," said the executioner standing up. "If he will not forgive

me, I will not do anything."

"Lord Viscount," the bailiff took Dandelion by the elbow. "Do not make trouble. The people are gathered, waiting… Forgive him, when he begs so nicely…"

"I will not forgive him and that's it!"

"Master executioner," the bailiff said turning to the executioner. "Can you behead him without his forgiveness? I'll repay you…"

The executioner wordlessly held out his open hand, as wide as a pan. The bailiff sighed, pulled out a purse and poured some coins into the hand. The executioner looked and then clenched his fist. He rolled his eyes within his hood.

"Okay," he agreed, he hid the money and walked back over to the condemned. "Kneel down, stubborn sir. Put your head on the block. If I want I can be stubborn and mischievous too. I can cut twice what I can do in one. Or in three."

"I forgive you!" Dandelion promptly shouted. "I forgive you!"

"Thank you."

"Since you have been given your pardon," said the mournful bailiff, "return my money."

"The executioner turned on his heel and raised his axe.

"Move aside, sir," he said in an ominously hollow voice. "You know that according to the rules that you must not interfere with the performance of the execution. When I chop the head, blood flies."

The bailiff backed away so rapidly that he almost fell from the scaffold.

"Is this right?" Dandelion knelt and stretched his neck across the stump. "Master? Hey, Master!"

"What do you want?"

"You were kidding, right? When you said you wouldn't behead me with the first blow? You'll only cut once? Right?"

The executioner's eyes sparkled.

"It'll be a surprise," he growled ominously.

The crowd suddenly parted before a rider who burst into the square on a lathered horse.

"Halt!" The rider called, waving a large roll of parchment with a red seal. "Stop the execution! On the orders of our Lady Duchess! Stop the execution! I'm here to bring clemency for the accused."

"Not again," growled the executioner lowering his axe sullenly. "Another pardon? This is getting boring."

“A pardon! A reprieve!” Roared the crowd. The women in the first row started wailing even louder. The children whistled and booed with disappointment.

“Hush, people!” Shouted the bailiff and unrolled the parchment. “This is the will of Duchess Anne Henrietta! In her immense goodness and to celebrate the peace of Cintra Her Ladyship has waived all charges against Julian Alfred Pankratz, Viscount de Lettenhove and pardons him from execution…”

“My Dear Ermine,” Dandelion said, smiling broadly.

“…And orders that the above Viscount Julian et cetera promptly leave the capital and the County of Toussaint and never return, because his presence is no longer welcome here, and her Ladyship never wants to lay eyes on him again. You are free, Viscount.”

“What about my property?” The troubadour said indignantly. “My lands, forests and castles you can have, but let me take my lute, my horse, Pegasus, my one hundred and forty ducats and eighty dimes, my cloak lined with duck, my ring…”

“Shut up!” Shouted Geralt, pushing through the crowd on his horse. “Shut up and get down here you mutton head! Ciri, clear us a way! Dandelion! Did you hear what I said?”

“Geralt? Is that you?”

“Stop your questions and get down from there right now! Come here! Jump up!”

They walked through the crowd and went into a gallop down a close alley. Ciri went first, followed by Geralt and Dandelion riding Roach.

“What’s the rush?” The bard asked from behind the witcher. “No one is pursuing us.”

“For now. The Duchess is likely to change her mind and revoke what she previously decided. Admit it – you knew you were going to get a pardon?”

“No, I didn’t,” Dandelion muttered. “But I counted on it. My Ermine has a good heart.”

“Stop with the Ermine, dammit. You just got pardoned for insults against Her Majesty, you don’t want a recurrence.”

The troubadour was silent. Ciri stopped Kelpie and waited for them. When they arrived, she saw Dandelion wiping tears from his eyes.

“Look at him,” she said. “A viscount…”

“Let’s go,” the witcher urged. “Let’s get out of this town and out of the borders of this lovely country. While there is still time.”

***

When they were almost to the border of Toussaint, in sight of the mountain Gorgon, an official overtook them. He brought Pegasus, a saddle, a lute and Dandelion's ring. He did not listen to the question on the hundred and forty ducats.

He ignored the bard's plea to give a kiss to the Duchess with a straight face.

They followed the course of the Sansretour, until it became a small stream. They bypassed Belhaven.

They camped in the valley of Newi. In a place that the witcher and the bard remembered well.

Dandelion lasted a long time without asking questions.

But finally they had to tell him everything. And sit with him in silence. During the hard, painful silence that reigned, when all was said.

***

At noon the next day they were on the slopes of Riedburne. The peace was prevailing throughout the area. People were trusting and accommodating. They felt safe.

At the crossroads gallows were laden with corpses.

They passed through towns on their way towards Dol Angra.

"Dandelion," Geralt just now noticed what he should have noticed a while ago. "Your priceless tube! Your memoirs. The courier didn't bring it, it's still in Toussaint."

"I left it," the poet said indifferently. "In Ermine's dressing room, under a pile of coats, clothes and corsets. And they can stay there for centuries."

"Do you want to explain it?"

"There's nothing to explain. In Toussaint I had enough time to carefully read everything that I had written."

"And what?"

"I'll write it again. From the beginning."

"I understand," said Geralt. "You're a lousy writer as well as a royal favourite. To put it bluntly, what you touch you screw up. Half a century and you still have the possibility of correcting and re-writing, but not for the Duchess. What a shame, a lover driven away. Yes, yes, there is no reason to make faces! Being married to the Duchess of Toussaint was not written for you, Dandelion."

"That remains to be seen."

"Do not count on me."

"Nobody asked you anything. But I can tell you that my Ermine has a good

heart, and is a very forgiving woman. It is true that she was unnerved when she caught me with the young Baroness Nique… But surely she has calmed down, she will realise that I was not made for monogamy. She'll forgive me and be waiting…"

"You are hopelessly stupid," Geralt said and Ciri nodded vigorously to indicate she felt the same way.

"I will not argue with you," Dandelion said, offended. "It's an intimate matter. But I am sure that she will forgive me. I'll write a touching ballad or sonnet, I'll sent it to Toussaint and…"

"Have mercy!"

"Oh, you don't want to talk about it. Come on, let's go! Forward, Pegasus! Forward!"

They rode.

It was the month of May.

***

"Because of you," the witcher said reproachfully, "we had to run away from Toussaint like outlaws or bandits. I did not have any time to see…"

"Fringilla Vigo? You would not have seen her. She left shortly after your departure, In January. She simply disappeared."

"I did not mean her," Geralt coughed, looking over at Ciri who was listening. "I wanted to see Reynart. To introduce him to Ciri…"

Dandelion bowed his head.

"The good knight Reynart de Bois-Fresnes," Dandelion said, "fell in late February when facing some invaders near the border fortress of Vedette near the Cervantesa Pass. Anarietta bestowed on him posthumously…"

"Shut up, please."

Dandelion was silent and incredibly obedient.

***

May continued and grew. The intense yellow thistle in meadows disappeared, replaced by blooming, white, fluffy dandelions.

It was very green and warm. The air, after brief thunderstorms became hot, dense and sticky as barley porridge.

***

On the twenty-sixth of May they crossed the Yaruga on a new, white, resin scented bridge. Remnants of the old bridge's, black, burnt, charred piles were still visible in the water and on the shore.

Ciri began to get restless.

Geralt knew why. He knew her intentions, her plans and arrangement with Yennefer. He was ready. Yet the thought of the painful parting stung his heart. As if in his chest a poisonous scorpion had awakened.

***

At the crossroads of the village of Koprivince, was an inn burned during the war and next to it stood a hundred year old oak, now in bloom. The population of the whole area even from distant Spall, regularly used the oak tress low hanging branches to hung tablets and posters with all kinds of information. It served the people as communication. The tree was known as the *Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil*.

“Ciri, you start from that side,” Geralt ordered dismounting form his saddle. “Dandelion you look from the other side.”

The branches draped with tablets, swayed in the light wind and clattered and bumped into each other.

As was usual after a war, a lot of the messages were for missing family members. Quite a few of the messages were along the lines of – ‘Come back, all is forgiven’, there were listings for erotic massage and related services in surrounding villages and towns and lots of news and advertising.

Hung here and there were love letters next to denunciations, both signed and anonymous.

They found there tablets containing philosophical considerations – either incomprehensible, absurd, obscene or disgusting.

“Hey,” Dandelion called. “The castle of Rastburg needs a witcher. They offer great rewards. Comfortable accommodation and delicious meals are provided. Any interest, Geralt?”

“Not at all.”

Ciri found the message she had been looking for.

She announced to the witcher what he had long been expecting.

***

“I’m going to Vengerberg, Geralt,” she repeated. “Don’t give me that look. You know that I have an obligation. Yennefer is calling me. She is waiting there.”

“I know.”

“And you are going to Rivia, to your secret meeting…”

“It’s a surprise,” he interrupted. “It isn’t a secret.”

“Okay, a surprise. I meanwhile, will go to Vengerberg and solve everything, I’ll pick up Yennefer and in six days we will see you in Rivia. I asked you not to

give me that look. We do not have to say goodbye like it is forever. It will only be six days. Goodbye."

"Goodbye, Ciri."

"In Rivia, in six days," she insisted once again, turning Kelpie about.

She kicked her into a gallop and was quickly out of sight. Geralt felt as if icy claws were clawing at his stomach.

"Six days," Dandelion repeated thoughtfully. "From here to Vengerberg and then back to Rivia… That will total about two hundred and fifty miles… That's impossible, Geralt. Of course, with that magical mare, she can travel three times faster than us. But even a magical mare must need to rest. And Ciri's mysterious issue must be resolved. Come on, its impossible…"

"For Ciri," the witcher cut him off, "nothing is impossible."

"But…"

"She is no longer the girl you knew," Geralt did not let him finish.

Dandelion was silent for a long time.

"I have a strange feeling…"

"Be quiet. Don't say anything. I'm begging you."

***

May ended. They were approaching the new moon, the moon was just a sliver. They rode towards the mountains visible on the horizon.

***

It was a typical post-war landscape. Among the fields rose graves and burial mounds, in the lush spring grass were white skulls and skeletons. On the branches of trees hung corpses and along the road, waiting for the beggars to weaken, sat wolves.

Grass did not grow on the vast stretches of blackness, where past fires had burned.

Yet many of the villages and settlements, where only ruins had remained, had started to rebuild. Around them was the sounds of axes, and hammers hammering and saws cutting. Near the ruins were women, working the scorched earth with their hoes. Some stumbling, dragged ploughs behind them, the straps cutting into their shoulders.

"I have a vague feeling, said Dandelion, "that something is not as it should be. There's something missing… Do you have the same feeling, Geralt?"

"Huh?"

"Something here is not normal."

"Nothing here is normal, Dandelion. Nothing."

***

It was a hot night, black, with no wind, lit by only distant flashes of lightning and upset by the rumour of thunder. Geralt and Dandelion camped and watched the horizon to the west glow red with fires. It was not long until the breeze picked up and brought the smell of smoke. And snippets of sound.

They heard women crying and the wailing of children and the sound of their murderers howling.

Dandelion did not say anything, but kept throwing glances at the witcher. But the witcher did not move, did not even turn his head. His face was like stone.

In the morning they went on their way. Rising above the forest was a wisp of smoke, which they did not look at.

Later that day they encountered a column of settlers.

***

The column moved in a long, slow march. They carried small bundles. They were completely silent. Men, boys, women, children. They did not utter a cry or a word of complaint. Not a cry or groan of despair. Their cries and despair were mirrored in their eyes.

The empty eyes of aggrieved people. Deprived, battered and expelled.

“Who are these people?” Dandelion said, not paying attention to the eyes of the officer who watched over the displaced people. “Why are they forced to leave?”

“Nilfgaardians,” replied a young lieutenant from his saddle, no older than eighteen. “Nilfgaardian settlers. They settled on our land like cockroaches. And we are sweeping them away like cockroaches as agreed in the peace treaty of Cintra.”

He spat and looked disdainfully at the troubadour and the witcher.

“And if it was up to me, I’d not let these bugs live.”

“And if it was up to me,” said a sergeant with a grey moustache, regarding his youthful companion with disrespect, “I’d let them work in peace on their farms and lands. I would never expel a good farmer from this country. I would love to see agriculture prosper. So we will not go hungry.”

“You’re a real blockhead, Sergeant,” the young Lieutenant scolded. “They are of Nilfgaard! These people do not know our language, our culture or have our blood. For the small joy of having agriculture we would be taking a snake to our breast. We would have traitors ready to attack from behind. Or do you think this peace with the Black Ones will last forever. No, no, they go back to where they came from… Eh, soldier! There one goes with a cart! Grab him, quickly!”

The order was carried out eagerly. With the help of fists, heels and sticks.

Dandelion coughed.

The young officer measured they suspiciously.

“You are not from Nilfgaard?”

“Gods forbid,” swallowed the troubadour.

Many of the women and children passing in front of them moved like puppets, with empty eyes, swollen faces and bruised bare legs showing through torn skirts. Some had to be supported as they walked. Dandelion looked at Geralt’s face and began to panic.

“It’s time to be on our way,” he muttered. “Farewell, gentlemen.”

The young officer did not even turn his head, intrigued by monitoring the refugees.

The column meandered slowly to the south. From somewhere behind them they heard a high, desperate scream from a female.

“Geralt, no,” Dandelion whispered. “Do not interfere, stay out of it…”

The witcher turned and looked at the poet as if he did not know him.

“Meddle in it?” He shrugged. “Save someone? Give my life for noble principles and ideals? No, Dandelion, not anymore.”

***

On a restless night, illuminated by lightning, the witcher again awakened from a dream. This time he was not sure if it was one hideous nightmare or if it was a series of nightmares.

Again, over the remains of the fire a light arose, pulsating and frightening the horses. Again, inside that light appeared a castle, with columns and a table at which sat women.

Two other women were there, standing calmly. One black and white and the other black and grey.

Yennefer and Ciri.

The witcher moaned in his sleep.

***

Yennefer was right when she did not allow her to wear male clothing. Ciri would have felt foolish dressed as a boy among these elegant ladies. She was glad that she gave in to the combination of black and grey, it flattered her and she could felt the approval when they saw the puffy sleeves and clinched waist and the small brooch in the shape of a rose.

“Come closer please.”

Ciri shivered slightly. It was not just the sound of the voice. Yennefer, as it

turned out, was right about her neckline. Ciri had insisted though, and now she had the impression that she could feel a draft on her breast all the way down to her navel, and was covered in goose bumps.

“Closer still,” said the dark-haired and dark-eyed woman whom Ciri remembered from the island of Thanedd. And though Yennefer had taught her all the names of the women she would meet in this castle, Ciri immediately though of her as Lady Owl.

“We welcome you,” Lady Owl said. “To the Lodge in Montecalvo, Ciri.”

Ciri bowed as instructed by Yennefer, politely, but without lowering her eyes modestly like a maiden.

It was answered with a sincere smile from Triss Merigold and a nod and a friendly look from Margarita Laux-Antille. The looks from the other women where hard as augers. As the blade of a piercing spear.

“Sit down,” Lady owl nodded towards a seat. “No, not you, Yennefer! Only her. You, Yennefer, are not an invited guest, but are summoned to be tried and punished as a wrongdoer. You’ll stand for as long as it takes the Lodge to decide your fate.”

In a twinkling of an eye, Ciri ended protocol.

“In that case, I will stand also,” she said in a loud voice. “I have not come as a guest. I too, was summoned to decide my fate. That’s the first thing. The second thing is that Yennefer’s fate is linked with mine. We are inextricably linked and that cannot be changed… With all due respect.”

Margarita Laux-Antille smile and looked her in the eyes. The simple yet elegant, Assire var Anahid, a Nilfgaardian with a slightly aquiline nose, nodded and tapped her fingers gently on the table’s surface.

“Philippa,” said a woman with a silver-fox boa around her neck. “I think that in this respect we should not go to extremes. At this point it is not necessary. This is the round table of the Lodge, and all who sit at it are equals – even when one of us is on trial. I think that we can agree…”

She did not finish, she glanced at all the sorceresses. One by one, they all nodded their heads in agreement – Margarita, Triss, Assire, Sabrina Glevissig, Keira Metz and both elves.

Only the second Nilfgaardian, the dark-haired Fringilla Vigo did not give an affirmative nod, she was pale as death as she stared at Yennefer.

“So be it,” Philippa Eilhart waved her hand. “Sit, both of you. But know that I am against it. But the unity of the Lodge and its interests are most important. The Lodge is everything, the rest is nothing. I hope you understand, Ciri?”

“Perfectly,” Ciri said, not looking away from her gaze. “Especially since I am supposed to be the nothing.”

The beautiful queen of the elves, Francesca Findabair laughed.

“Congratulations, Yennefer,” she said in her hypnotically deep and melodious voice. “I noticed you left your mark. This is gold. I recognise the school.”

“It’s easy to recognise,” Yennefer looked around with fiery eyes, “because it is the school of Tissaia de Vries.”

“Tissaia de Vries is dead,” Lady Owl said calmly. “We mourn her, and gladly. Her death, however, was a turning point. Now is a new time and big changes are coming. You, Ciri, you were once Princess Cirilla of Cintra, but fate has now given you a different role. Surely you already know what it is.”

“I know,” said Ciri, not listening to the warning hiss from Yennefer. “Vilgefortz explained it to me! He was going to stick a glass tube between my legs. If this is to be the fate that awaits me, then thank you very much.”

Philippa’s dark eyes blazed with frosty fury. But it was Sile de Tancarville that spoke next to Ciri.

“You still have a lot to learn, girl,” she said, covering her neck with her silver-fox boa. “Many of the things you have seen and heard you will need to unlearn. Alone or with assistance. You have acquired a lot of bad habits, no doubt because of the evil you have experienced in this world. But this is childish stubbornness, and now you can’t see when someone only has your best interests at heart. You lash out around you with your claws like a wild kitten, so you have given us no choice. We will take you by the neck and treat you like a child, without a second thought. Because we are older, wiser and we know everything about what was, what is and we know a lot about what will be. We will take you by the neck like a child, so one day when you are a wise cat, you will sit here at this table, among us. One of us. No! Not a word! Do not dare open your mouth while Sile de Tancarville speaks.”

The sorceress from Kovir’s voice was sharp and penetrating as a knife scratching on iron, and hung over the table. Ciri was not the only one to shrink and draw her head down between her shoulders but the other magicians of the Lodge as well, with maybe the exception of Philippa, Francesca and Assire. And Yennefer.

“You are right,” said Sile, adjusting the boa around her neck again, “you were called to Montecalvo to meet your fate. But you were not right when you complained that you are nothing. You are everything, you are the world’s future. At this point in time, you cannot even understand, because you are just a kitten, a

child who sees everyone as Vilgefortz or Emhyr var Emreis. At this point, it is not worth explaining that you are wrong. This is all for your sake and for the sake of the world. There will time for such explanations later. For now, you do not want to hear the voice of reason, and you riposte every argument with a child's stubbornness. So now you'll be taken by the neck. I'm done. Philippa, declare the girl's fate."

"You are coming with me," Lady Owl said, breaking the heavy silence, "and Sile to Kovir, to Pont Vanis, the summer capital of the kingdom. As you are no longer Cirilla of Cintra, during the course of the audience you will be presented as an adept of magic, being protected by us. At that audience you will meet a very wise king, Esterad Thyssen. You will meet his wife, the Queen Zuleyka, a person of singular nobility and goodness. You will also meet their son and heir, Prince Tancred."

Ciri was beginning to understand and rolled her eyes. Lady Owl did not miss that detail.

"Yes," she confirmed. "First of all you must impress prince Tancred. Because you are going to become his lover and give him a child."

"If you were still Cirilla of Cintra," Philippa continued after a long pause, "still the daughter of Pavetta and granddaughter of Calanthe, you would become Prince Tancred's legal wife. You'd be the princess and later the queen of Poviss and Kovir. Unfortunately, and I tell you with genuine regret, fate has deprived you of everything. Including your future. You will only be his mistress. His favourite."

"In name," interjected Sile, "and formally. In practice, we will in fact, endeavour to ensure that you are beside Tancred with the status of princess and later eventually queen. Naturally, we will need your help. Tancred has to want to have you by his side. Day and night. We will show you how to stimulate that desire, but it is up to your to bear the fruit of our teachings."

"All this is not important, at the end of the day," said Lady Owl. "The important thing is that you get pregnant to Tancred as soon as possible."

"Yeah, sure," muttered Ciri.

"Your's and Tancred's child," Philippa watched here with dark eyes, "will ensure the future and status of this Lodge. Take note that it will be a great thing. You will be a part of it, because right after the birth you will sit with us at this table. We will teach you. You are one of us, even if you do not want to admit it yet."

"On the island of Thanedd," Ciri overcame the tightness in her throat, "you

said I was a mindless tool, even a monster, Lady Owl, and now you say that I am one of you."

"There is not that much difference," the Daisy of the valley said in a ringing voice. "We, *me luned*, are all monsters. Each in our own way. Is that not right, Lady Owl?"

Philippa shrugged.

"That ugly scar on your face," Sile said indifferently, "we will magically remove or disguise. You will be a beautiful and mysterious woman, and I guarantee that Tancred Thyssen will go crazy for you. We will have to invent some personal details. Cirilla is a nice name and not so rare, so you can keep it. But you still need a last name. I would not be against it, if you used mine."

"Or mine," Lady Owl said covering the smile on the corner of her lips. "Cirilla Eilhart also sounds nice."

"That name," the hall rang with the silvery voice of the elven queen, "is pretty in any combination. And each of us here would love to have a daughter like you, Zireael, Swallow with the eyes of a hawk. You are the body and the blood of Lara Dorren. Each of us would give everything, even this Lodge and the fate of the kingdoms around the world, to have such a daughter. However, it is impossible. We know that it is impossible. So we envy Yennefer."

"Thank you, Lady Philippa," Ciri said after a few moments, squeezing the head of the sphinxes in her hands. "I also feel honoured with the proposal to take the surname de Tancarville. However, it seems to me that my new last name is the only thing that I can choose for myself, I thank the two mistresses. But I want to be called Cirilla of Vengerberg, daughter of Yennefer."

"Ha!" A sorceress flashed her teeth, who Ciri guessed to be Sabrina Glevissig of Kaedwen. "Tancred Thyssen will be a fool if he does not marry her. If he instead choose another princess, he would be a fool and blind, not to recognise the diamond among the glass beads Yenna, I envy you. And you know how sincere I can be with my envy."

Yennefer thanked her with a gesture. Without a shadow of a smile.

"So," Philippa said, "all is taken care of."

"No," said Ciri.

Francesca Findabair snorted quietly. Sile de Tancarville raised her head and her expression hardened.

"I have to think about it," Ciri said. "Meditate. Put my thoughts in order. Calmly. And when I'm done I will come back here, to Montecalvo, and come before this Lodge and discuss what has been decided."

Sile moved her lips, as if she had noticed a bad taste in her mouth and wanted to spit it out immediately. But she remained silent.

“I have to meet,” continued Ciri, “with the witcher Geralt in the city of Rivia. I promised that I would be there and that Yennefer would accompany me. I will fulfil my promise, with or without your consent. Lady Rita, here knows that, when I go to Geralt, I can always find a hole in the wall.”

Margarita Laux-Antille nodded with a smile.

“I need to talk to Geralt. Say goodbye to him. And tell him the truth. You should know one thing, ladies. When we left castle Stygga, leaving behind their dead and ours, I asked Geralt if it was all over, if we had won, if evil was defeated then good had prevailed. He did not answer, he just smiled a sad smile. I thought it was from fatigue and the sorrow of leaving all his friends buried under the walls. Only now I know what his smile meant. It was a sympathetic smile at the naivety of a child who believed that killing Vilgefortz and Bonhart represented the triumph of good over evil. I have to try and convince Geralt that what you ladies want to do with me, differs substantially from what Vilgefortz wanted to do with his glass tube. I’ll try and explain to him the differences between castle Montecalvo and castle Stygga, although Vilgefortz thought he was doing was for the good of the world and you ladies also do for the good of the world. I know it is not going to be easy to convince an old wolf like Geralt. Geralt will say that I’m a brat and can easily be fooled into doing noble things. But I have to try. It is important that he understand it, that he accepts it. It is very important. Also for you ladies.”

“You did not understand,” Sile de Tancarville snapped sharply. “You’re still a snotty nosed girl who replaced whining with arrogance. The only thing that gives me some hope is the acumen of your mind. You learn quickly. Believe me, you will soon laugh at the stupid things you have said here. Relative to your trip to Rivia, I express my strong opposition. It is a matter of principle, to prove to you that I, Sile de Tancarville, never talk to the wind. That I can grab the necks of the rebellious. It is for your own good, to learn discipline.”

“Therefore, let us resolve this issue,” said Philippa Eilhart, placing her hands on the table. “Let each of us express our opinion. Should we allow this arrogant maid, Ciri, to travel to Rivia? To meet with the witcher, for whom there is no place in her life? Are we to allow this sentimentality, which we will soon have to rid her of? Sile is against. What about the other ladies?”

“I am also against,” Sabrina Glevissig announced. “Also as a matter of principle. The girl, I like. I like her arrogance and stubbornness, it is better than

flabby softness. I have nothing against her pleading. I have no doubt that she would return - I respect her word. But the girl has dared to threaten. So let her know that threats are not to be tolerated."

"I'm against it," said Keira Metz. "For purely practical reasons. I also like the girl and Geralt delivered me out of the hands of danger on Thanedd. It is a sentiment that I long ago got rid of, but I do not deny that it was pleasant to me. I could repay him this way. But will not. Because you are wrong, Sabrina. This girl is a witcheress and is trying to be smarter than us. In short, she is just trying to get away."

"Does anyone here," Yennefer said ominously, dragging her words, "dare doubt the word of my daughter?"

"Be silent, Yennefer," Philippa hissed. "Do not talk, or I'll lose patience. We have two votes against. Let's listen to the others."

"I am in favour of letting her go," said Triss Merigold. "I know her and can vouch for her. I would also, if permitted, accompany her on this trip. To help, if I may, in her meditations and reflections. And with her conversation with Geralt."

"I also vote for her," Margarita said with a smile. "You may wonder at my motivations, ladies, but I do it for Tissaia de Vries. If Tissaia was among us she would not agree that in order to maintain the unity of the Lodge it is necessary to use coercive methods or restriction of personal freedom."

"I vote for her," said Francesca Findabair, adjusting the lace at her neckline. "I have many reasons, but I do not wish to explain them."

"I vote for her," said Ida Emean aep Sivney. "So my heart dictates."

"I'm against it," Assire var Anahid said dryly. "I do not decide out of lack of sympathy, antipathy or principled reasons. I fear for her life. Under the protection of the Lodge, Ciri is safe and on the route to Rivia she will be an easy target. I fear those that stole her identity and even her name, still don't think that it's enough."

"We have," Sabrina said sarcastically, "yet to know the opinion of Lady Fringilla Vigo. I guess that it is obvious. We all remember the castle Rhys-Rhune."

"I am grateful for the reminder," Fringilla cocked her head proudly. "I am for Ciri. To prove the admiration and affection I have for the girl. I also do it for the witcher, Geralt of Rivia, without which the girl would not be sitting here today. To save Ciri, he went to the edge of the world and fought everyone trying to prevent him - even himself. It would be shameful to deny him a meeting with his daughter."

“I have not heard here any shameful acts,” Sabrina said cynically. “But a lot of naive sentimentality. Just such sentimentality that we want to eradicate from the girl. The results are that the scales have settled in deadlock. We have not decided anything. We need to vote again. I suggest that this time we do it secretly.”

“Why?”

All looked at the one who spoke - at Yennefer.

“I am still a member of the Lodge,” said Yennefer. “I have not been deprived of membership, you have not put anyone else in my place, so I have the right to vote. Certainly I know how I will vote. My vote therefore pushes the scales over and settles the matter.”

“Your insolence,” Sabrina said, lacing her fingers together, loaded with onyx rings, “borders on bad taste, Yennefer.”

“If I was in your place, madam, I would keep a discreet silence,” Sile added gravely. “And be fearful of another vote, to deal with you.”

“I voted for Ciri,” Francesca said, “but you, Yennefer, I have to call to order. You ran away from the Lodge, refusing to cooperate. But you have responsibilities and obligations, debts that you have to repay, the verdict must be made. Otherwise you would not have been allowed to cross the threshold of Montecalvo.”

Yennefer grabbed Ciri, who was dying to get up and scream. Finally, without resistance, Ciri dropped back into her chair in silence. Lady Owl, suddenly rose from her seat, dominating the whole table.

“Yennefer,” she proclaimed loudly, “you are not entitled to a vote, that is clear. But I am. I have heard all the voices present. I guess, I will finally make my vote.”

“How do you vote, Philippa?” Sabrina frowned.

Philippa Eilhart looked across the table. She met Ciri’s green eyes and stared at them.

***

The bottom of the pond was a multicoloured mosaic, the coloured tiles appeared to move.

Sitting on the pond creating shadows were the broad leaves of water lilies hiding goldfish.

The water’s surface reflected the dark eyes of a little girl, her long hair floated on the water.

The girl had forgotten the whole world, laying on the edge of the pool with

her little hands in the water.

She went to try and touch those gold and red fish. The fish approached her fingers and palms, curiously circling around them, but she couldn't catch them. They remained as elusive as light and shadow, as the water itself. The dark-eyed girl fingers clutched emptiness.

"Philippa!"

It was the most beloved voice in the world. And yet she was not a little girl now.

Furthermore, she was not looking into the water. The water lilies, fish and reflection were gone.

"Philippa!"

***

"Philippa!" Sile de Tancarville's sharp voice pulled her from her reflections. "We are waiting."

Through the open window cam the cold wind of spring. Philippa Eilhart shuddered. *Death,* she thought. *Death has passed by my side.*

"This Lodge," she said at last in a firm voice, "is to decide the fate of the world. So, this Lodge must reflect the world. Here, equilibrium and wisdom does not always mean cold and selfish, calculation and vileness, and sentimentality is not always naive. On one hand, iron discipline and on the other responsibility, resistance to violence, gentleness and trust. Cool reason… And heart."

"I," she said into the silence that reigned after her introduction, "cast the last vote. I will take into account one more thing. An element that without balancing anything, balances everything."

Following her gaze, everyone looked at the wall, to a mosaic of many multicolour tiles depicting the snake Uroboros, biting it's own tail.

"That thing," she continued, staring with her dark eyes at Ciri, "is destiny in which I, Philippa Eilhart have only begun to believe in recently, which I have only recently begun to understand. Destiny is not the way to providence or comfortable fatalism. Destiny is hope. I am full of hope that it will become what we want to happen, so I give my vote to Ciri - Child of Destiny, Child of Hope"

In the pillared hall of Montecalvo the was silence for a long time. From outside of the window came the hunting cry from a sea eagle.

"Lady Yennefer," Ciri whispered. "It means…"

"Come, my daughter," Yennefer whispered back. "Geralt is waiting for is and it is a long road ahead."

***

Geralt awoke suddenly and sat up. He heard the echoing cry of a sea eagle.

Then the witcher and the sorceress were married at a glorious wedding. They stayed for a long time and ate honey and drank wine.

They lived happily ever after, but very briefly. He died of a heart attack. She died soon after, of what the story does not mention. They say that it was with regret and longing, but who would believe in such fairy tales.

Flourens Delannoy
Fairytales and Stories

CHAPTER TWELVE

It was the sixth day after the new moon of June when they reach Rivia.

The emerged from the woods and appeared on the side of a hill. At the foot of the hill, suddenly, without warning, flashed the mirror surface of the lake of Loc Eskalott, which the valley took its name from. In its waters were reflected the shapes of Mahakam Massif, fir trees, and the larch-covered hills of Craag Ros. At the lake's peninsula was Castle Rivia, the winter residence of the kings of Lyria and at the southern tip of Loc Eskalott was situated the city.

"So here we are," Dandelion confirmed the obvious fact. "Destiny has brought us here again, the circle has closed. I don't see the blue and white banner on the castle towers, so Queen Meve must not be present. I don't think that she has forgiven your desertion…"

"Believe me, Dandelion," Geralt interrupted him, guiding his horse down the slope. "I do not care if she has forgiven me or won't forgive me…"

Next to the city, near the entrance gate, stood a colourful tent reminiscent of a cake. In front of the tent, on a pole, hung a white shield with a red chevron. Under the raised part of the tent stood a king in full armour and a white tabard the same as the shield. The knight, with a penetrating and challenging look, stared at the women passing by before him with sacks of coal, charcoal, deadwood and barrels of pitch. Upon seeing Geralt and Dandelion approach on horseback, his eyes lit up with hope.

"The Lady of your heart," Geralt thwarted the hopes of the knight with a chilling voice, "whoever she is, is the most beautiful and virtuous of all women from the Yaruga to the Buina."

"On my honour," the knight reluctantly answered. "You speak the truth, sir."

***

A blonde girl in a silver studded, leather jacket vomited in the middle of the street, bent in half, holding the stirrup of a grey mare. Two colleagues of the girl, in identical clothing, with swords on their backs and headbands holding back their hair, vulgarly insulted passers-by with their slurred speech. Both were more than drunk, weaving on their feet and clutching to the sides of horses tied to a

pole set in front of the inn.

“Do we really need to go in there?” Asked Dandelion. “Inside there are bound to be more like them.”

“The meeting is arranged here, remember? This is the Cock and Bull inn, which was written on the tablet.”

The blonde girl again leaned forward in her next spasm of vomiting. The mare snorted and shied, so the girl fell to the ground landing in her own vomit.

“What are you staring at, asshole?” Yelled one of the colleagues. “White hair!”

“Geralt,” whispered Dandelion. “Please don’t do anything stupid.”

“Don’t worry.”

They tied their horses to the berth at the front of the inn. The young men were ignoring them, busy shouting at a townswoman passing down the road with a child. They did not like what they saw.

The first thing that drew the eye when they entered the inn was the inscription - CHEF WANTED. The second was the large painting on the wall showing a bearded monster with an axe dripping blood. The sign underneath it read - Mahakam Dwarf - vile traitor.

Dandelion lacked no reason to be scared. The only customers in the establishment, apart from some winos who drank with dignity and a couple of prostitutes, were people wearing leather garments and with swords hanging from their backs.

There were eight of them in total, of both sexes, but they made enough fuss to be eighteen. They constantly shouted insults and blasphemes.

“I recognise you, gentlemen. I know who you are,” said the innkeeper. “I have a message for you. You have to go to the tavern called Wirsing’s.”

“That’s a good tavern,” Dandelion rejoiced.

“Well then, go and take advantage of their establishment,” the innkeeper said, drying glasses with his apron. “If you don’t like my place, take your business elsewhere. But I tell you that the Elms quarter only dwarves and non-humans inhabit there.”

“So what?” Geralt blinked.

“Well, you probably know this,” the innkeeper shrugged, “but the one who left the message for you was a dwarf. If it pleases you to be dealing with such people… that is your business. You, gentlemen, know whose company you prefer.”

“We are very picky when it comes to company,” said Dandelion, nodding his

head towards the table with the men and women in leather jackets and headbands holding back their hair.

“But it is not kind to point out something under someone’s nose.”

The innkeeper placed a freshly dried glass on the counter and looked at them scowling.

“You have to be more understanding,” he said in an emphatic tone. “The young people need to let off steam. It is well know that young people should let off steam. The war has mistreated them. Their fathers died…”

“And their mothers are whoring,” finished Geralt, his voice as cold as an icy mountain stream. “I understand. I embody tolerance. At least I try. Come on, Dandelion.”

“Go ahead then, with all due respect,” said the innkeeper without any respect. “Just don’t complain that I didn’t warn you. In these times it is easy to get fleeced in the dwarven quarter. Just…”

“Just what?”

“Just nothing. This is not my thing.”

“Come on, Geralt,” said Dandelion to the witcher, he had started to notice the war orphans, those not completely drunk, eyes begin to glitter with the use of fisstech.

“Goodbye, innkeeper. Who knows, maybe someday I’ll visit your business. When you take down the sign in the entrance.”

“And which one of the signs does not please you, gentlemen?” The innkeeper frowned and glared at them. “Huh? The one with the dwarf?”

“No, the one about the chef.”

Three young people got up from the table, swaying on their feet, evidently with the intention of intercepting them. Two boys and a girl in black leather jackets. With swords on their backs.

Geralt did not slow, he walked towards them, his face and eyes were cold and completely indifferent.

The young people at the very last moment, parted and retreated. Dandelion noticed the stench of beer. Sweat. And fear.

“They have to get used to it,” the witcher said as they entered the street. “They have to adapt.”

“Sometimes it is difficult.”

“This is not an argument, Dandelion.”

The air was hot, stick and as thick as soup.

***

Outside, in front of the inn, two young men in black jackets helped the blonde girl wash in the horse trough. The girl, spat, snorted and stammered trying to explain that she felt better and that she needed a drink. That they would definitely go the market stalls for entertainment, but not before a drink.

Her name was Nadia Esposito. The name has been recorded in the annals. And went down in history.

But Geralt and Dandelion did not know this yet. Nor did the girl.

***

The streets of Rivia were alive with a great buzz and what appeared to be locals completely absorbed the visiting traders. It seemed that everyone there traded everything, trying to change one thing for something else. From everywhere came the cacophony of the sounds of products being advertised, fierce haggling and from both sides the sounds of people being accused of fraud, theft, chicanery and other sins which had nothing to do with trade.

Before coming to the Elms district, Geralt and Dandelion received many interesting proposals. Offered to them was, among other things - an astrolabe, a tin trumpet and decorative cutlery adorned with the Frangipani family crest, shares in a copper mine, a jar of leeches, a tattered tome entitled *The Miracle or Head of Medusa*, a pair of breeding ferrets, an elixir to increase potency and even - for a negotiated price - a not too young, not too thin, and not very clean bride.

A black-bearded dwarf with an unprecedented brazenness was trying to convince them to buy a cheap mirror in a frame, which he claim to be one of the magical Cambuscan mirrors.

At that moment a stone was thrown which knocked the goods from his hand.

“Mangy kobold!” Cried the assailant, a dirty, barefoot urchin who was running away. “Non human! Bearded Goat!”

“I hope your gut rots, human worm!” Roared the dwarf in return. “I hope it will rot and come out your ass!”

People watched in grim silence.

***

The district of the Elms was located on the shore of the lake in a cove where grew alders, weeping willows and of course, elms. Here everything was much quieter and calm, nobody was buying anything and nobody wanted to sell.

From the lake a breeze was blowing which was especially nice for the pair after escaping the suffocating stench and flies of the market streets.

They soon found the Wirsing tavern. It was the first on the street and the saw

it with ease.

The porch was covered in climbing roses, and under the roof overgrown with moss, where a swallows nests hung, were two dwarves.

“Geralt and Dandelion,” said one of the dwarves belching loudly. “You, rogues have come as expected.”

Geralt dismounted.

“Hail, Yarpen Zigrin. Good to see you, Zoltan Chivay.”

***

They were the only guests in the pub that smelled of garlic, spices and something indescribable, but pleasant. They sat at a heavy table overlooking the lake, which through the glass window next to the table, appeared mysterious, magical and romantic.

“Where is Ciri?” Yarpen Zigrin asked bluntly. “I hope nothing…”

“No,” Geralt quickly interrupted him, “she is on her way. You will see her soon. Well, bearded storyteller, tell me what is new.”

“What did I tell you?” Yarpen said sarcastically. “What did I tell you, Zoltan? He returns from the end of the world, where he, if you believe the rumours, waded through blood, killed dragons and overthrew an empire. And he asks, how we are going. The same witcher.”

“What smells so good?” Dandelion said, sniffing.

“Lunch,” Yarpen Zigrin said. “Meat. Don’t ask us, Dandelion, where we came by the meat.”

“No I’m not asking, because I know the joke.”

“Don’t be a bore.”

“Where did the meat come from?”

“He came alone to find us.”

“And now, seriously,” Yarpen said, wiping his eyes, though the joke was, in fact, very old. “With regard to the food, we are in a critical situation, as always after a war. The meat is rarely seen, even poultry, fish is difficult to find as well… It is just as bad with flour, potatoes, and legumes… Farms were burned along with their stores, ponds were emptied, and the fields are fallow…”

“Production has stagnated,” added Zoltan. “There is no transport. The only thing that works is usury and barter. Have you seen the bazaar? The rich alongside the poor, selling and bartering the last remnants of his property and amassed fortunes…”

“If we get a poor harvest before this winter then people will die of starvation.”

“Is it really that bad?”

“Coming from the south, you had to pass villages and settlements. Think of in how many you heard the barking of dogs.”

“Bloody hell,” Dandelion slapped his forehead. “I saw… I told you, Geralt, it was not normal! That something was missing! Ha! Now I realise! I did not hear any dogs! There was no…”

He stopped suddenly, looked towards the kitchen where the smell of garlic and spices came from and terror came into his eyes.

“Don’t worry,” Yarpen grumbled. “Our meat has never barked, meowed or cried for mercy. Our meat is nothing like that. It is fit for a king!”

“Confess, dwarf!”

“When we received your letter and it was clear that we would see you in Rivia, we were thinking, Zoltan and me, how we could entertain you. We were going round in circles until we felt like pissing. Then we approached the lake shore and saw that it was plagued by snails. So we took a bag and filled it to the brim with those precious molluscs.”

“We missed a few of them,” nodded Zoltan Chivay. “But we were very drunk and they were very quick.”

Both dwarves again burst out in laughter at the joke.

“Wirsing,” Yarpen said pointing to the kitchen, “can prepare snails well, as you must know that it requires a lot of science. The chef is well renowned. Before becoming a widower, he and his woman owned an inn in Maribor, and he cooked so well that even the King himself was a guest there. And now let’s drink, I say!”

“But first,” Zoltan said, “try some of the whitefish, freshly smoked and caught from the lake.”

“And we are waiting for your story, gentlemen,” said Yarpen. “We are curious to hear what you experienced.”

***

The whitefish was still warm, oily and fragrant. The vodka was cold and hurt their teeth.

Dandelion went first, with his flowery style, colourful language and embellishments on the story full of nonsense and lies. Then the witcher spoke. He told the pure truth, and spoke dry and monotonously. Dandelion could not stand it and interrupted again and again which earned him reprimands from the dwarves.

And then the story was over and there was a long silence.

“For the archer Milva!” Zoltan cleared his throat and raised his cup in a salute. “For the Nilfgaardian. For Regis the herbalist, who entertained strangers in his hut, with moonshine made from mandrake. And for this Angoulême, with whom I am not familiar. Let the earth rest light on them. Let them have there, in the afterlife, everything that they had scarce in this life. And let their names live on long in songs and stories. Let’s drink.”

“Let’s drink,” echoed Dandelion and Yarpen.

Let’s drink, thought the witcher.

***

Wirsing, a grey-haired man, pale and skin as a stick, a veritable denial of a stereotypical innkeeper and master of the culinary mysteries, deposited on the table a basket of white fragrant bread and a platter of snails, sizzling in garlic and spices on a bed of radish leaves.

Dandelion, Geralt and the dwarves dug in quickly. The meal was exquisitely tasty and very funny at the same time, given the need for clumsy forceps and forks.

They ate, smacking their lips, eating the bread and mincing words when referring to every second snail that slipped from the forceps. Two kittens also enjoyed the meal whenever a snail slipped from the clamps and rolled on the floor.

The smell coming from the kitchen indicated that Wirsing was preparing another serving.

***

Yarpen Zigrin reluctantly waved his hand, but realised the witcher was not going to give up.

“For me there has been nothing new,” he said, spitting out a piece of snail shell. “I was in the army… Then I was selected as a bailiff. I’ll do a career in politics. There is too much competition in business. In politics any fool can hold the purse of a thief. It is easy to stand out.”

“Well, I,” said Zoltan Chivay, gesturing with a snail, “am not for politics. I’ll go home to my forge, driven by water and steam, accompanied by Figgis Merluzzo and Munro Bruys. You remember Figgis and Munro, witcher?”

“Not just them.”

“Yazon Varda was killed at the Yaruga,” Zoltan said dryly. “Quite stupidly, in one of the last battles.”

“A pity. And Percival Schuttenbach?”

“The gnome? Ah, he’s fine. That rogue escaped the recruitment claiming his

religion forbids war. And he succeeded, even though everyone knows that the entire pantheon of gods and goddesses would go to war for a pickled herring. He has a jewellery shop in Novigrad. He bought my parrot, Field Marshal Duda, and made the bird a living advertisement. He taught him to say *'Diamonds! Diamonds!'* And it works, go figure. The gnome has clientele loaded with money. But it is Novigrad! And there is money in the streets. Therefore, we also want to establish a forge in Novigrad."

"Those people will scribble with shit on your door," Yarpen said. "Throw stones through your windows. They'll call you a damned dwarf. It doesn't matter that you are a veteran. In Novigrad you'll be nothing more than a pariah."

"I'll go anyway," Zoltan said cheerfully. "There is too much competition in Mahakam. And a lot of politicians. Let's drink for our friends. For Caleb Stratton. For Yazon Varda."

"For Regan Dahlberg," Yarpen added, frowning. Geralt shook his head.

"Regan also…"

"Also. In Mayena. The old Dahlberg has been left alone in this world. Ah, hell, enough of this! Let's drink. and hurry up with those snails, because Wirsing is coming over with another pan."

***

The dwarves, with belts unbuckled, listened to Geralt's story of Dandelion's aristocratic romance, that ended on the gallows. The poet seemed offended and did not comment. Zoltan and Yarpen almost spilt apart with laughter.

"Yes, yes," Yarpen said finally, "in the words of the old song - *'a man breaks down in tears and the woman smiles; pleased.'* Some distinguish examples of that saying have joined with us around this table today. Look no further than Zoltan Chivay. With all the stories that have been told, he forgot to add that he is getting married. Soon, in September. The lucky woman is called Eudora Brekekes."

"Breckenriggs!" Zoltan emphatically corrected, frowning. "I'm starting to get tired of correcting your pronunciation, Zigrin. Take heed, when I get tired of something I kick it up the ass!"

"Where's the wedding? And when exactly?" Dandelion said soothingly. "I ask because we will come. If you invite us, of course."

"We have not yet reached a decision on where, when or how, or if we are even getting married," muttered Zoltan, visibly confused. "Yarpen has rushed things. I think Eudora has committed, but who knows what will happen? It is still bad times."

“The second example of a girl’s omnipotence,” continued Yarpen, “is Geralt of Rivia, the witcher.”

Geralt pretended to be busy with a snail. Yarpen snorted.

“After miraculously finding his Ciri, he allows her to leave. He leaves her alone again, even though, as someone rightly pointed out here, it is still bad times. All of this happens to the witcher, because a woman wanted it. The witcher always does what this woman wants, a certain Yennefer of Vengerberg. If he at least got something from the sorceress in question… But he gets nothing. The truth. As King Dezmod used to say, looking at the chamber pot after relieving himself *‘The mind cannot comprehend this.’*”

“I suggest,” said Geralt, picking up a cup with a wry smile, “to drink and change the topic of conversation.”

“Right,” Zoltan and Dandelion said in unison.

***

Wirsing carried a third and forth platter of snails to the table. Not forgetting, of course, the bread and vodka. The diners were beginning to get full, so it was not surprising that the toasts were becoming more frequent. Nor was there any wonder that they spoke more philosophy and with increasingly thick speech.

“The evil we were fighting against,” insisted the witcher, “is a manifestation of the action of chaos and their performances aimed to disturb the order. So, when evil spread, the order could not reign, and all that order was building fell apart, and nothing was left standing. The faint glow of wisdom and the timid flame of hope, embers that still retained the heat, rather than flash and then die away. Darkness ensued. And the darkness was filled with fangs, claws and blood.”

Yarpen Zigrin stroked his beard, smearing grease from the snails through it.

“You speak well, witcher,” he admitted. “But, as young Cerro said to King Vridnak on their first date *‘Does it have any practical uses?’*”

“There is no ground for the existence of witchers,” Geralt did not smile, “because the struggle of Good and Evil takes place now in an entirely different field of battle in a completely different way. The evil is no longer chaotic. It is no longer a blind force, unbridled, which a witcher has to face, a mutant as deadly as chaotic evil itself. Today Evil is governed by laws - because the laws serve them. They act in accordance with treaties and have signed for peace, because some treaties allow…”

“Settlers to be forcefully expelled,” Zoltan guessed.

“And not only that,” Dandelion added gravely. “Not only that.”

“So what?” Yarpen Zigrin, sat back and folded his hands on his belly. “We’ve all seen something. Everyone has been pissed on. Each lost a dream. That’s what happens, it’s always been like that and it always will be. We are the lowest, nothing more than these empty shells. What do you dislike, witcher? What is going on? The changes that the world is experiencing? The development? The progress?”

“Maybe.”

Yarpen was silent for a while, watching the witcher from under his bushy eyebrows.

“Progress,” he said at last, “is like a herd of pigs. So that is the way you see progress, and that is how you judge it. Like a herd of pigs that walk through the courtyard of the farmhouse. The existence of the herd means profit. The pork knuckles. The sausages, the bacon. In short, there are a number of advantages! So you shouldn’t pout and complain that there is shit everywhere.”

Everyone was quiet for a time, weighing his heart and conscience on all matters and important issues.

“I need a drink,” Dandelion finally said.

No one protested.

***

“Progress,” Yarpen Zigrin said into the silence, “will, in the long run, brighten the darkness. The darkness will give way to the light. But not immediately. And, of course, not without a struggle.”

Geralt, staring out the window, smiled at his own thoughts and dreams.

“That darkness you speak of,” he said, “is a state of spirit, not matter. To fight something you need to train something quite different than a witcher. It is time to start.”

“You will start to retrain? Is that what you were thinking?”

“Not at all. This job holds no interest to me. I will go into retirement.”

“Is that right!”

“I’m serious. No more being a witcher.”

There was a long silence, broken occasionally by the furious meows of the kittens as they scratched at each other in a game.

“No more being a witcher,” Yarpen Zigrin repeated. “Ha! I don’t know what to think about that, as old King Dezmod said when caught cheating at cards. But I have a very bad feeling. Dandelion, you have travelled with him and spent a lot of time at his side. Has he shown other symptoms of paranoia?”

“Okay, okay,” said Geralt with a stony face. “No more jokes, as King

Dezmod said when all of his guests at a feast began to go livid and croak. I have said all that I had to say. And now down to actions."

He picked up his sword, which was hanging on the back of his chair.

"Here is your Sihil, Zoltan Chivay. I return it to you with gratitude and recognition. It has been useful. It has helped me. It has saved lives. And taken lives."

"Witcher…" The dwarf raised his hands in a defensive gesture. "The sword is yours. I did not lend it to you, I gave it to you. As a gift…"

"Hush, Chivay. I give you back your sword. I'll no longer need it."

"Quickly," Yarpen said. "Pour vodka into him, Dandelion, because he is talking like old Schrader when he fell into the mine shaft on his head. Geralt, I know you've a deep temperament and a sensitive soul, but do not talk such crap, as you can see, Yennefer is not here, just us old wolves. Don't tell us old wolves stories of a witcher not needing a sword, the world is not like that. You are a witcher and you will need…"

"No, I won't," Geralt gently denied. "Perhaps this will surprise you old wolves, but I have come to the conclusion that it is foolish to piss in the wind. That it is foolish to stick my neck out for anyone. Even if that someone pays. And no, this is not an existential philosophy. Believe it, but suddenly, I have taken a tremendous affection for my own skin. I have come to the conclusion that it would be stupid to risk it in defence of others…"

"I noticed," Dandelion nodded. "On one hand, it is smart. On the other…"

"There is no other."

"Yennefer and Ciri," Yarpen asked after a little while, "have something to do with your decision?"

"Much."

"Then everything is clear," Zoltan sighed. "I have no clue how a master swordsman will adapt to normal life. But, try as I might, I cannot see you planting cabbages, although I do have respect for your choice… Innkeeper! This sword is a Mahakam Rune Sihil from the Rhundurina forge itself. It was a gift. If the recipient does not want it, then the one who gave it must take it back. Take it and hang it over your fireplace. Rename you inn to, *'The Witcher's Sword'*. Then on winter nights we can tell stories about monsters and treasure, of bloody wars and bitter battles. Of death. Of deep love and unwavering friendship. About courage and honour and this sword will hang there, above the listeners and inspire the storyteller. Now pour me a drink, gentlemen, a glass of vodka, because I will continue and will be delivering profound truths and philosophies,

including existential ones."

They pour vodka into their glasses quietly and with dignity. They looked each other in the eye and drank. With no less dignity. Yarpen Zigrin cleared his throat, looked at his audience to make sure they were sufficiently focused and dignified.

"Progress," he spoke with deliberation, "will brighten the darkness, because that is what progress does, like, excuse the expression, an ass is for shitting. Each time there will be more light, and we will be less afraid of the dark and the evil that lurks in it. Perhaps the day will come, when we will simply stop believing that something is hidden in the darkness. And we will laugh at that kind of fear. It will seem childish. And will bring shame! But there will always, always be darkness. And evil will always be waiting in the darkness, with its claws, fangs and blood. And witchers will always be necessary."

***

They sat in meditation and silence, deep in thought, so deep that they did not noticed the increasing noise in the city - a sinister and menacing noise like the irritated buzzing of wasps.

They barely noticed how quiet and empty lakeside boulevard was until one person ran past, then another, then another.

Suddenly, shouting broke out in the city and the door of Wirsing's inn burst wide open and a young dwarf ran into the room. He was red with effort and had difficulty catching his breath.

"What is it?" Yarpen Zigrin lifted his head.

The dwarf, still breathless, pointed in the direction of the town. His eyes were wild.

"Take a deep breath," Zoltan Chivay advised. "And tell us what's wrong."

***

Later it was claimed that the tragic events in Rivia were an unfortunate coincidence that was a spontaneous reaction, a sudden and unpredictable outburst of justified anger induced by the hostility of the dwarves and elves towards the humans of the city. It was argued that is was not the humans, but the dwarves that attacked first, that they provoked the violence. A dwarfish heckler insulted the noble Lady Nadia Esposito, a war orphan and that he used violence against her. Later when the nobles came to the defence of their friend, the dwarf called upon his relatives. A fight ensued, which soon became a real battle that, in the twinkling of an eye, engulfed the whole bazaar.

The battle degraded into a bloodbath, in a massive attack from the humans

against the districts occupied by the non-humans and the district of the Elms. In less than an hour, between the incident at the bazaar to the intervention of the sorceresses, one hundred and seventy people were killed, about half of which were women and children.

This version of events is reflected in the works of Professor Emmerich Gottschalk of Oxenfurt.

But there are others who argue otherwise. How can this be spontaneous, this unpredictable explosion, that within minutes of there were carts on the streets of the bazaar handing out weapons among the humans? Where did the sudden righteous anger of this mob come from, of who the most visible and active members at the time of the massacre, were people whom nobody new, and who had only come to Rivia a few days before the incident, and then disappeared without a trace? Why did the military intervene so late? And why with such distaste?

Some scholars sought to interpret events in Rivia as a Nilfgaardian provocation, and there were others who argued that everything had been hatched by dwarves in league with the elves. Who were killing their own to discredit the humans.

Lost among the majority of scientific voices was a theory by a young, bold and eccentric lawyer, who - until he was silenced - claimed that the incident in Rivia was not from secret conspiracies, but ordinary and very common characteristics of the local population - ignorance, xenophobia, violence and profound brutalisation.

Later, everyone grew bored and stopped talking about the matter altogether.

***

“Into the cellar,” the witcher said grimly, listening to the approaching noise and the roar of the crowd. “Get into the basement, dwarves! And without your stupid heroism!”

“Witcher,” Zoltan protested, clutching the handle of his axe. “I cannot… They are killing my brothers…”

“Into the cellar. Think about Eudora. Do you want her to be a widow before the wedding?”

The argument worked. The dwarves ran to the cellar. Geralt and Dandelion hid the entrance with a rug. Wirsing, usually pale, was as white as buttermilk.

“I saw a pogrom in Maribor,” he stammered, looking at the entrance of the cellar. “If they find them there…”

“Go to the kitchen.”

Dandelion was also pale. Geralt was not surprised. Until recently it was a formless and monotonous roar but now they could pick out individual voices. The sound of them lifted the hair on his head.

“Geralt,” moaned the poet. “I have a certain resemblance to an elf…”

“Don’t be stupid.”

Clouds of smoke appeared over the rooftops. A group of dwarves came running through the alleys. Dwarves of both sexes.

Two of them, without hesitation, jumped into the lake and started swimming, splashing hard and moving for the centre of the lake. The rest scattered. Some turned towards the inn.

The mob poured into the street. They were faster than the dwarves. In their race was the lust for killing.

The cries of the victims drilled their ears, ringing on the stained glass windows of the premises. Geralt noticed that his hands had begun to tremble.

One of the dwarves was literally torn to pieces. Another was thrown to the ground and in seconds became a shapeless, bloody mass. A woman was massacred with pitchforks and spears. The child she was protecting was simply trampled, crushed to death beneath their feet.

Three dwarves - a man and two women - ran towards the inn. The roaring crowd raced after them.

Geralt took a deep breath. He stood up. Feeling the terrified eyes of Dandelion and Wirsing, he removed from the shelf above the fireplace, Sihil, the Mahakam sword forged in the foundry of Rhundurina itself.

“Geralt…” Dandelion moaned in a heartbreaking tone.

“Very well,” said the witcher, walking towards the exit. “But this is the last time! Damn me, but it really is the last time!”

He went out onto the porch, then jumped off it and cut a hulking man in a masonry smock, then a woman that threatened him with a shovel. He then amputated the hand of a woman who was grasping the hair of one of the dwarves. With two quick diagonal cuts he finished off the men kicking one of the fallen dwarves.

He waded into the crowd. Quickly moving in semicircles. He slashed wide, seemingly at random - knowing that such swings were more spectacular than violent. He did not want to kill them. He just wanted to wounded them.

“An elf! An elf!” Someone in the mob shouted as if possessed. “Kill the elf!”

What nonsense, he thought, Dandelion might look like an elf, but I don’t look like an elf in any way.

He spotted the person who had shouted, maybe a soldier, for he was wearing uniform and high boots. He advanced through the crowd, dodging like an eel. The soldier was protecting himself with a pike, holding it with both hands. Geralt chopped at the pole, severing fingers.

He spun, causing another large cut, screams of pain and a fountain of blood.

"Mercy!" A lad said on his knees before him, peering through his dishevelled hair. "Mercy!"

Geralt spared him, stopping his arm and sword, using the attacking impetus to complete his turn. From the corner of his eye he saw the dishevelled young man with a smirk on his face and saw what he was holding in his hands. He changed the direction of his movement, trying to escape. But he was caught in the crowd. And for a split second he was mired in the crowd.

He could only watch the pitchfork that was flying towards his body.

***

The fire in the huge fireplace went out. A gust of wind from the mountains whistled through the crevices of the walls and screamed through the improperly closed shutters of Kaer Morhen, Home of the Witchers.

"Damn it!" Eskel said, standing up and going to the cupboard. "Seagull or vodka?"

"Vodka," Geralt and Coen said with one voice.

"Sure," interjected Vesemir, hidden in the shadows, "Yes, of course! Drown your stupidity in vodka. Damn fools!"

"It was an accident…" muttered Lambert. "She had already mastered the comb…"

"Shut your big mouth, you idiot! I don't want to hear any more! I warned you, if something happened to that little girl…"

"Enough," Coen interrupted him, softly. "She sleeps peacefully. Deep and healthy. She will wake up a bit sore, but that's it. About the trance, and what happened, she will not even remember it."

"As long as you remember," said Vesemir, panting angrily. "Cabbage heads! Pour for me too, Eskel."

They were silent for a long time, listening intently to the howling gale.

"We will need to call someone," Eskel finally said. "We will need to bring a sorcerer here. What is happening to the girl, it is not normal."

"That is her third trance."

"But the first time she has spoken clearly."

"Repeat to me again what she said," Vesemir said, emptying his cup in one

gulp. “Word for word.”

“I cannot repeat it verbatim,” Geralt said, staring into the embers. “But the sense of it, if you can make sense of it, was as follows - Coen and I will die. The teeth will be our undoing. We will both be killed by teeth. He two. And me three.”

“It is quite likely,” snorted Lambert. “That you’ll be killed from bites. Teeth can kill any of us at any time. But you two, if that prophecy is truly prophetic, will be finished off by some very jagged monsters.”

“Or festering gangrene because of bad teeth,” Eskel agreed, apparently quite serious. “But we are not missing any teeth.”

“I,” said Vesemir reprovingly, “would not take the matter lightly.”

The witchers were silent. The wind howled through the walls of Kaer Morhen.

***

The dishevelled lad, as if afraid of what he had done, let go of the pitchfork. The witcher, unable to repress a cry of pain, bent forward, stuck in his belly, the pitchfork unbalanced him and he fell to his knees, and slid onto the pavement. Blood spilled with a murmur and a splash worthy of a waterfall.

Geralt tried to stand. Instead he collapsed on his side.

The sounds that surrounded him, acquired resonances and echoes, heard as if underwater.

His eyes deceived him, with impaired perspective and completely false geometry.

He saw the crowd disperse. They escaped from those who were coming to his aid. Zoltan and Yarpen with axes, Wirsing with his butcher knife and Dandelion armed with a broom.

He wanted to scream, where are you going? It is not worth pissing in the wind for me. But he could not scream. His voice was stifled by a wave of blood.

***

It was noon, when the sorceresses arrived in Rivia, within sight of the shiny surface of Loc Eskalott, the towers of the castle and the red roofs of the city.

“We’re here,” said Yennefer. “Rivia. What a curious and entangled destiny.”

Ciri was excited and Kelpie kept dancing and shuffling on the edge of the road. Triss Merigold sighed unnoticed. Rather, she believed it had been unnoticed.

“Please,” Yennefer looked at her. “What strange sounds float from your beauteous breast, Triss. Ciri, go out and see what lies ahead.”

Triss averted her face, determined not to give Yennefer any excuse. She did not expect it to work. For a long time she had been sensing Yennefer's anger and aggression growing stronger as they approached Rivia.

"You, Triss," Yennefer mischievously insisted, "do not blush, do not sigh, do not drool or wiggle around in your saddle. Or is it that you think because I agreed to your request that I want to have you with us? That I was interested in seeing you spend a meeting with an old love? Ciri, I asked you to go on ahead. The two of us need to talk!"

"It is not a discussion, it is a lecture." Ciri dared to argue, but under the threatening glare from violet eyes, she immediately recoiled, clucked and galloped off on Kelpie on the road ahead.

"You're not going to meet a loved one, Triss," Yennefer continued. "I am not so noble or stupid enough to give you the opportunity, or him the temptation. But just for today. I could not deny myself the sweet satisfaction. He will know what role you play as a member of the Lodge. He will thank you for that with his famous look. And I'll be looking at your quivering lips and trembling hands, I will listen to your lame apologies and excuses. And you know what, Triss? I will faint with delight."

"I knew," Triss grunted. "That you would not forget, that you would take your revenge. I agreed to this, because I was actually at fault. But one thing I must tell you, Yennefer. Do not count too much on fainting. He knows how to forgive."

"He knows what was done to him, of course," Yennefer narrowed her eyes. "But he will never forgive you for what was done to Ciri. And me."

"It is possible," Triss swallowed. "He may not forgive. Especially if you insist. But he won't fly into a rage. He won't lower himself like that."

Yennefer flicked her horse with her whip in anger. The animal whinnied and leapt and the sorceress swayed in her saddle.

"Enough talk," she snapped. "More humility, you smug viper! He is my man, mine and only mine! Do you understand? You have to stop talking about him, to stop thinking about him, you have to stop admiring his noble character… As of right now, right now! Oh I want to grab you by your matted red hair…"

"Try it!" Screamed Triss. "Just try it, you vindictive bitch and I'll scratch out your eyes! I…"

The both fell silent when they saw the cloud of dust as Ciri galloped back towards them.

They immediately understood that something was happening. Even before

Ciri had reached them.

Above the thatched roofs and red tiles, suddenly shot out red tongues of flame and belching clouds of smoke. To the sorceresses ears came a sound like the intrusive buzz of flies, or the buzzing of angry bees. Screams grew stronger in counterpoint to the buzzing.

“What the hell is going on?” Yennefer stood in her stirrups. “A raid? A fire?”

“Geralt…” Ciri suddenly groaned, turning as white as paper. “Geralt!”

“Ciri? What is the matter?”

Ciri raised her hand and the sorceresses saw blood running down her palm. Down the life line.

“He has come full circle,” said the girl, her eyes closed. “He hurt me with the thorn from Shaerrawedd, the snake Uroboros biting his own tail. I’m coming, Geralt! I’m coming to you! I will not leave you alone!”

Before the sorceresses were able to protest, she turned Kelpie and immediately went into a full gallop.

They had enough presence of mind to immediately kick their horses into a gallop. But their mounts were not able to keep pace with Kelpie.

“What is it?” Shouted Yennefer, cutting the wind. “What is going on?”

“You know!” Sobbed Triss, galloping at her side. “Ride, Yennefer!”

They had ridden between the city’s outskirts before they passed their first fugitives fleeing from the city, Yennefer was bright enough to know what was happening in Rivia, no fire or raid of troops, but a pogrom. She also knew what Ciri had sensed, what -and whom - she was rushing to. She knew that she could not catch her. There was nothing she could do.

Frightened people had compacted into a crowd and she and Triss had to slow their mounts to try and get through. Kelpie just jumped, the hooves of the horse knocking off a few hats and caps.

“Ciri! Stop!”

Before they knew it, they were among the streets crowded with people running and screaming. Yennefer, as she rode, saw bodies lying in gutters and noticed bodies hanging by their legs from posts and beams. She saw a dwarf lying on the ground, pounded by cudgels, she saw another who had been massacred with broken bottlenecks. She heard tormentors shout and the screams of the tortured. She saw a woman thrown out of a window to the waiting crowd below and then beaten with sticks.

The crowd thickened, the roar grew. It seemed that the distance between them and Ciri had decreased. The next obstacle was a group of halberdiers, who tried

to fence the black mare in before Kelpie jumped over them. One was knocked to the ground and the rest cowered in fright.

They rushed into a square, which was covered in acrid smoke. Yennefer realised that Ciri, undoubtedly guided by a prophetic vision, was heading to the heat of the incident. Where the fires burned and murder was raging.

In the next street there was fighting, dwarves and elves were fiercely defending themselves from behind a hastily erected barricade, defending a helpless position, falling and perishing under the pressure of the screaming mob that pounced on them. Ciri screamed and clung to the neck of her mare. Kelpie rose into the air and jumped over the barricade, not like a horse, but like a huge black bird.

Yennefer ran into the crowd, but pulled her horse up short, knocking over several people.

She was pulled from the saddle before she had time to scream. She was beaten on the shoulders, on her back and neck. She fell to her knees, and saw an unshaven man, wearing a cobbler's apron, who was preparing to kick.

Yennefer had had enough of being kicked.

From her extended fingers shot a bolt of blue flame, which whistled like a whip, burning the face, torso and arms of the people striking her. It started to smell of burning flesh and the screams of pain, raised above the surrounding noise and din.

"Witch! Elf sorceress!"

Another man rushed at her brandishing an axe. Yennefer shot flames into his face, his eyeballs boiled and them burst, running down his cheeks with a hiss. She relaxed, someone grabbed her by the arm, and Yennefer pulled ready to shot, but it was Triss.

"Let's go… Yenna… Run!"

I've already heard that voice, Yennefer thought. From those lips that look wooded, without a droplet of saliva to wet them. from those lips that is paralysed with terror and shakes with panic. I've already heard that voice. On the Hill at Sodden.

When I was dying in fear.

Now he is dying in fear. Until the end of my days I'm going to be scared to death. Because those who do not break the cowardice, will be scared to death until the end of their days.

The fingers that Triss dug into her arm were like steel, Yennefer liberated herself from the grip with a great effort.

“Run if you want!” She shouted. “Hide under the skirts of the Lodge! I have to nothing left to defend! I will not leave Ciri alone! Or Geralt! Begone! Get out of my way if you appreciate your skin!”

The crowd keeping her away from her horse, retreated before the rays given off by the hands and eyes of the sorceress. Yennefer shook her head, ruffling her black curls. She seem to be fury incarnate, the avenging angel, with her flaming sword.

“Return home, scum!” She cried, leaping at the crowd with a fiery whip. “Run! Otherwise catch fire like cattle!”

“It’s just one witch, people!” A sonorous voice rang from the crowd. “One cursed elf witch!”

“She’s alone! The other has fled! Hey, bring us the stones!”

“Death to non-humans! Death to witches!”

“To the gallows with her!”

The first stone whizzed past her ear. The second hit her in the shoulder and rocked her back. The third struck her in the face. Pain exploded behind her eyes, then everything was wrapped in black velvet.

***

She came to, and groaned in pain. Both of her forearms and wrists ached like crazy. She mechanically fumbled around and noticed several layers of bandages. She groaned again, without words, desperate. With regret that this was not a dream. And regretting to have not succeeded.

“It did not work,” Tissaia de Vries said, sitting next to the bed.

Yennefer wanted a drink, something to wet her sticky lips. But she did not ask. Her pride would not allow it.

“It did not work,” said Tissaia de Vries. “But not because you did not try. You cut yourself deeply and accurately. Therefore, I am now with you. If you did not mean it seriously, if it was just a ridiculous, bogus exhibition, I have only contempt for you. But you cut yourself deep. Seriously.”

Yennefer numbly stared at the ceiling.

“I will take care of you, girl. I think you are worth it. I’ll work with you here. It will not be easy. I have to straighten the spine and flatten the hump. But I also have to treat those hands. When you cut your veins, you severed tendons. And the hands of a sorceress are a very important instrument, Yennefer.”

Moisture on her lips. Water.

“You’ll live,” said Tissaia factually, seriously, even severe. “Your time is yet to come. But when it arrives, you’ll remember this day.”

Yennefer eagerly sucked moisture from a stick wrapped in a wet dressing.

"I'll take care of you," echoed Tissaia de Vries, touching her hair gently. "And now… We're here alone, without witnesses. Not one is looking at us, and I'm not going to say anything to anyone. Cry, girl. Pour it all out. Make it your last cry. Starting now you will never cry. There is nothing more pathetic than a sorceress in tears."

***

She came to, coughing and spitting blood. Someone had dragged her across the ground, it was Triss, she was met by the smell of her perfume. Close to them, on the pavement, shod hooves rang, with a vibrating clang. Yennefer saw a rider in full armour, with a white shield with a red chevron, from the height of his saddle he was whipping the crowd. Stones hurled by the mob bounced harmlessly off on the armour and helmet. The horse neighed and kicked out.

Yennefer felt that instead of an upper lip, she had a big potato. At least one front tooth was chipped or knocked out and it hurt to talk.

"Triss…" She stammered. "Teleport us out of here!"

"No, Yennefer," Triss's voice was very quiet and very cold.

"They'll kill us…"

"No, Yennefer. I will not run away. I will not hide under the skirts of the Lodge. And even though it I am ready to faint with fear, like at Sodden, I will get over it!"

Near the entrance of the alley, on the ledge of a wall covered with moss, had formed a large pile of manure, debris and trash. It was a colossal heap. A splendid hill.

The crowd had finally managed to knock the knight from his horse. He was dragged to the ground with a terrible crash and the mob crawled over him like lice.

Triss grabbed Yennefer and dragged her towards the pile of rubbish and raised her hands.

She shouted a spell with such rage, that the crowd fell silent for a moment.

"They will kill us," Yennefer spat blood.

"Help me, Yennefer, "Triss stopped for a moment. "Help me. Let's cast Alzur's Thunder…"

That will kill five, thought Yennefer. Then the rest will tear us apart. But okay, Triss. I will not run away. You will not see me run.

She joined in the enchantment. And they shouted in duet.

The people stared at them blankly, staring, but quickly recovered. They again

began throwing stones at the sorceresses. Triss felt one whizz pass her head, but did not flinch.

It won't work, thought Yennefer. The spell will not work. We cannot conjure up something as complicated as Alzur's Thunder. It was said that Alzur had a voice like a bell and superior diction. And we are babbling and crying the words and melody…

She was ready to stop the chant and use her remaining strength to concentrate on some other spell, something to teleport them, or to distract the charging mob - if only for a second - with something unpleasant. But it turned out it was not necessary.

The sky darkened suddenly with clouds over the city. The shadows spread quickly. And a cold wind rose.

"Oh," said Yennefer. "It seems that you did it…"

***

"Merigold's Hailstorm," said Nimue. "Basically, the name is used illegally, since the magic has never been registered, and no one has been able to repeat it. The reason is simple - Triss had an injured mouth and spoke slurred and distortedly. Some also claim that fear affected her language."

"I do not believe it," Condwiramurs pursed her lips. "In the annals there is no shortage of other examples of courage and heroism from Venerable Triss, some even call her chronically fearless. But I wanted to ask you about something else. One version of the legend has it that Triss was not alone on Rivia Hill. That Yennefer was also there with her."

Nimue looked at the watercolour depicting a black mountain, steep and sharp as a knife, against dark blue clouds. At the top of the hill could be seen a slender silhouette of a woman with outstretched arms and red hair.

Through the fog that covered the surface of the water came the rhythmic clatter of the Fisher King's oars.

"If anyone was there with Triss," said the Lady of the Lake, "they did not survive the vision of the artist."

***

"It seems that you did it," said Yennefer. "Watch out, Triss!"

From the black clouds over the city of Rivia fell a barrage of icy hailstones the size of hens eggs. They beat down so hard they broke rooftops. They fell so densely that they covered the streets and squares in a thick layer of ice. The crowd swayed, people fell, covering their heads, hiding under one another and fleeing and falling on the slippery ground, rolling about and crowding the

archways under ledges. Not everyone managed to escape, some remained lying on the ice like dead fish, which was heavily dyed with blood.

Hail rattled on the magical shield that Yennefer was able to throw up at the last minute above both sorceresses and threatened to break through. She did not try any other spells. She knew what had been done, could not be stopped, an elemental force had been accidentally unleashed and had to reach its climax. Which it would soon reach.

That was the hope, at least.

Lightning flashed and thunder boomed until the surrounding houses were shaken to their foundation. All beat all around with a devastating effect. The sky began to brighten. From a cleft in the clouds appeared sunlight. Triss made a strange cry or sob from her throat.

Hail sparkled in the sun like diamonds. They were still falling, but the biggest downpour had abated, Yennefer could tell by the pounding on the magical shield, then the hail stopped.

Suddenly, as if cut off. Guards stormed into the street, the shoes of their horses scraped on the ice. The rabble screamed and fled, driven by whips and beaten with the flats of swords.

“Bravo, Triss,” croaked Yennefer. “I don’t know what that was… But it was effective.”

“There was something to defend,” croaked Triss Merigold - heroine of the hill.

“There always is. We better run, Triss. Because it is probably not over yet.”

***

That was the end. The sorceresses’ hail that they had launched at the city had cooled the hot heads. So much so that the army dared to intervene and restore order. Until then the soldiers had been afraid. They knew what they were threatened with in case of an attack by the feverish crowd with a thirst for death and who fears nothing. However, the explosion of the elements tamed the many-headed beast and the army charged and did the rest.

The hail was a terrible disaster for the city. And so, men who had moments ago tried to kill a dwarf by smashing his head against a wall, now sobbing, looked at what remained of his house.

In Rivia all was quiet. If it had not been for the two hundred massacred corpses and some burning houses, you might have thought that nothing had happened.

In the Elms district, next to Loc Eskalott, over which burned a rainbow in the

sky, and the weeping willows reflected in the clear mirror of the water, the birds sang again and the grass smelled wet. Everything looked idyllic.

Even the witcher who lay in a pool of blood in which Ciri knelt.

***

Geralt lay senseless, white as chalk. He lay motionless, but when they reached him, he began to cough, and to spit blood. He began to shake and to tremble so violently that Ciri could not hold him. Yennefer knelt beside him. Triss saw her hands shaking. Suddenly she felt very weak and her vision blurred. Someone grabbed her, preventing her from falling on the ground. She recognised Dandelion.

“It won’t work,” said Ciri’s voice, radiating despair. “Your magic cannot cure him, Yennefer.”

“We arrived…” Yennefer could barely move her lips. “We’re too late.”

“Your magic won’t work,” Ciri repeated as if she had not heard. “Is this what it is worth, all of your magic?”

You’re right, Ciri, Triss thought, feeling something catch in her throat. *We can produce hail, but we cannot ward off death. Although apparently the latter is easier.*

“We sent for a physician,” said a dwarf standing next to Dandelion, in a husky voice, “but he has not appeared…”

“It is too late for a doctor,” Triss said, surprising herself that her voice sounded so calm. “He is dying.”

Geralt continued to stir, coughing blood, then becoming very tense and froze. Dandelion, still holding Triss, sighed in despair, the dwarf cursed. Yennefer moaned, her face changing suddenly, contracted and ugly.

“There is nothing more pathetic,” said Ciri sternly, “than a sorceress in tears. You taught me that. But now you’re pathetic Yennefer. You and your magic, which is useless.”

Yennefer did not reply. She could barely hold Geralt’s head in both of her hands, while repeating a spell. In her hands, the witcher’s cheeks and forehead crackled with blue sparks.

Triss knew how much energy was required for that spell. She also knew that the spell would not help. She was even more confident that the spell would prove powerless for someone who was sterile. It was too late. The spell only exhausted Yennefer. Triss was surprised that the black-haired sorceress was able to withstand for so long.

Then she ceased to be surprised because Yennefer stopped in the middle of

the magic formula and fell on the pavement next to the witcher.

One of the dwarves swore again, the other bowed his head in silence. Triss Merigold still being propped up sniffed loudly.

Suddenly it got very cold. The surface of the lake boiled like a witch's cauldron and was enveloped in mist. The fog grew rapidly, it swirled over the water and stood on the waves, covering them in a think white milk, that stifled and sounds and made shapes and figures vanish.

"I," Ciri said slowly, still kneeling on the bloody ground, "I once gave up my power. If I didn't, I could save him now. I could cure him. I know it. But it is too late, I can't do anything. It is like I killed him myself."

The silence was broken by Kelpie's whinny. Then by Dandelion's muffled gasp.

They were all stunned.

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A white unicorn appeared out of the mist, running light, agile and silent, lifting his beautiful head. This was not just anything unusual, they all knew the legend, and the passage about the fact that unicorns run light, agile and silently. What was strange was that the unicorn was running on the surface of the lake, and did not even wrinkle the water.

Dandelion gasped, this time in awe. Triss felt overwhelmed by her emotions. Euphoria.

The unicorn's hooves rang on the stones of the waterfront. He shook his mane and horn and melodically neighed.

"Ihuarraquax," Ciri spoke to him. "I was hoping you'd come."

The unicorn came closer, neighing again and digging his hooves into the hard cobblestones. He lowered his head, the horn which sprang from his head suddenly blazed with light, with a sheen that dispelled the fog.

Ciri touched the horn.

Triss gasped loudly when she saw the girl's eyes filled with white heat and her head enveloped in a halo. Ciri did not hear her, did not hear anyone. With one hand she touched the unicorn's horn, with the other she touched the witcher. From her fingers drifted a ribbon of flickering light.

No one could say how long it lasted. It was unreal.

Like a dream.

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The unicorn snorted, pawed at the ground several times and moved his head as if pointing at something. Triss looked. Under a canopy of overhanging willow

branches she could discern a dark outline in the mist. A boat sailing on the water.

The unicorn once more shook its horn and began to disappear in the white fog.

“Kelpie,” Ciri said. “Go with him.”

Kelpie snorted. She shook her head. Then obediently walked behind the unicorn. Her shoes made an echoing sound on the cobblestones. Then the sound abruptly stopped, as if the mare had taken flight, disappeared or dematerialised.

The boat was on the shore, a few moments after the fog dissolved, Triss saw it clearly. It was a tatty old barge, formless as a trough in a barn.

“Help me,” Ciri said, firmly and decisively.

At first no one knew what the girl wanted help with. The poet was the first to understand. Perhaps because he knew the legend that he frequently lectured on and sang its verses. In his arms he picked up Yennefer. He marvelled at how small and light she was. He would have sworn that someone helped him lift her. He would have sworn that he felt Cahir’s arms helping. That he caught a glimpse of Milva’s braid. He would have sworn that when he took the sorceress to the boat, he saw Angoulême’s little hand holding it steady.

The dwarves picked up the witcher, Triss helped them, holding his head. Yarpen Zigrin blinked for a second, because he saw the two Dahlberg brothers. Zoltan Chivay would have sworn that Caleb Stratton helped him lift the witcher into the boat. Triss Merigold was sure that she could smell the perfume of Lytta Neyd called Coral and in a haze of yellow-green her eyes saw Coen of Kaer Morhen.

These tricks were brought to their minds by the dense fog around Loc Eskalott.

“Ready, Ciri,” the sorceress said dully. “Your boat is waiting.”

Ciri brushed the hair from her forehead and sniffed.

“Apologise to the ladies at Montecalvo, Triss,” she said. “But it can be no other way. I cannot stay if Geralt and Yennefer leave. I simply cannot. They must understand.”

“They must.”

“Goodbye, Triss Merigold. Take care, Dandelion. Take care all.”

“Ciri,” Triss whispered. “Little sister… Let me sail with you…”

“You do not know what you ask, Triss.”

“Will I ever see you…”

“Definitely,” she interrupted.

She climbed aboard the boat, which rocked and immediately began to move

away from the shore. It disappeared into the fog. Those on the shore did not hear the slightest splash and there was no movement in the water. It was as if it had disappeared, like a ghost.

For a brief moment they saw the small silhouette of Ciri, they saw her sitting at the bottom of the boat as it accelerated swiftly.

And then there was only fog.

She lied, thought Triss. *I will never see her again. I won't see her, because… Vaesse deireadh aep eigean. Something ends.*

"Something ends," said Dandelion.

"Something begins," Yarpen Zigrin finished.

From somewhere on the other side of the lake a cock crowed loudly.

The fog began to rapidly lift.

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Geralt opened his eyes irritated by the play of light and shadow through his closed eyelids. He saw above him leaves, a kaleidoscope of leaves glistening in the sun. He also saw branches full of apples.

He felt the delicate touch of fingers on his temple and his cheek. Fingers he knew. He loved her so much that it hurt. His stomach, chest and ribs ached, and a corset of tight bandages convinced him completely that the pitchfork in the city of Rivia had not been a nightmare.

"Lay quietly, my love," said Yennefer. "Lay quietly. Do not move."

"Where are we, Yen?"

"Does it matter? We are together. You and me."

The birds sang. It smelled of herbs, rosemary flowers and apples.

"Where is Ciri?"

"She is gone."

She shifted and gently freed her arm from under his head, and lay beside him on the grass so that she could look into his eyes. She looked eagerly, as if she would memorise his image, as if to save it for the future, for all eternity. He also looked at her as nostalgia gripped his throat.

"We were in a boat with Ciri," Geralt recalled. "On a lake. Then on a river with a strong current. Among the fog."

He fingers found his hand and squeezed hard.

"Lay still, my love. Lay still. I'm with you. It does not matter what happened, it does not matter where we were. Now I'm with you. I will never leave you. Never."

"I love you, Yen."

“I know.”

“Nevertheless,” he sighed. “I’d like to know where we are.”

“Me too,” Yennefer said, quietly, after a while.

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“And that,” Galahad asked, “is the end of the story?”

“Certainly not,” said Ciri, rubbing one foot against the other, trying to get rid of the sand sticking to her feet. “You want it to end? I do not!”

“So what happened next?”

“The normal,” she snorted. “They got married.”

“Tell me.”

“What’s to tell? They celebrate with a big wedding. They invited everyone - Dandelion, Mother Nenneke, Iola and Eurneid, Yarpen Zigrin, Vesemir, Eskel… Coen, Milva, Angoulême… And Mistle. I was there too, and we were drinking wine and mead. And they, Yennefer and Geralt, built a house and they live there happily ever after. Like in a fairytale. Do you understand?”

“Why are you crying, Lady of the Lake?”

“I’m not crying, the tears in my eyes are from the wind!”

There was a long silence and they watched the sun go down over the mountain peaks.

“Upon my soul,” Galahad said after a while. “It was a unheard of story. Strange is the world from which you came, Lady Ciri.”

She sniffed loudly.

“Yes,” continued Galahad, clearing his throat a few times, somewhat depressed by the silence. “But here in our lands, adventure occurs, worthy of wonder. Take for example what happen with Lord Gawain and the Green Knight… Or my uncle Bors and Tristan… Listen then, Lady Ciri. Lord Bors and Lord Tristan were riding to the west, towards Tintagel. Their path led them through a wild and threatening forest. They continued to ride and keep a careful watch. Then there appeared a white deer and next to it a lady, dressed all in black, as black as anything you have seen in your nightmares. And that lady was beautiful, more beautiful than any lady in the world, well not Lady Guinevere… The knights saw the lady standing next to the deer and waved and she told them this…”

“Galahad.”

“Yes?”

“Be quiet.”

He coughed, and fell silent. Both were silent staring at the sun. They stayed

that way for a long time.

“Lady of the Lake?”

“I asked you not to call me that.”

“Lady Ciri?”

“Go ahead.”

“Come with me to Camelot, Lady Ciri. You have to meet King Arthur, he will show you honour and reverence… I will… I will always love and worship…”

“Get up! Or not. While you are kneeling you can rub my feet. They are hurting me terribly. Thank you. You are very kind. I said my feet! Feet end at the ankles.”

“Lady Ciri?”

“I’m still here.”

“The sun is about to set…”

“That’s the truth,” Ciri bent down and buckled her shoes, then stood up. “We’ll saddle the horses, Galahad. Is there somewhere around here where we can spend the night? Ha! From your look I can see you know this land about as well as me. But no matter, let us set out, whether to sleep in the open or in the woods. Let’s not let twilight catch us near the lake. The night will be very cold here… What are you looking at?”

“Oh,” she said seeing the young man blush. “You’re smiling at the thought of spending the night in a carpet of moss bed under a hazel bush? In the arms of a fairy? Listen well, young man, I do not have the slightest desire…”

She paused, looking at his blush and sparkling eyes. Seeing something there, in his face, which was not really ugly. Something squeezed her stomach and gut, and it was not hunger.

Something is happening to me, she though. What’s wrong with me?

“Do not bother!” She almost cried. “Let’s saddle the horses!”

When they were in the saddle, she looked at him and laughed out loud. He looked at her, his eyes filled with amazement and questions.

“Nothing, nothing,” she said easily. “It was just something I was thinking. Lead the way, Galahad.”

Carpet of moss, she thought, holding back a chuckle. *A hazel bush. And me in the role of a fairy. Well, well.*

“Lady Ciri…”

“What?”

“Will you come with me to Camelot?”

She held out her hand. He held out his hand. Holding hands, they rode side by side.

The devil, she thought, *why not? I bet any money that this world has jobs for a witcheress.*

“Lady Ciri?”

“Let’s not talk about it now. Let’s ride.”

They rode off towards the sunset. Behind them they left a darkening valley. Behind them was a lake, an enchanted lake, a lake blue and smooth as a polished sapphire. Behind them were left the boulders littering the shore. And pine trees on the slope.

That was left behind them.

And everything else was in front of them.

THE END

meet the author

ANDRZEJ SAPKOWSKI was born in 1948 in Poland. He studied economy and business, but the success of his fantasy cycle about the sorcerer Geralt of Rivia turned him into a bestselling writer. He is now one of Poland's most famous and successful authors.

BOOKS BY ANDRZEJ SAPKOWSKI

The Last Wish
The Sword of Destiny
Blood of Elves
The Time of Contempt
Baptism of Fire
The Tower of Swallows
Lady of the Lake