

*Then the prophetess said to the witcher: "I shall give you this advice: wear boots made of iron, take in hand a staff of steel. Then walk until the end of the world. Help yourself with your staff to break the land before you and wet it with your tears. Go through fire and water, do not stop along the way, do not look behind you. And when the boots are worn, when your staff is blunt, once the wind and the heat has dried your eyes so that your tears no longer flow, then at the end of the world you may find what you are looking for and what you love ..."*

*The witcher went through fire and water, he did not look back. He did not take iron boots or a staff of steel. He took only his sword.*

*He did not listen to the words of prophets. And he did well because she was a bad prophet.*

Flourens Delannoy, *Tales and Legends*

## CHAPTER ONE

The bushes rustled with birds.

The slope of the ravine was overgrown, a dense mass of brambles and barberry, a perfect place to nest and prey. No wonder, then, that they were full of birds. Stubborn greenfinches, nerds and warblers chirping, every sound resonated, every moment the sonorous "pink-pink" of finches. Chaffinches warning of rain, thought Milva, instinctively glancing at the sky. There were no clouds. But the finches were calling. We could use a little rain at last.

The place in front of the ravine was an excellent post, giving potential for a successful hunt, especially here in Brokilon, a wild forest full of beasts. The dryads who controlled a large area of the forest rarely hunted, and men even more rarely dared to venture here. Here, an avid hunter of meat or hides itself became the object of hunting. Brokilon dryads had no mercy for intruders. Milva had experienced this first hand.

In any case, animals were not lacking in Brokilon. However, Milva had lay in ambush for over two hours and still she had not spent a single arrow. You could not hunt on your feet here— a drought had prevailed for several months leaving the leaves crisp underfoot, dry branches creaked with every step. Under such conditions, only stillness in the ambush could lead to eventual success and reward.

An admiral butterfly delicately landed itself on the neck of her bow. Unflinching, Milva watched it as it folded and unfolded its wings, looking simultaneously at her bow, a new acquisition, which she had still not ceased to find pleasure in. She was an archer by trade, she loved a good weapon, and that weapon which she held was the best of the best.

Milva had used many bows in her lifetime. She had learned to shoot from the ordinary ash and yew, but soon abandoned them in favour of reflective laminate, which the dryads and elves used. Elven bows were shorter, lighter and more manageable, and thanks to the layered composition of wood and animal tendons they were also much "faster". An arrow fired from them reached its target in a much shorter time and at a flatter trajectory, which largely eliminated the possibility of it being swept away by the wind. The best examples of such weapons, bent four times, bore the name Zefhar, a runic character created for the handle of the bows' curved arc. Milva had used a Zefhar for quite a few years and thought there could not be a bow that surpassed them.

But she had finally found such a bow. This was of course in the Cidaris Hrakim Bazaar, famous for its rich supply of strange and unusual goods brought by sailors from the far corners of the world, everywhere where frigates and galleons

could reach. Milva whenever she could, went to visit the bazaar and peruse the arches. This was precisely where she had acquired the arc that she thought was going to serve her for many years, a Zerrikanian Zehfar, reinforced with carved antelope horn. She thought this bow to be perfect. It only lasted a year, for one year later, at the same stall, with the same merchant, she found a veritable wonder.

The bow came from the far North. It had a wingspan of sixty-two inches. It was crafted from mahogany, had a perfectly poised grip and a smooth neck with laminated layers of woven wood, whale bones and tendons. It was clear from the other arches lying next to it that they differed not only in construction and craftsmanship, but in price - and its price was precisely what had drawn Milva's attention. When, however, she took the bow in her hands and tested it, she paid without hesitation and without even haggling over the price which the merchant had asked. Four hundred Novigrad crowns. Needless to say, she did not carry such an extortionate sum. She managed to strike a deal and sacrificed her Zehfar, a string of sable – the fruit of her poaching activity, a medal and a marvelous Elven locket, a crimped coral cameo bordered with river pearls.

But she did not regret it. Never. The arch had an incredible lightness and was accurate to perfection. Although not too long, hiding in the composite entwined a considerable distance of wire. Equipped with silk-hemp string and velvet accurately stretched over the protruding handles twenty-four inches, to give the tension precisely fifty-five pounds of power. True, there were arches which gave even eighty, but Milva considered this to be an exaggeration. Fired from her bow, an arrow penetrated two hundred feet within a heartbeat, and at a hundred paces had more than enough momentum to effectively strike a deer and a man if he wore no armor, pierced through. Milva rarely hunted animals larger than deer, or men in heavy armor.

The butterfly flew away. Finches still rustled in the bushes. And still nothing came into shot. Milva leaned against the trunk of the pine, and began to remember. Just to kill time.

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Her first meeting with the witcher occurred in July, two weeks after the events on the island Thanedd and the outbreak of war in Dol Angra. Milva returned to Brokilon after a few days absence, bringing with her the remains of a group of Scoia'tael commandos, who had been stranded in Temeria while trying to enter territory under Aedirn which was already involved in the war. The Squirrels had wanted to join the uprising of elves in Dol Blathanna. They had failed, and if it wasn't for Milva, they would have been killed. Milva had helped them by offering asylum in Brokilon.

Immediately after her arrival she was informed that Aglais urgently awaited her in the Col Serrai. Milva was truthfully a little surprised by this.

Aglais was the prioress of healing in Brokilon, and the deep, full, hot springs and caves of Col Serrai valley was a place of healing.

However, she obeyed the summons, convinced that it was some elf being treated who wanted contact with his detachment through her. When she saw the wounded witcher and found out what he wanted, she flew into a veritable frenzy, running out of the cave with her hair wild and unloaded all of her anger onto Aglais.

“He saw me! He saw my face! Do you even comprehend what that threatens me?”

“No, I do not understand.” the healer replied coldly, “This is Gwynbleidd, witcher, friend of Brokilon. There are fourteen days from the new moon. It will be some time before he can get up and walk normally. He wants news of the world, news of his loved ones. Only you can deliver it to him.”

“News from the world? I think you have lost your mind, dryad! Do you know what is happening now in the world, beyond the boundaries of your quiet forest? The war continues in Aedirn! In Brugge, in Temeria and Redania. There is chaos, hell, great persecution! Those who launched a rebellion on Thanedd, are wanted everywhere! Breathe a single word at the wrong time to enlighten them and you'll be with the executioner and his red-hot iron in the dungeon! And I have to go to spy, to inquire, to gather news? Risk my neck? And for whom? For some half-dead witcher? And you say he's not a stranger to me, but a friend? You truly have lost your wits, Aglais!”

“If you're going to scream” The dryad calmly interrupted, “let us go further into the forest. He needs tranquility.”

Milva glanced involuntarily through the cave, in which she had just seen the wounded man. Handsome, she thought instinctively, though thin as a stick ... A white head of hair, but the flat belly of a youngster, the kind associated with labour, not bacon and beer ...

“He was on Thanedd,” said Milva, not looking for an answer “A Rebel.”

“I do not know.” shrugged Aglais. “He's wounded and needs help. The rest is not my business.”

Milva pouted. The healer was known for her reluctance to talk. But Milva had already had time to hear the accounts from excited Dryads on the Eastern borders of Brokilon, about the events that had occurred two weeks before. About a chestnut-haired sorceress who had appeared in Brokilon in a flash of magic with a wounded man, his arms and feet broken, clinging to her. The wounded man was the witcher, known as Gwynbleidd, White Wolf.

Initially, the dryads had not known what to do. The bleeding witcher screamed and fainted, as Aglais applied makeshift dressings to his wounds. The sorceress who had brought him, looked on, swearing and crying. Upon hearing this, Milva was greatly shocked – has anyone ever seen a sorceress mourn? And then came the order from Duen Canella, from Eithne with eyes of silver, the Lady of Brokilon. The Sorceress read the order from the ruler of the Forest Dryads. The witcher was to be cared for here.

They healed him. Milva had seen with her own eyes. He lay in the cave, in a trough filled with the water of magical Brokilon essences, his immobilized limbs lay in rails and his legs were enveloped in a thick sheepskin and healing vines called conynhael, or purple comfrey. His hair was white as milk. He was conscious, and though people treated with conynhael usually raved senselessly, magic could also speak through them ...

“No?” The dispassionate voice of the healer snatched her away from her thoughts, “How will it be then? What should I tell him?”

“Let him go to the Devil.” Milva growled, tugging at her belt from which hung a pouch and a hunting knife, “And you too can go to the devil, Aglais.”

“This is your will. I cannot force you.”

“You're right, you cannot force me.”

She went into the forest, moving between the pines. She did not look back. She was furious.

Milva knew of the events that took place during July's first new moon on Thanedd, the Scoia'tael talked about it incessantly. During the congress of sorcerers on the island there had been a rebellion, blood was shed and heads had rolled. The armies of Nilfgaard, as if right on cue, struck Aedirn and Lyria, the war had begun. In Temeria, Redania and

Kaedwen, all blame fell on the Squirrels. Firstly, being because apparently the Scoia'tael had come to the aid of the rebels and sorcerers on Thanedd isle. Secondly because Vizimir, the king of Redania, murdered with a stylus, was killed at the hands of an elf or a half-elf. So humans hated the Squirrels. Everywhere seethed like a cauldron, and a river of elven blood flowed ...

Ha, she thought, maybe it's true, what the priests ranted, that the end of the world is nigh and the Day of Judgement is upon us? The world is in flames, and men have become like wolves, not only to elves, but to other men. Brother against brother ... And a witcher, mixed up in this political rebellion. A witcher, who after all is there to protect humans against the monsters that hurt them! Since the world began, never has a witcher involved himself in politics or war. Why, there is even a story of a foolish king, who carried water in a colander, fancied a rabbit as a messenger, and a witcher as a governor. But here you have it, a witcher badly wounded in a rebellion against kings, escaping his punishment in Brokilon. Indeed, it is the end of the world!

“Hello, Maria.”

She shivered. The dryad leaned against a pine, her eyes and hair were silver. The setting sun shone a halo on her head silhouetted against the mottled background of the forest wall. Milva knelt on one knee, head bowed low.

“Hail Lady Eithne.”

The ruler of Brokilon released a golden knife from her belt, in the shape of a sickle.

“Rise,” she said. “Let us walk. I want to talk with you.”

A long time passed as they walked through the woods cloaked in shadow, the tall silver haired dryad and the girl with flaxen hair. Neither interrupted the silence.

“We have not come by Duen Canella yet, Maria.”

“There is no time Lady Eithne. For Duen Canella slips away from the road, and I ... You know”

“I know. You are tired?”

“The Elves need help. So I help them, in accordance with your orders.”

“At my request.”

“Absolutely, at your request.”

“I have another one to make.”

“That's what I thought. The witcher?”

“Help him.”

Milva stopped, turned, and with a sharp movement snatched a twig of honeysuckle that obstructed her path. She

turned it between her fingers, before throwing it to the ground.

“For half a year,” she said quietly, looking into the silvery eyes of the dryad, “I gamble with my own head, I bring the elven commandos to Brokilon ... When they have rested and you have healed their wounds, I take them home ... Is it too little? Have I not done enough? At each new moon I head back on a trail in deepest night ... I fear the Sun like a bat or an owl who ...”

“Nobody knows the forest paths better than you.”

“In the woods I do not learn of anything. The witcher said he wants me to gather news, to go amongst the people. He is a rebel, and to say his name makes the an'givre prick their ears. I cannot show myself in the towns. What if someone were to recognize me? The vivid memories are still fresh in my mind, the blood is not yet dry ... Because, alot of blood was shed. Lady Eithne.”

“Quite a alot” The silver dryads old eyes were strange, cold, impenetrable. “Quite alot, it's true.”

“You know me, I will be threaded to a stake.”

“You are prudent. You are careful and vigilant.”

“The news that the witcher asked about, you can forget vigilance, I will need to ask questions. But these days it is too dangerous to show even curiosity. If they catch me ...”

“You have contacts.”

“They will torture me. Kill me. Or I will rot in Drakenborg ...”

“You are indebted to me.”

Milva turned her head, biting her lips.

“Yes,” she said bitterly. “I am not able to forget.”

She closed her eyes, her face suddenly contracted, her mouth quivering, her teeth firmly clenched. Under her pale eyelids, adorned with moon glow, shone ghostly memories of that night. Again the sudden pain in the ankle, trapped in the leather loop, pain shooting through her joints, torn by the pulling. The violent quake of the trees ringing in her ears ... Cries, moans, wild and frantic, the panicked feeling and terror that descended on her, when she realized that she could not break free ... Screams and fear, horsetail rope, rough dark and twisted, the swinging, unnatural, inverted earth, inverted sky, trees, inverted corners, pain, the blood in her temples pulsating ...

And at dawn, dryads round a ring of flowers ... Distant silvery laughter ... A puppet on a string! Swing, swing puppet, head down ... And her own cries, so pervasive, so alien. And then darkness.

“True, I have a debt” through clenched teeth she repeated. “ Yes, I was saved by your generous hands that cut the deadly rope. Whilst I live, I see, I have not payed off this debt.”

“Everyone has some debt,” said Eithne. “Such is life, Maria Barring. Debts and claims, obligations,

acknowledgements, payments ... Doing something for someone. Or maybe for yourself? Because in reality, you always pay yourself, not others. Every debt is repaid to ourselves. In each of us lies both creditor and debtor. What matters is that we agreed to this bill. We come into the world with a pinch of life given to us then all we do is get and repay debts. To ourselves. For ourselves. To that end, the account is settled.”

“This man ... the witcher ... is he close to you, Lady Eithne?”

“Yes. Although he does not know it. Return to the Col Serrai, Maria Barring. Go now, and do what he asks.”

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From a mound of brush, a twig snapped. The birds launched their furious noise, "Check-check". The magpies and finches broke into flight, their tail feathers flashing white. Milva gasped. Finally.

“Check-check,” called a magpie. “Check-check-check.” Again, a twig snapped.

Milva adjusted the worn to a shine leather protector on her left forearm, held together with a bunch of grips attached to a loop. She plunged a hand into the quiver on her thigh. Instinctively, out of habit she inspected the blade tip and fletching. The blades were bought from market – she choose on average just one out of ten offered to her - but she always feathered the arrows herself. With most commercially available ready-made arrows, the feathers were too short and arranged directly over the pole, while Milva applied hers to fin in a spiral, lying no shorter than five inches.

She readied an arrow onto the string of her bow and looked out over the ravine inbetween a patch of verdant barberry trunks with clusters of red berries which stood out from the rest of the trees.

The finches flew not far away, resuming their song.

*Come on, little deer,* she thought, lifting and stretching the bow. *Come on. I'm ready.*

But the deer moved away from the ravine, towards the marshy springs flowing into the Ribbon. The young deer rose from the valley. A beautiful beast. At a glance it could weigh forty pounds. He raised his head, pricked up his ears, then turned to the brush and crunched a few leaves.

It was easier to shoot it from behind. If it weren't for the trunk covering her target Milva would have fired without hesitation. Even reaching the stomach, the tip would have pierced the animal and touched the heart, liver or lungs. Upon hitting the thigh, it would sever the artery, and the animal would fall soon after. She waited, not releasing the chord.

The deer again raised its head, took a step, went behind the trunk – advancing slightly. Milva, maintaining the bow at full stretch, cursed silently. A shot from the front might fail: instead of planting in the lung, the tip could pierce the stomach. She waited, holding her breath, feeling the salty taste of the chord at the corners of her lips. This was one, almost inestimable advantage of her bow - a heavier weapon or one less perfect, she could not have held for so long in suspense, without the risk of hand fatigue and poor accuracy in her shot.

Fortunately, the deer lowered his head, nibbling a few blades of grass that sprang from the moss, turning sideways. Milva breathed calmly, aimed for the chest, and gently released the bowstring with her fingers.

But she did not hear the snap that was expected of the ribs pierced by the arrow. The deer jumped up, kicked and disappeared to the sound of dry branches and trampled leaves.

For a few heartbeats Milva stood motionless, like a marble statue of a petrified goddess in the forest. Only when all the noises had subsided, she removed her right hand from her left cheek, lowering the bow. Noting the escape route of the animal in the corner of her memory, she sat quietly, propping her back against the trunk. She was an experienced hunter, she had trotted in from the woods since childhood, having shot her first deer at eleven, and a fourteen-horns stag - an extremely happy hunting omen - on her fourteenth birthday. But experience had taught her that pursuit of a wounded animal was pointless. If you hit well, the deer had fallen no more than two hundred paces from the escape route. If you had hit badly - in fact she could not rule out such a possibility - rushing could only make matters worse. After a flight in panic, a badly injured animal, undisturbed will slow its pace. A hunted animal will race at breakneck speed and not slow down for quite some time.

She had half an hour at least. She stuck between her teeth a blade of grass she had pulled from the ground and plunged back into her memories.

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When, after twelve days, she returned to Brokilon, the witcher was already walking. He limped slightly and imperceptibly dragged his leg, but still walked. Milva was not surprised - she knew about the miraculous healing properties of the water and the forest weed, conynhael. She knew too of Aglaia's skills, more than once she had witnessed the rapid healing of wounded Dryads. And, obviously, the rumors about the robustness and the extraordinary resistance of witchers were not fabricated.

Upon her arrival, she did not go to the Col Serrai though the dryads knew Gwynbleidd eagerly awaited her return. She delayed the meeting deliberately, she was still not happy that she had been given the mission and wanted to express her displeasure. She escorted the Squirrel commandos to the camp, and gave a lengthy account of the events that had passed, warning the dryads against the blockade on the border by the Ribbon, organised by the humans. Only when she was reminded for the third time, Milva took a bath, changed and went to the witcher.

He waited for her on the edge of a clearing, where cedars grew. He walked around from time to time, sat down, then straightened himself elastically. It was clear Aglaia had recommended some exercises.

“What news?” He asked immediately after their greeting. The coldness in his voice did not deceive her.

“The war draws to an end, probably,” she said, shrugging her shoulders. “Nilfgaard, they say, practically destroyed Lyria and Aedirn. Verden surrendered and the king of Temeria arranged a pact with Nilfgaard. The elves in the Valley of Flowers have established their own kingdom. But the Scoia'tael of Temeria and Redania have not settled there. They continue to fight ...”

“That's not what I was looking for.”

“No?” she said feigning surprise. “It's true ... yes. I went through Dorian, as you asked me to, although it extended my journey. And the roads right now, are not safe ...”

She paused, stretched. This time he urged her to continue.

“This Codrigher,” she finally asked “Whom you made me visit, he was your friend?”

The witcher's face did not move, but Milva knew that he had understood.

“No. He was not.”

“That's good” she continued freely. “Because he is no longer among the living. He burned together with his work, all that remains is a chimney and part of the wall. The whole of Dorian is full of gossip. Some talk that this Codringher practiced witchcraft and upon brewing his potions he entered into a pact with the devil, so he was consumed by the fires of hell. Others say that he had stuck his nose where it should not be as usual, and of course this would not please some, so they simply murdered him and made a fire to cover their tracks. What about you, what do you think?”

She received no response, and could not read the witcher's face, which was dull of emotion. She continued therefore, and without losing the malicious and arrogant tone.

“It's strange that the fire and the death of that Codringher took place during the first moon of July, at exactly the same time as the riots on the island of Thanedd. As if someone had guessed that Codringher knew something precisely about the disorder and would be questioned about the details. As if they had wanted to shut him up for eternity, before he made any revelations. What do you say? Ha, I see, you say nothing. Since you care so little, then I'll tell you: I will inform you that your little shennigans, your questionings and spying activities are dangerous. They might want to close the mouths and cut off the ears of others such as Codringher. Well, that's how I see it.”

“Forgive me.” he said after a moment. “You're right. I exposed you. It was too dangerous a job for ...”

“For a woman, yes?” She tossed her head, and threw back her hair which was still damp. “That's what you wanted to say? My word, I came across a gentleman! Are you stupid? Although I have to squat to pee, my hood is made of wolf fur, not rabbit hair! Do not pass me off as a coward, you do not know me!”

“I know” he said quietly and calmly, seeming oblivious to her wrath, “You Milva, help the Squirrels to escape death and accompany them to Brokilon. I know of your courage. But foolishly and selfishly I exposed you ...”

“You idiot!” she interrupted sharply. “You should not be worrying about me, but for yourself. The sooner the better!”

She smiled mockingly, because this time, his face changed. She deliberately remained silent, waiting for the questions he was about to ask.

“What do you know?” He asked finally. “And from whom?”

“You had your Codringher” she snorted, proudly raising her head “I have my contacts. Those who have keen eyes and ears.”

“Speak. Please, Milva.”

“Following the riots on Thanedd” she began after a short silence, “Things started to heat up everywhere. The hunt for traitors began. Particularly for those sorcerers, who had sided with Nilfgaard, and also some other mercenaries. Some were caught. Others disappeared, like rocks dropped in water. It doesn't take a great mind to guess where they escaped to, under whose wings they took shelter. But it isn't just witches and traitors who are hunted. The rebellion of renegade wizards was aided by a group of Squirrels, whose commander was the famous Faoiltiarna. He is wanted. An order was issued that each elf caught must be tortured and interrogated about the commando Faoiltiarna.”

“Who is this Faoiltiarna?”



“An elf, a Scoia'tael. He made life difficult for many people. There is a high price on his head. And that is not the only head sought. They are also looking for some Nilfgaardian knight, who was on Thanedd. And yet ...”

“Speak.”

“The an'giyare inquires about a witcher named Geralt of Rivia and a little girl named Cirilla. They were ordered to take those two alive. Under order of execution: it is forbidden to touch a hair on their heads or a button on their clothes. Ha! You must be dear to their hearts as they seem remarkably concerned for your health ...”

She paused, seeing the expression on his face, which suddenly appeared inhumanly calm. She realized that despite her attempts, she had failed to scare him. At least not about his own skin. Suddenly, she felt ashamed.

“Well, their hunt will be futile.” she said in gentler tone, but still with a slightly mocking smile on her lips. “You're safe in Brokilon. And they won't take the girl alive. When they searched the rubble on Thanedd, the magical tower, the one which collapsed ... Hey there! What's up?”

The witcher staggered, leaning against a cedar, then sat down heavily on a tree stump. Milva jumped, frightened by the pallor that had suddenly covered his face.

“Aglais! Sirssa! Fauve! To me, quickly! Damn, death has come for him! Hurry!”

“Do not call them ... I'm all right - Speak. I want to know ...”

Milva suddenly understood.

“They found nothing in the rubble!” She cried, feeling herself now turn pale. “Nothing! They turned every stone and cast spells, but they could not find ...”

She wiped the sweat from her brow, and gestured at the dryads who came. She seized the witcher, who was still seated, by the shoulders and leaned over him so that her long blond hair fell on his pale face.

“You misunderstood,” she repeated quickly, clumsily, having difficulty finding the right thing to say in the rush of words that seemed to be crowding her mouth. “I just wanted to say that ... you understood me wrong. Because I ... How could I have known that you are so ... No ... I did it on purpose. I just said that the girl ... That they will not find her, because she vanished without a trace, like the sorcerers. Forgive me.”

He did not answer. He looked to the side. Milva bit her lip, clenched her fists.

“In three days I leave Brokilon.” she announced softly after a long, very long silence. “By the time the full moon disappears, when the nights darken a bit. After ten days I will return, perhaps sooner. Just after Lammas, the first days of August. Do not be upset. If I must move heaven and earth, i will discover everything. If anyone knows anything about this girl, you'll know too.”

“Thanks, Milva.”

“In ten days ... Gwynbleidd.”

“I’m Geralt. “ he said, holding out his hand.

She pressed it firmly, without hesitation.

“I’m Maria Barring.”

With a nod and a shadow of a smile on his face, he thanked her for her honesty. She knew he had appreciated it.

“Be careful, please. Be mindful of who you speak to before asking questions.”

“Have no worries for me.”

“Your informants ... You trust them?”

“I do not trust anyone.”

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“The witcher is in Brokilon. Among the Dryads.”

“Yes thats what I thought.” Dijkstra folded his arms over his chest. “But its good to have confirmation.”

He was silent for a moment. Lennep licked his lips. He waited.

“Well, its good to have confirmation.” repeated the chief of intelligence of the kingdom Redania, pensively, as if speaking to himself. “It is always better to be certain. Eh, even if it turned out that Yennefer is with him ... There is no sorceress with him, Lennep?”

“What?” the agent started. “No, sir. There is no sorceress. What are the orders? If you want him to live, I will lure him from Brokilon. But if however he fetches a higher price dead ...”

“Lennep,” Dijkstra looked upon his agent's cold, shiny eyes. “Do not be overzealous. In our profession overzealousness never pays. And always seems suspicious.”

“But sir,” Lennep paled slightly. “I just wanted ...”

“I know. You were just asking what my command is. My command is: leave the the witcher alone.”

“At your command. And what about Milva?”

“Leave her alone too now. For the time being ...”

“At your command. May I withdraw?”

“You may.”

The agent left the room, cautiously and quietly closing the oak door. Dijkstra was silent for a long time, staring at the piles of paper on the table, maps, letters, denunciations, minutes of hearings and death sentences.

“Ori!”

The secretary raised his head and coughed, clearing his throat, but remained silent.

“The witcher is in Brokilon.”

Ori Reuven coughed again, instinctively glancing at the table, and leveling his eyes on the feet under it. Dijkstra followed his gaze.

“That's right. I do not forgive him.” he growled. “For two weeks I could not walk. I lost face to Philippa - I had to whine like a dog and ask for her bloody witchcraft, otherwise I'd still be limping. Well, I myself should not have underestimated him. The worst part is, I can't even get my revenge and kick his arse, I personally do not have the time, and I can't even use any of my people to settle a private matter! I can't, Ori, can I?”

“Hem, hem ...”

“No need to grunt. I know. Ah, hell, how that power is tempting! I am itching to use it. It is easy to forget it is there, but if you use it, there are no limits ... Is Philippa Eilhart still holed up in Montecalvo?”

“Yes.”

“Take a pen and inkwell. I'll dictate a letter for her. Write ... Damn it, I can't concentrate. What are those bloody screams, Ori? What's going on in the square?”

“Students are throwing stones at the Nilfgaardian ambassadors residence. We paid them for it, hem, hem, I think.”

“Aha. All right. Close the window. Tomorrow they will go bombard the bank of the dwarf Giancardi. He refused to disclose to me who has accounts there.”

“Giancardi, hem, hem, gave a substantial sum to fund the war.”

“Ha. Then let the students go bomb the banks who gave sod all.”

“All of them gave something.”

“Ah, you're boring, Ori. Write, I say. “My dear beloved Phil, the sun of my ...” Damn, I always get confused. Take a new sheet. Ready?”

“Yes, hem, hem.”

“Dear Philippa. Miss Triss Merigold is definately concerned about the fate of the witcher, whom she teleported from Thanedd to Brokilon. Making this fact a profound secret even from me, hurt me terribly. But you can reassure her. The witcher is fine now. He's even started sending a Brokilon emissary with the task of finding traces of the princess Cirilla, the young one who has so interestested you all. Our friend Geralt apparently does not know that Cirilla is in Nilfgaard where she is being prepared for her marriage to Emperor Emhyr. The witcher must be anxious as he sits quietly in Brokilon, so I will try to send him this news.” You finished writing yet?”

“Hem, hem, “ ...send him this news.””

“New paragraph. “I wonder ...” Ori, wipe the pen, damn it! We are writing to Philippa, not to the royal council, the letter has to look aesthetically pleasing! New paragraph. “I wonder why the witcher is not seeking contact with Yennefer. I find it hard to believe that his affection bordering on obsession just suddenly evaporated, regardless of his political ideals. On the other hand, if Yennefer was the one who led Cirilla to Emhyr and if I were to find evidence of this, it would make me very glad to inform the witcher as well. The problem would solve itself, I am sure that treacherous black-haired beauty would not anticipate the day nor the hour. The Witcher does not like it when someone touches his little girl, Artaud Terranova conclusively found that out on Thanedd. I would like to believe, Phil, that you do not withhold evidence of Yennefer's treason and do not know where she is hiding. I would be very sorry if it turned out, that there is another secret kept from me. I have no secrets from you ...” What are you laughing, Ori?”

“Nothing! Hem, hem.”

“Write! “I have no secrets from you, Phil, and I hope that the same is true for you. With my deepest regards, et cetera, et cetera.” Here, let me sign.”

Ori Reuven sprinkled the letter with sand. Dijkstra sat comfortably, with his hands clasped on his stomach, and began twiddling his thumbs.

“This Milva, the one who spies for the witcher,” Dijkstra asked, “What can you tell me about her?”

“She is, hem, hem,” grunted the Secretary “Responsible for taking the survivors of Scoia'tael groups broken by the Temerian army to Brokilon. She helps the elves to escape, allowing them to rest and re-form into their commando units ...”

“Spare me the information thats already known publicly,” interrupted Dijkstra. “I am aware of Milva's activity, and I intend to gather more evidence on it. Were it not for that I would have thrown her to the Temerians a long time ago. What else can you tell me about her? About her personal life?”

“Originally, I believe, she is from some godforsaken village in Upper Sodden. Her real name is Maria Barring. Milva is a nickname, which was given to her by the dryads. In the Elder Speech it means ...”

“Kite.” Dijkstra interrupted. “I know.”

“She came from a family of hunters and foresters. The family trade was passed down from father to son. When the eldest son was crushed in an accident, the old Barring decided to teach the art of the forest to his daughter. When he died, her mother remarried. Hem, hem ... Maria did not get along with her stepfather and ran away from home. She was, I believe, sixteen years old. She travelled north, living from hunting, but she did not have an easy life in the baron forests, all alone and hunting like a beast. So she started to poach in Brokilon and there, hem, hem, the dryads caught her.”

“And instead of killing her, the let her go,” Dijkstra muttered. “having recognized her as one of them. As for Milva ... she returned the favour. She made a deal with the Witch of Brokilon, with the old Lady Eithne Eyes of Silver. Maria Barring is dead, long live Milva ... How many expeditions did she arrange before you in Verden and Kerack discovered the truth about it? Three?”

“Hem, hem ... Four, I believe ...” although he had an infallible memory, Oriemu Reuven was still afraid of making mistakes, “A total of around a hundred people, among the fiercest of the lot, the scalps of Mamun, were killed. For a long time we could not work it out because sometimes Milva would take it upon herself to prevent a massacre, and by the heavens, the survivors praised her bravery. It was only the fourth time, in Verden, I believe, someone finally slapped himself on the forehead. “How is it,” they so suddenly exclaimed, hem, hem, “that the guide that so often is attacked, each time is left alive?” And thats how she came to be discovered, the tour guide leads, but to a hunters trap, directly under the arrows of the Dryads waiting in ambush ...”

Dijkstra pushed the minutes of a hearing to the edge of his desk, it seemed to him that the parchment still stank of the torture chamber.

“And then,”he took a guess, “Milva vanished to Brokilon without a trace. But today in Verden it is difficult to find volunteers who are willing to make expeditions to the dryads. Old and young, Eithne and Milva make a pretty good team. And they dare to say that provocation is a human invention. But perhaps ...”

“Hem, hem?” Ori muttered, surprised by the prolonged silence of his superior.

“Perhaps they have started to learn something from our methods.” the spy coolly finished, gazing at the denunciations, records of hearings and death sentences on his table.

\* \* \*

Seeing no blood anywhere, Milva became concerned. She remembered suddenly that the deer had taken a step forward when she had fired. Either he had, or he had intended to - which would have given the same outcome. If he had moved, the arrow could have hit him in the stomach. Milva cursed. A shot in the belly, it was a curse and a disgrace to the hunter! Bad luck! Pah, pish, poor devil!

She ran quickly to the slope of the hill, searching intently through the brambles, moss and ferns. She was looking for her arrow. Equipped with a four-bezelled tip, so sharp that it shaved the hair on her forearm, launched from a distance of fifty yards, it would have pierced the deer right through.

Milva saw, she had found it. She breathed a sigh of relief and spat three times, to ward off bad luck. She needn't have worried, yes, it was better than expected. The arrow was not covered with the sticky and stinking contents of the stomach. It did not bear the traces of the clear, pink and foamy substance from the lungs. The tip was covered with dark, rich red blood. The tip had pierced the heart. Milva would not have to sneak or walk on tiptoe for long through the forest. The deer no doubt lay dead in the thicket, no more than a hundred paces from the clearing, where the traces of blood would lead. A deer shot in the heart would die after a few jumps, and she knew that she would track it with ease.

After a dozen paces, she found the trail of her prey, and followed it, re-immersing herself in thoughts and memories.

\* \* \*

She kept her promise to the witcher. She returned to Brokilon even earlier than promised, five days after the Harvest Festival, five days after the new moon, the beginning of the month of August according to the humans, Lammas for the elves, the seventh, penultimate sayaed of the year.

She crossed the Ribbon at dawn, herself and five elves. The commando, which she led, initially consisted of nine horses, but mercenaries from Brugge had hunted them the whole time they walked. Three had attacked about five hundred yards from the river, harassing them, until in the mists of dawn, they began to see Brokilon at the edge of the Ribbon. The attackers feared Brokilon. This saved Milva and her group. They crossed the river. Exhausted, wounded. And not all of them had survived.

She had news for the witcher, and she was convinced that Gwynbleidd was still in Col Serrai. She intended to go to him only around noon, after he had slept his fill. She was amazed when he suddenly emerged from the fog like a ghost. Without a word, he sat nearby, watching as she prepared her bed, putting blankets over a pile of branches.

“What, you're in a hurry?” she exclaimed mockingly, “Witcher, I get tired you know. Day and night in the saddle, I do not even feel my arse, and I'm soaked up to the navel, because at daybreak like wolves, we made our way through the willows in the stream ...”

“Please tell me. Did you learn anything?”

“Yes I did.” she snorted, unlacing and removing her soaked shoes. “With little difficulty, because she seems to have caused quite a stir. You had not mentioned that this young lady was so important! I thought she must be your stepdaughter, she must be one of those poor little unfortunate and abused orphans. And here we have the princess of Cintra! Ha! And perhaps you are too a prince in disguise?”

“Tell me, please.”

“It would seem the Kings wanted their hands on her, because your Cirilla, from what I learned, was saved from Thanedd and sent straight to Nilfgaard, together with the traitorous sorcerers. At Nilfgaard she was welcomed with great revelry by Emperor Emhyr. And you know what? He'd made up his mind to marry her it seems. And now let me breathe. If you want, we can resume this conversation when I'm rested.”

The witcher was silent. Milva hung out her wet socks on a forked branch, so that the rising sun would dry them out, then pulled off her belt buckle.

“I wish you would not stand there with that disapproving look,” she grumbled, “What better news could you have expected? Nothing threatens you, no questions are asked about you and the spies have stopped caring for you. As for your damsel, she escaped the king, she will become Empress ...”

“You are certain this is the right information?”

“Nothing is certain these days,” she replied with a yawn, sitting on her bed. “Except that every day the sun travels from east to west. But what they say about the emperor of Nilfgaard and the princess of Cintra must be true. People talk a lot about it.”

“Why the sudden popularity then?”

“As if you do not know! Think ... she will bring Emhyr a good piece of land as a dowry! Not only Cintra, but land on this side of the Jaruga too! Ha, she may even become *my* empress, since I'm from Upper Sodden and all of Sodden is his domain. Pfft! Then, one day I'll kill a deer in their forests, and I will hang at her command ... fucking cruel world!”

Ah curse it, my eyes are heavy ...”

“Just one more question. From these sorceresses ... That is, of those wizards who had betrayed, some were caught?”

“No. But one of them committed suicide, they say. After Vengerberg fell, and the army marched into Aedirn and Kaedwen. Maybe out of grief or fear of torture ...”

“The commando which you brought had spare horses, will the elves give me one?”

“Aha, I see your anxious to get on the road,” she mumbled, wrapping herself in a blanket. “And I'm thinking that I know where ...”

She paused, surprised at the expression on his face. Suddenly she realized that the news she had brought was not good at all, she didn't really understand anything. Unexpectedly, she felt the urge to sit down with him, to attack him with questions, listen, give advice perhaps ... She rubbed her eyes with her knuckles roughly. I'm exhausted, she thought, death, chased all through the night after my heels. I need to breathe. At the end of the day what do I care about his troubles or concerns? What does it matter? And this girl? To hell with him and with her! What a curse, I've lost sleep over this ...

The witcher stood up.

“Will the elves give me a horse?” He repeated.

“Take whichever one you want.” she said after a moment. “Just make sure they do not see you. The mercenaries attacked us on the crossing, it was bloody ... Oh and do do not touch the Moreau, that one is mine ... Why are you still standing here?”

“Thank you for your help. For everything.”

She did not answer.

“I am indebted to you. How can I repay you?”

“How? You can finally go away!” She cried, raising herself onto her elbow and tugging violently at the blanket to cover herself. “I ... I want to sleep! Take a horse ...go .... To Nilfgaard, to hell, for all I care! Go away! Leave me alone!”

“I will pay what I owe you,” he said softly. “I will not forget. Maybe one day it will be that you will need help, support - an arm to support you. Then call, call into the night. And I'll come.”

\* \* \*

The deer was on the edge of the slope, his glassy eye pointed to the sky. The ground was spongy and damp, densely overgrown with fern. Milva could see an enormous tick planted in the light fawn belly of the animal.

“You will have to find another victim my little critter,” she muttered, folding her sleeves and drawing a knife. “Because this one is already cold.”

With swift, skillful movements she cut the skin from the breastbone to the anus, cleverly bypassing the reproductive system. She carefully split the layer of fat, cut the esophagus and with blood up to her elbows, she rummaged through the intestines and gall bladder in search of bezoars. She did not believe in the magical properties of bezoars, but there was no shortage of fools who believed and paid a good price for them.

She took the carcass of the deer and layed him over a log with his belly to the ground to let his blood flow. She wiped her hands on fern leaves and sat down next to her prey.

“You must be mad or possessed witcher,” she said quietly, staring at the wall of Brokilon pines, their crowns suspended a hundred feet above her. “Going away to Nilfgaard looking for that girl. Going to the end of the world, to stand in fire, and not even a thought to stock up on provisions. I know that you live for her, but does it have to be this way?”

The trees, of course, did not comment or interrupt her monologue.

“I was thinking,” Milva went on, picking the blood from her nails with the knife, “You have no chance of rescuing your young lady. You will never reach Nilfgaard, or even the Jaruga. In this state you could not even walk up Sodden. Your death is already written. It is written on your stubborn face, you can see it in your own terrifying eyes. Death will surprise you soon, witcher. But thanks to this little deer, you will not die of starvation. And that's a good thing. Well ... I think.”

\* \* \*

Seeing the Nilfgaardian ambassador enter the courtroom, Dijkstra quietly sighed. Shilard Fitz-Oesterlen, envoy of Emperor Emhyr var Emreis, had a habit of talking in diplomatic terms and loved to weave pompous language and paradoxical turns of phrase into sentences, intelligible only to diplomats and scholars. Dijkstra had studied at the academy in Oxenfurt and although he had not obtained a master's degree, he knew the basics of the turgid jargon spoken by academics. He used it reluctantly however, because at heart he could not stand pomp and ceremony, or any of that sort of pretention.

“Welcome, Your Excellency.”

“Sir Count,” Shilard Fitz-Oesterlen bowed ceremoniously. “Ah, please forgive me. Maybe now I should say, Grand Duke? Noble and enlightened Prince? Your Highness Secretary of State? Upon my word, your highness, the honors are showered upon you at such a rate that in truth I do not know what title to give you without breaking protocol.”

“The best is 'Your Majesty'.” said Dijkstra modestly. “You know, after all, Excellency, that the court makes the king. And you are probably familiar with the fact that when I shout 'jump!', the whole court of Tretogor asks, 'How high?'”

The ambassador knew that Dijkstra was exaggerating, but it wasn't that far from the truth. Prince Radovid was a minor, Queen Hedwig had been devastated by the tragic death of her husband - the aristocracy, terrified, had become stupid, and was disunited and divided into factions.

In fact, the government of Redania was led by Dijkstra. He could without difficulty obtain all the honors he wanted. But he wanted none.



“Your Highness has deigned to call me,” the ambassador said after a moment. “Without the presence of the Minister of Foreign Affairs. To what do I owe this honor?”

“The Minister,” Dijkstra raised his eyes to a ceiling, “resigned because of ill health.”

The ambassador nodded solemnly. He knew perfectly well that the foreign minister was sitting in the dungeon, and that surely just a swift look at the pre-interview instruments of torture was enough to make him confess any of his collusions with the secret services of Nilfgaard because he was a coward and an idiot. The ambassador knew that the network organised by the agent Vattiera de Rideaux, head of Imperial Intelligence, had been smashed, and that all the threads were now in the hands of Dijkstra. He also knew that these threads led directly to him. But his immunity protected him, and tradition and duty forced him to play the game until the very end.

Especially after the strange coded instructions that Vattier and Stefan Skellen “The Coroner”, the imperial agent of special missions, had recently sent to the embassy.

“As a successor has not yet been appointed,” began Dijkstra, “The unpleasant duty falls to me, of informing you that your Excellency has been considered *persona non grata* in the kingdom of Redania.”

The ambassador bowed.

“It is unfortunate,” he said, “that the distrust resulting in the mutual expulsion of the ambassadors arises from facts which do not relate directly to the kingdom of Redania, or the empire of Nilfgaard. The Empire has taken no hostile action against the Redania.”

“Apart from the blockade at the mouth of the Skellig Islands and Jaruga for our ships and goods? Aside from arming, and supporting bands of Scoia'tael?”

“Those are insinuations.”

“What about the concentration of the imperial army in Verden and Cintra? The raids by armed bands in Sodden and Brugge? Sodden and Brugge are Temerian protectorates, and while we are in alliance with Temeria, your Excellency, the attacks on Temeria are attacks on us. The rebellion on the island of Thanedd and assassination of king Vizimir are also issues that relate directly to Redania. I question the nature of the role that the Empire played in these events.”

“As for the incident on Thanedd,” the ambassador spread his hands, “I am not authorized to express an opinion. Beyond the scenes of his private affairs, sorcerers are foreign to His Majesty Emhyr var Emreis. I regret the the marginal effect of our protests against the propaganda which suggests otherwise. Propaganda enlarged by, as I dare say, and not without the support of the highest authorities of the kingdom Redania.”

“Your protests surprise me. And I am extremely surprised, at that.” Dijkstra smiled slightly, “After all, the Emperor did not conceal the fact that the Princess of Cintra, who was kidnapped from Thanedd, resides at his court.”

“Cirilla, Queen of Cintra,” Shilard Fitz-Oesterlen corrected insistently, “was not abducted, but sought asylum within the Empire. It has nothing to do with the incident on Thanedd.”

“Really?”

“The incident on Thanedd,” continued the ambassador with a stony face, “deeply disgusted the Emperor. And the insidious attack committed by a madman against king Vizimir has awakened in him a deep and genuine loathing. However, it reached its peak when terrible rumors spread amongst the populace, who dare to look upon the Empire as

the instigators of this crime.”

“Recognition of the real instigators,” Dijkstra articulated slowly, “will put an end to the gossip, hopefully. The persecutors will be captured, and justice administered, it is only a matter of time.”

“*Justitia Est Fundamentum Regnorum*,” answered Shilard Fitz-Oesterlen seriously. “*Crimen horribilis non potest non esse punibile*. I assure you that His Majesty also wishes to see that happen.”

“It is in the power of the Emperor to grant that desire.” Dijkstra tossed in casually, crossing his arms over her chest. “One of the political leaders of the plot, Enid an Gleanna, until recently, known as Francesca Findabair the sorceress, from Imperial benches plays elf queen of the puppet state, Dol Blathanna.”

“His Imperial Majesty,” the ambassador bowed stiffly, “can not interfere in the affairs of Dol Blathanna, an independent kingdom, recognized by all the neighboring powers.”

“Except for Redania. To Redania, Dol Blathanna is still part of the kingdom of Aedirn, although you cut Aedirn and Lyria to pieces with the help of the elves of Kaedwen. You have crossed out these kingdoms from the world map too soon. Too soon, your Excellency. However, this is not the time nor the place to discuss it. Let Francesca Findabair hold the reigns for now, the time for justice will come. What about the other rebels, and the organizers of the assassination of King Vizimir? Vilgefortze of Roggeveen, and Yennefer of Vengerberg? There is every reason to suppose that after the defeat of the coup they both fled to Nilfgaard.”

“I assure you,” the amabassador lifted his head, “that they did not. And if they did, I guarantee that they will not escape the punishment they deserve.”

“They have not sinned against you, so it is not up to you to punish them. By delivering them, Emperor Emhyr would provide evidence of his sincere desire for justice, after all, *Justitia Est Fundamentum Regnorum*.”

“There is no denying the wisdom in your request,” admitted Shilard Fitz-Oesterlen, feigning an embarrassed laugh. “Firstly, these people are not within the territory of the Empire. Secondly, even if they were, there would still be a problem. The extraditions would have to be carried out following an official ruling, in this case, by the Imperial Council. Consider, your Highness, that the severance of diplomatic relations is an act of hostility on Redania's part. It is therefore illogical to expect the Council to grant a request for extradition from a hostile country. It would be an unprecedented ... Unless ...”

“Unless what?”

“You created a precedent.”

“I do not understand.”

“If the kingdom of Redania was ready to hand over someone who was considered a felon by the Empire, the Emperor and his Council would have a reason to reciprocate this gesture of goodwill.”

Dijkstra was silent for a long time, giving the impression of being lost in thought.

“Who is it you want?”

“The name of the criminal?” the ambassador pretended to try to remember the name, and finally reached into his

briefcase for the document. “I do apologise, my memory fails me. I have it here. Ah yes, a certain Cahir Mawr Dyffryn aep Ceallach. Undeniably the allegations against him are serious. He is wanted for murder, desertion, kidnap, rape, theft and forgery of documents. Fleeing from the wrath of the emperor, he escaped abroad.”

“To Redania? He chose a long way then.”

“Your worship,” Shilard Fitz-Oesterlen smiled slightly, “he is not limited to Redanian territory. But I have no doubt that if the offender has been seen in any of the allied kingdoms, your grace would be informed of it from one of his ... personal relations.”

“What did you say was the name of this criminal?”

“Cahir Mawr Dyffryn aep Ceallach.”

Dijkstra was silent for a long time, pretending to rack his memory.

“No.” he said finally. “We have not arrested anyone by that name.”

“Really?”

“My memory does not fail me in this instance. I do apologise, Your Excellency.”

“I also,” said Shilard Fitz-Oesterlen icily. “Especially since it seems impossible in these conditions, to conduct a mutual extradition of criminals, I will not annoy your Lordship further. I wish you health and success.”

“Good health and good luck.”

“Mutually. Good-bye, Your Excellency.”

The ambassador went out, after some complicated, ceremonial bows.

“Kiss my *sempiternum meam*, smart ass.” Dijkstra muttered, crossing his arms over his chest. “Ori!”

The secretary, red from coughing and grunting, emerged from behind the curtain.

“Philippa is still holed up in Montecalvo?”

“Yes, hem, hem. With her friends Laux-Antille, Merigold and Metz.”

“Any day war could break out, the border of the Jaruga will explode, and they go and lock themselves up in a wild fortress! Take your pen, and write. “Beloved Phil ...” Damn!”

“I wrote: “Dear Philippa.””

“Good, continue."You might be interested to know, that the oddity in the winged helmet, who disappeared as mysteriously as he appeared on Thanedd, is called Cahir Mawr Dyffryn and is the son of steward Ceallach. Surprisingly, we are not the only ones looking for this strange individual, but as it turns out, Vattiera de Rideaux and people of that son of a bitch ...”

“Lady Philippa, hem, hem, does not like such words. I wrote: "the scoundrel".”

“Fine, the scoundrel Stefan Skellena. "And you know as well as I, dear Phil, that the intelligence services of Emhyr are urgently looking for only those agents and emissaries, who vowed to rip Emhyr apart. Those who were meant to do his bidding in the cities or die, but betrayed him, their commands left unexecuted. Things look pretty strange, however we were confident that Cahir was ordered to capture princess Cirilla and deliver her to Nilfgaard." New paragraph. "The matter raised a reasonable amount of suspicion in me and strange though it may be, I have come up with some surprising theories. However, they are not meaningless, and I would like to discuss them with you in private. With deepest respect et cetera, et cetera.””

\* \* \*

She went to the south, straight as an arrow, to the banks of the Ribbon, and after crossing the river, trekked over wet ravines, covered in a soft carpet of bright green moss. She assumed that the witcher, not knowing the terrain as well as her would not risk crossing by the human side. By cutting through the huge half circle formed by the river, part of which bulged into Brokilon, she had a chance to catch up. Travelling quickly and without stopping she even had a chance to overtake him.

The finches sang, and they were not mistaken. The sky had darkened considerably in the South. The air became thick and heavy, and the mosquitoes became extremely annoying, almost unbearable.

When she found herself in a marshy meadow, overgrown with black alder festooned with naked green catkins, she felt a presence. She heard nothing but she felt there was someone. She knew there were elves.

She stopped her horse, so the archers hidden in the thicket had the opportunity to take a good look at her. She held her breath, hoping she would not startle them.

A horsefly buzzed over the deer carcass, which rested over the haunches of her mount.

Rustling. A quiet whistle. A whistle in response. The Scoia'tael emerged from the bushes like ghosts, and only then Milva breathed more freely. She knew them. They belonged to the commando of, Coinneach Dá Reo.

“Hael.” she said, dismounting. “Que'ss va?”

“Ne'ss,” said elf curtly, whose name she could not remember. “Caemm.”

The others were camped not far, in a clearing. There were at least thirty, more than just the Coinneach commando. Milva was surprised, the numbers of Squirrel detachments had started to decrease. The commando groups she had seen lately were bloodstained, ragged and sickly, barely holding on in the saddles of their weak horses. This commando was different.

“Cead, Coinneach.” greeted the approaching leader.

“Ceadmil, sor'ca.”

Sor'ca. Little sister. She gave this name to those with whom she regarded as friends, to express her respect and sympathy, although they were older than herself. At first, she was known as Dh'oine to the elves, human being. Later, as she helped them regularly, they began to call her Woedbeanna Aen, "woman of the woods". Later still, when they began to know her better, they called her as the dryads did. Milva, meaning Kite. Her real name, which she revealed only to her closest friends on the condition that they returned the gesture, did not sound right in the elven tongue. They pronounced it Mear'ya, with a slight grimace, as if it was akin to something unpleasant in their language and they would immediately decide to call her "sor'ca" instead.

“Where are you heading?” Milva looked around slowly, but still did not see any wounded or sick. “The Eighth Mile? To Brokilon?”

“No.”

She refrained from asking further questions, she knew better. She was content to just watch their faces, immobile, concentrated, noting the ostensible calm, exaggerated, as they organised their equipment and weapons. It was enough to look into their deep, bottomless eyes to understand. She knew that they were preparing for battle.

From the south, black clouds gathered. The sky grew dark.

“And where are you going, sor'ca?” Coinneach asked, casting a quick glance at the deer laid over her horse, he smiled slightly.

“South,” she replied coolly, to avoid any misunderstanding. “By Drieschot.”

The elf's smile disappeared.

“On human shores?”

“At least until the Ceann Treis.” she said with a shrug, “I will skip the route past the Brokilon waterfalls, because ...”

She turned her head when she heard a horse snort. New Scoia'tael had come to join the already large commando. These Milva knew better.

“Ciaran!” She exclaimed, without hiding her astonishment. “Toruviel! What are you doing here? I've just taken you to Brokilon and you're back ...”

“Ess'creasa, sor'ca.” Ciaran aep Dearbh interrupted gravely. The bandage around the head of the elf was stained with blood.

“Yes,” Toruviel repeated after him, dismounting carefully so as not to disturb her arm bent in a sling. “We heard news. We could not remain stuck in Brokilon when each arrow counts.”

“If I had known,” Milva muttered with a pout, “I would not have made all that trouble for you. I would not have risked my neck at the crossing.”

“The news came last night.” Toruviel quietly explained. “We could not ... We can not abandon our comrades at a time like this. It is impossible, you understand, sor'ca.”

The sky darkened more and more. This time, Milva clearly heard the thunder rumbling in the distance.

“Do not go South, sor'ca.” Coinneach Dá Reo said. “A storm is brewing.”

“And what can a storm do ...” She paused, looking at him closely. “Ha! So it's that kind of news? Nilfgaard, yes? Soldiers of the Empire march across Sodden to the Jaruga? They will strike at Brugge? Is that why you are going?”

He did not answer.

“Yes, just like Dol Angra.” She looked into his dark eyes. “The Emperor of Nilfgaard will use you, just as before. Your people protect their rear so they can slaughter humans by sword and fire. And after, once the Emperor has made peace with the kings, they will crush you. You will perish in your own flame.”

“Fire purifies. And it hardens. We must go through it. Aenyel Fhael, ell'ea, sor'ca? Or as you say: the baptism of fire.”

“I prefer another kind of fire.” Milva took the deer from her horse and dropped it on the ground at the feet of the elves. “The one that crackles under a spit. Here, for you will need the energy on the road. I no longer need it.”

“Will you go to the South?”

“Yes.”

I'm going, she thought, I'm going fast. I must warn this idiot witcher, I must warn him of the turmoil he will be caught up in. I have to change his mind.

“Do not go, sor'ca.”

“Leave me be, Coinneach.”

“A storm is brewing in the South.” The elf repeated. “A great storm. And a great fire. Take shelter in Brokilon, sister, do not ride south. You've done enough for us, you can do nothing more. You do not have to go. We must. Ess'-Tedd, esse crease! It is time for us to leave. Farewell.”

The air was heavy and dense.

\* \* \*

The spell of teleprojection was tricky, the sorcerers were to speak with one voice, by joining hands and thoughts. Even then, it turned out to be a devilishly strenuous exercise, partly because the distance was so considerable. The clenched

eyelids of Philippa Eilhart quivered, Triss Merigold panted, and sweat beads ran down the high forehead of Keira Metz. Only the face of Margarita Laux-Antille expressed no fatigue.

The small room plunged into semi-lit darkness, suddenly, a mosaic of light began to dance along the dark wood paneling. Outlined by a white glow, an orb appeared above the round table. While Philippa Eilhart chanted the last incantations, the orb came up right in front of her, on top of one of the twelve chairs placed around the table. An indistinct silhouette took shape inside it. The projection was not very stable, the image flickered, but it soon became clearer.

“Holy shit,” Keira muttered, wiping her forehead. “Do they not know of glamarye or any other beauty spells in Nilfgaard?”

“Apparently not.” said Triss from the corner of her mouth. “They certainly have not heard of fashion either.”

“Neither have they heard of make-up.” said Philippa quietly. “But don't say a word now, girls. And do not gape at her. We must stabilize the projection and greet our guest. Strengthen me, Rita.”

Margarita Laux-Antille repeated the formula of the incantation and gestured to Philippa. The image flickered several times, it started to lose its vague picture and unnatural glow, the contours and colours became more acute. The sorceresses were now carefully observing the silhouette that was facing them. Triss bit her lip and glanced at Keira.

The woman within the projection was pale and her complexion was ugly. She had bland, expressionless eyes, narrow bluish lips and a slightly hooked nose. She wore a bizarre, conical, rather crumpled hat. Thin, dark, greasy hair hung from underneath it. Her robes were loose and shapeless, black with a silver trim, and frayed at the shoulder making her look unattractive and neglected. They were embroidered with a circle and a crescent star which served as the only decoration worn by the Nilfgaardian sorceress.

Philippa Eilhart rose, trying not to unduly expose her jewels, her laces and her cleavage.

“The venerable Lady Assire,” she said. “Welcome to Montecalvo. We are delighted that you have accepted our invitation.”

“I accepted out of curiosity.” said the Nilfgaardian sorceress with an unexpectedly pleasant and melodious voice, instinctively adjusting her hat. Her hands were thin, marked with yellow spots, and her nails were broken and uneven, obviously bitten.

“Only out of curiosity,” she reiterated, “however the consequences could indeed prove to be disastrous for me. I beg you to give me an explanation.”

“I will do so in a moment,” Philippa nodded, motioning the other sorceresses. “But before then, allow me to call the projections of the other participants of the meeting and make a cross-presentation. I ask a little patience.”

The sorceresses united hands again and resumed their incantations. The air in the chamber rang like taut wire from the ceiling coffers and once again descended in a glowing haze, filling the room with flickering shadows. Above three of the unoccupied chairs, spheres of pulsating light began to form, the outlines of the silhouettes within becoming visible. The first to appear was Sabrina Glevissig, wearing a provocatively low-cut turquoise dress with a large, standing lace collar, which formed a beautiful setting for her curly hair crowned with a brilliant diadem. Next to her, emerging from the misty light projection, was Sheala de Tancarville in a black velvet gown trimmed with pearls, her neck wrapped with a silver fox boa. The Nilfgaardian sorceress nervously licked her thin lips. Just wait for Francesca, thought Triss. When you see Francesca, little black rat, your eyes will pop out of your head.

Francesca Findabair did not disappoint. Her dress was the colour of blood, revealing her appetizing form. She wore a necklace of rubies, an ambitious hairdo, and her doe eyes were encircled with keen elven makeup.

“Ladies, I wish you all welcome to Montecalvo,” said Philippa. “I took the liberty of inviting you here to address some issues of significant importance. I regret that we meet as teleprojections, however, due to the times and the distances between us, a real meeting would have been impossible. I, Philippa Eilhart, the mistress of this castle, as hostess and instigator of this meeting will handle the introductions. To my right, Margarita Laux-Antille, the head of the Academy of Aretuza. To my left, Triss Merigold, of Maribor, and Keira Metz, of Carreras. Next, we have Sabrina Gleivissig, of Ard Carraigh and Sheala Tancarville of Creyden, representing Kovir. Then Francesca Findabair, known as Enid an Gleanna, the current ruler of the Valley of Flowers. And finally Assire var Anahid of Vicovaro, from the Empire of Nilfgaard. And now ...”

“And now I will say goodbye!” Sabrina Gleivissig yelled, pointing at Francesca with her hand covered in rings. “You went too far, Philippa! I'm not going to sit at the same table as the damn elf, even as an illusion! She failed to clean the blood from the walls and floors of Garstang. The blood she and Vilgefortz spilled!”

“I beg you to observe the proprieties and keep your cool.” Philippa leaned on the edge of the table with both hands. “Listen to what I have to say. I do not ask anything more. When I finish, each of you will decide whether to stay or leave. The projection is voluntary, it can be interrupted at any time. The only thing I ask of those who decide to leave, is to keep the secrecy of this meeting.”

“I knew it!” Sabrina moved so suddenly that for a moment she came out of the projection. “A secret meeting! Secret arrangements! In short, a conspiracy! And the intent is clear. Do you mock us, Philippa? First you demand that we keep this from our kings and our colleagues, which you have not seen fit to invite. And there sits Enid Findabair, by the grace of Emhyr var Emreis the reigning ruler of the elves of Dol Blathanna, who actively supports and arms Nilfgaard. That's not to say I'm not more amazed at the projection of a Nilfgaardian sorceress here in this room. Since when did the sorcerers of Nilfgaard cease to profess blind obedience and docile servility towards the Imperial power? And what secrets are we talking about here? If she's here, it's at the knowledge and consent of Emhyr! At his command! She is the eyes and ears of the Emperor!”

“I doubt it.” said Assire var Anahid calmly. “Nobody knows that I participate in this meeting. I was asked in secrecy, which I have preserved and will maintain. It is also in my own interest to do so - if my participation came to light, I'd lose my head. For that is why there is such servility among sorcerers in the Empire, they have a choice between slavery and the scaffold. I have undertaken a risk by accepting your invitation. I did not come here as a spy and I have only one way to prove it, my own death. Just break Lady Eilhart's request of secrecy. If the news of our meeting leaves these walls, I lose my life.”

“For me, the betrayal of this secret could also have unpleasant consequences,” Francesca smiled charmingly. “You would have a marvelous opportunity for revenge, Sabrina.”

“I will get revenge in some other way, elf.” Sabrina's black eyes flashed ominously. “If the secret comes to light, it will not be through my fault or carelessness. Not mine!”

“Are you implying something?”

“Of course,” Philippa Eilhart interjected. “Of course, Sabrina gently reminds us of my work with Sigismund Dijkstra. As if she herself had never maintained any contact with the agents of King Henselt.”

“There is a difference,” Sabrina growled. “I was not Henselt's mistress for three years, let alone his spies!”

“Enough of this! Shut up!”



"I agree." Sheala de Tancarville suddenly said outloud. "You've said enough, Sabrina. Enough already about Thanedd, enough about espionage and personal affairs. I do not come here to take part in such discussions or to listen to you spread your resentment and bombard us with insults. I'm not interested in the role of mediator, and if you invited me here with this intention, I will say it was to no avail. Indeed, I already suspect that I participate in vain, and I unnecessarily lose precious time at the great expense of my research work. However, I will refrain from making assumptions. Finally, I propose we call on Philippa Eilhart to begin, so we can finally learn the reason for this gathering. We will learn the role in which we play here. Then, without unnecessary emotions we will decide whether we should continue the show or lower the curtain. The discretion of which we are asked to commit, of course, obliges us all. And I, Sheala de Tancarville, will personally take appropriate action against the indiscreet."

None of the sorceresses moved nor uttered a word. Triss did not for a moment doubt Sheala's warning. The Kovir recluse did not make threats she threw to the wind.

"We give you the stage, Philippa. I ask that the venerable congregation remain silent until you are finished."

Philippa Eilhart rose, rustling her dress.

"Dear sisters," she said. "The situation is serious. Magic is threatened. The tragic events of Thanedd, thoughts that I remember with regret and reluctance, have shown that the effects of hundreds of years of seemingly conflict-free cooperation, can be forgotten in the blink of an eye, when excessive private interests and ambitions emerge. Today we are in a breakdown, a disorder, and we run into mutual hostility and distrust. This is what happens, when things begin to spiral out of control. To regain control, to prevent a terrible disaster, we should take a strong hand to the helm of this ship carried away by the storm. Lady Laux-Antille, Lady Metz, Lady Merigold and I have already discussed this matter and have reached an agreement. Rebuilding the Chapter and Council destroyed at Thanedd is not enough. Besides, no one is capable of rebuilding both of these institutions, and there is no guarantee that it will not be infected by the same disease that destroyed the previous one. We propose a completely different, secret organization that will serve only the affairs of magic, which will do everything in its powers to prevent a disaster. For if magic dies, this world will perish. Just as centuries ago, a world devoid of magic and the progress it brings will plunge into chaos and darkness, it will be drowned in blood and barbarity. All ladies present here are welcome to join our initiative, to actively participate in the proposed secret group. We have invited you here to hear your views on on this matter. I am done."

"Thank you." Nodded Sheala de Tancarville. "If the ladies will allow me, I will begin. My first question, Philippa; why me? Why was I invited? Repeatedly, I rejected my candidacy for the Chapter, and I refused a chair on the Council. Firstly, my work consumes me. Secondly, I thought then and still think that there are, in Kovir, Hengfors and Poviss others, more deserving of these honors. I ask, why I was invited here and not Carduin? Not Istredd of Aedd Gynvael, Tugdual or Zangenis?"

"Because they are men." said Philippa. "The organization, which I have mentioned should be composed exclusively of women. And you Assire?"

"I withdraw my question." The Nilfgaardian sorceress smiled. "It was the same as Lady de Tancarville's. The answer satisfied me."

"This smacks of feminist chauvinism." sneered Sabrina Glevissig. "Especially from your mouth, Philippa, after your change of ... sexual orientation. I have nothing against men. In fact, I love men, and life without them I can not imagine. But ... After a moment's thought ... I believe this to be a wise concept. Men are mentally unstable, too sensitive to their emotions and you can not count on them in times of crisis."

"It is true." admitted Margarita Laux-Antille calmly. "We constantly compare the results of the of the Aretuza adepts to those boys from the school in Ban Ard and the comparison falls invariably in favour of the girls. Magic requires patience, delicacy, intelligence, common sense and tenacity. It needs one to bear calmly and humbly their setbacks and failures. Men lose to ambition. They always want what they know is impossible and unattainable, and they do not notice what is possible."

"Enough, enough, enough." Sheala pouted, though not hiding her smile. "There is nothing worse than scientifically

manufactured chauvinism, shame on you, Rita! Although ... I agree also with the unisex structure of the proposed convention ... or, if preferred, Lodge. As we understand this is for the future of magic, and magic is too serious a matter to entrust its fate to men."

"If I may," Francesca Findabair said in her melodious voice, "I would like us to stop the rambling speculation about the nature of the domination of our gender, this harbours no discussion. Let us instead focus on matters relating to the proposed initiative, the purpose of which is still not entirely clear to me. The timing is not accidental, and is clearly related to the war. Nilfgaard has invaded and forced the Northern Kingdoms to the wall. So behind the vague slogans that I have heard, is hidden understandably, the desire to reverse the situation and defeat Nilfgaard? And then to skin the audacious elves? If so, Philippa, we do not find common ground."

"Is this the reason why I have been invited here?" Asked Assire var Anahid. "I do not devote much attention to politics, but I know that the Imperial army has the advantage over your troops. Aside from Lady Francesca and Madame de Tancarville coming from a neutral kingdom, all the ladies represent kingdoms which are hostile to the Nilfgaardian Empire. Do you expect me to see this magic word of solidarity, as an incentive for treason? I'm sorry, but I do not see myself in that role."

Having finished her speech, Assire leant, as if to lay her hand on something that was not in the projection. Triss thought she heard meowing.

"She has a cat!" whispered Keira Metz. "I bet he's black ..."

"Not so loud." Philippa hissed. "Dear Francesca, dear Assire. Our initiative should be absolutely apolitical, that is its basic premise. We will not be guided by the interests of races, kingdoms, kings and emperors, but the good magic and its future."

"Driven by the good magic," Sabrina Gleivissig smiled mockingly, "but still forgetting to ensure the welfare of witches? And yet we know how our fellow sorcerers are treated in Nilfgaard. We talk of being apolitical, but when Nilfgaard wins and we find ourselves under Imperial power, we will all look like ..."

Triss moved uneasily, Philippa let out a barely audible sigh. Keira looked down, Sheala pretended to adjust her boa. Francesca bit her lip. Assire var Anahid's face did not flinch, but was covered with a slight blush.

"I just wanted to say ... It's a sad fate that awaits us all." Sabrina finished quickly. "Philippa, Triss and I, all three of us were at Sodden Hill. Emhyr will make us pay, as we will pay for Thanedd, and for the entirety of our involvement. But this is just one of the reservations that stops me from agreeing to the declared political neutrality of the convention. Does participation in it mean the immediate resignation of the active and political, after all, service that we act in now with our kings? Or will we remain in this service and serve two masters at once: magic and power?"

"When someone tells me that he is apolitical," Francesca smiled, "I always ask which of the policies he is referring to."

"And you know for certain he does not mean the one that he follows." said Assire var Anahid, looking at Philippa.

"I am apolitical," Margarita Laux-Antille raised her head. "And my school is apolitical. I mean all political types that exist!"

"Dear ladies," Sheala spoke. She had remained silent for a long time. "Remember that you are the superior sex. So do not behave like girls who are fighting over bowl of sweet treats on the table. The principal proposed by Philippa is clear. At least to me, and I still don't have enough reason to consider you to be less keen of mind than I am. Outside of this room, be who you want, and serve whom you want and for whatever reason you choose to, as faithfully as you wish. But when the convention is gathered, we will deal exclusively with magic and its future."

“This is exactly how I imagine it.” Philippa Eilhart confirmed. “I know that there are many problems, as well as doubts and ambiguities. We will discuss them at the next meeting in which all will take part, not as a projection or illusion, but in their own person. Your presence will be regarded not as a formal act of accession to the convention, but as a goodwill gesture. We will decide together whether such a convention should be created. All of us. Fairly.”

“All of us?” Sheala repeated. “I see empty chairs, I assume they are not there by chance?”

“The agreement should have twelve sorceresses. I would like Lady Assire to propose a candidate who should be present at our next meeting. Surely the Empire of Nilfgaard has another worthy sorceress. The second place I leave to you to cast, Francesca, because as the only pure-blood elf you should not feel isolated. The third ...”

Enid an Gleanna raised her head.

“Please, I ask that you give me two places. I have two candidates.”

“Are any of the Ladies opposed to this request? No? Neither do I object. Today is the fifth day of August, the fifth day after the new moon. We will meet again on the second day after the full moon, dear sisters, in fourteen days.”

“One moment,” interrupted Sheala de Tancarville. “One seat remains empty. Who will be the twelfth sorceress?”

“This will be the first problem that will face the Lodge.” Philippa smiled mysteriously. “In two weeks I will tell you who should sit on the twelfth chair. And then together we will work out how to bring that person here. The identity of this candidate may surprise you. For this is no ordinary person, my dear sisters. It is Life or Death, Destruction or Rebirth, Order or Chaos. It depends on how you look at it.”

\* \* \*

The entire village came out en masse to the fence to watch the passage of the gang. Tuzik went along with the others. He had work to do, but he could not resist. Recently, there had been much news of the rats. Even a rumor circulated that they had all been captured and hanged, but the rumor was false, as the evidence demonstrated. There they paraded right now, ostensibly, unhurried, before the whole village.

“Insolent rogues.” Someone whispered in awe behind Tuzika. “They strut right through the village ...”

“Dressed as if for a wedding ...”

“And what horses! You will see no horses like that in Nilfgaard!”

“Bah, they were stolen! The Rats steal everyones horses. Today it is easy to sell a nag anywhere. But they keep the best for themse ...”

“This one at the front, look at him, he's Giselher ... Sort of their leader.”

“And the one on the chestnut next to him is an elf ... Spark's her name ...”

A mongrel emerged from behind the fence and began to bark, he bounced around the front hooves of Spark's mare. The elf shook her lush mane of dark hair, turned her horse, leaned heavily and lashed the dog with her whip. The mut yelped in pain and turned three times on the spot. Spark spat at him. Tuzik muttered a curse between his teeth.

The villagers around him whispered continuously, discreetly pointing to the next Rat riding through the village. Tuzik listened, he couldn't help it. He knew the gossip and hearsay no worse than others. He easily guessed that the one with the straw-colored hair down to his shoulders, biting an apple, was Kayleigh, the one with the broad-shoulders was Asse, and the one in the embroidered sheepskin was Reef.

Two girls followed at the end of the parade, riding side by side holding hands. The tallest one, sitting on a bay horse, had a shaved head like a typhus victim, her unbuttoned jacket revealed her pristine white lace blouse, her necklace, bracelets and earrings threw dazzling reflections.

“The shaved one is Mistle ...” Tuzik heard. “She's hung with baubles like a Christmas tree at Yule.”

“They say that she has slaughtered more people than she has seen springs ...”

“And the other? The one with a sword on her back?”

“Falka's her name. She's ridden with The Rats since the summer. She's the newcomer ...”

The newcomer, assessed Tuzik, was not much older than his daughter, Milenka. The ash-blond hair of the young rogue fell in wisps from under her red velvet beret, topped with a bouquet of pheasant feathers that protruded arrogantly. Around her neck she wore a silk scarf of burning poppy colour, tied in a fancy bow.

Among the villagers who had come out of their cottages, commotion suddenly erupted. Giselher, had stopped his horse, and condescendingly tossed a tinkling pouch of coins at the foot of Grandmother Mykitka, who was leaning on her cane.

“May the gods keep you, my little darling!” Grandmother Mykitka wailed. “May you be healthy, our guardians, that ...”

The noise of Sparks laughter drowned out the old woman's voice.

The elf rakishly supporting her right foot in the stirrup, reached for a bag and poured a handful of coins headlong into the crowd. Asse and Reef followed her example. A shower of silver fell onto the sandy road. Kayleigh, chortling, launched his half-eaten apple into the swirling crowd.

“Benefactors!”

“Little hawks!”

“May fate be kind to you!”

Tuzik did not run like the others, he would not fall on his knees to dig coins out of the sand and chicken shit. He stood still by the fence, looking at the two girls passing slowly.

The younger girl, with the ashen hair, caught his eye and saw his facial expression. She let go of the hand of the girl with the shaven head, urged her horse and rushed at him, driving him against the fence and almost touching him with her stirrup. He saw her green eyes and shuddered. They were cold, full of evil and hatred.

“Leave him Falka,” called the shaven headed girl. “It is pointless.”

The green-eyed bandit was content to take one last look at Tuzik, then followed the Rats without even turning her head.

“Guardians!”

“Little hawks!”

Tuzik spat.

By mid afternoon, the Blacks, the menacing cavalry from the fort at Fen Aspra descended upon the village. Their horseshoes rumbled, the horses whinnied, rattling their weapons. The mayor and the other villagers questioned, lied like madmen, and directed the soldiers in the pursuit of a false trail. Fortunately, no one questioned Tuzik.

When he returned home from the pasture and went to the garden, he heard voices. He recognized the chattering of the twins Stelmach and Zgarba, the broken falsetto of the neighbours children. Then he heard the voice of Milenka. They must be playing, he thought. He came out from behind the woodshed. He froze.

“Milenka!”

Milenka, his only living daughter, the apple of his eye, hung a stick round her back by a string, posing as a sword. She had let her hair free, clinging to her woolly hat with a rooster feather sticking out, round her neck her mother's scarf ... In a bizarre, fanciful bow.

Her eyes were green.

Tuzik had never beaten his daughter, he had never used the father's strap.

It was the first time.

\* \* \*

On the horizon there was a flash of lightening, and a thunderous roar erupted. A gust of wind harrowed the surface of the Ribbon. There will be a storm, thought, Milva, and rain comes after a storm. The finches were not wrong. She spurred her horse on. If she wanted to catch up with the witcher before the storm, she had to hurry.

*"I have known many soldiers in my life. Marshals, generals and voivods, winners of many campaigns and many battles. I listened to their stories and memories. I saw them, looking at their maps, drawing lines of different colors, making plans, developing strategies. In this war on paper, everything worked, everything was clear and took place in an ordered fashion. "It must be so," explained the military. "The army is all about order and discipline. The army can not exist without these two pillars."*

*It is all the more surprising then, that real war - and I have known more than one! - In terms of order and discipline, is not dissimilar to a brothel engulfed in fire.*

Dandelion, *Half a century of poetry*

## CHAPTER TWO

Ribbons of crystal clear water poured over the edge of the escarpment in a gentle arc, falling into a roaring and foaming cascade among the rocks, as black as onyx, before breaking onto them and disappearing among the white surf, which poured into an vast sheet of water so transparent that you could see every pebble, every braid of green seaweed waving in the current against a background of multicoloured mosaic.

Both banks were lined in a carpet of knotweed, among which a dipper bustled, splashing and proudly exposing the white ruffles on her neck. Over the knotweed, bushes shimmered with green hues, looking brown and ochre on the background of spruce trees, which seemed to be sprinkled with silver powder.

"Truly," Dandelion sighed. "It is beautiful here."

A great dark trout tried to jump over the threshold of the waterfall. For a moment it hung, suspended in the air, waving its sweeping tail fins before falling heavily into the roaring foam.

The darkening sky was suddenly shattered with a streak of forked lightning in the South, a hollow echo of distant thunder rolled across the wall of the forest. The witcher's bay mare danced, pulled her head, and bared her teeth, trying to spit out the bit. Geralt firmly tightened his grip on the reins, and the mare snapped her hooves, her horseshoes ringing on the stones, and continued to prance backwards.

"Ho! Hooo! Did you see her, Dandelion? She is a dancer! Damn, I look forward to the first opportunity I have to get rid of this animal! May it die, I'd even exchange it for an ass!"

"And you consider that a possibility any time soon?" The poet scratched his neck, which was itchy from mosquito bites. "The wild landscape of this valley provides an unparalleled aesthetic, but for variety, I'd be happy with the aesthetics of any cosy tavern. Soon it will be one week that I have admired the romantic nature, landscapes and distant horizons. I miss the interiors. Especially those which give a hot meal and a cold beer."

"Naturally, you will pine over this for some time." The witcher turned in his saddle. "You can ease your pain knowing that I am a little homesick for civilisation too. As you know, I was stuck in Brokilon for exactly thirty-six days. And as many nights, during which the romantic nature froze my arse, crawled down my back and settled its dew on my nose ... Hooo! Damn this mare! Will you finally cease your tantrum?"

“She was bitten by horseflies. The bugs have grown fierce and bloodthirsty, as often happens before a storm. The thunder and flashes in the South are more frequent.”

“I noticed.” The witcher looked at the sky, holding his horse which was still dancing. “The wind has also changed, it smells of the sea. The weather will change, no doubt. We're going. Hurry your fat little gelding, Dandelion.”

“My horse is called Pegasus.”

“As if it could be anything else. You know what? We should also give my elvish mare a name. Hmmm ...”

“How about Roach?” Laughed the troubadour.

“Roach.” The witcher agreed. “Very nice.”

“Geralt?”

“Tell me.”

“Have you ever had a horse called Roach?”

“No.” The witcher said after a moment's thought. “I have not. Hurry your lazy Pegasus, Dandelion. We have a long road ahead of us.”

“Of course.” The poet growled. “How many miles is Nilfgaard, according to you?”

“A lot.”

“Will we arrive before winter?”

“First we'll get to Verden. There we can discuss ... certain matters.”

“What? Do not try and get rid of me! I'll keep you company, that's what I decided!”

“We'll see. As I said, we have to go through Verden.”

“Is it far? Do you know these areas?”

“I do know them. We are next to the waterfall of Ceann Treise, ahead of us is a place called the Seventh Mile. The hills beyond the river are the Hills of the Owl.”

“And we are going South, over the river? The Ribbon joins the Yaruga near a fortress somewhere in the vicinity of Bodrog ...”

“We will go South, by the bank. Where the Ribbon tapes toward the West, we'll go through the forests. I want to get

to a place called Drieschot, or the Triangle. There, the borders of Verden, Brugge and Brokilon converge.”

“And from there?”

“We'll go over the Yaruga, to the mouth. To Cintra.”

“And then?”

“And then we'll see. If at all possible, you could force your slothful Pegasus to go at a slightly faster pace.”

The rain caught up with them during the crossing, in the middle of the river. First, a violent gale sprang up, its squalls like those of a hurricane, tugging their hair and clothes, and slashing their faces with leaves and sticks torn from trees along the riverbank. They spurred their horses towards the shore with cries and blows, as water foamed around their horses hooves. As they neared the other side, the wind ceased suddenly and a grey curtain of rain fell before them. The surface of the Ribbon began to crack and boil as if someone threw billions of lead pellets from the sky.

Upon reaching the shore with great difficulty, they were transfixed by the violent downpour that had descended upon them. They hastened to seek refuge in the woods. The trees formed a canopy over their heads in a dense, green roof, however it could not protect them against such a torrent. The rain quickly soaked the leaves, the branches bowed and after a while, it was raining in the forest just as much as it was out in the open.

They wrapped themselves in layers, and put on their hoods. Among the trees there was darkness, pierced only by the lightning, which came more and more. The storm raged without end, without interruption, and in a deafening roar. Roach, who was frightened, stamped and danced. Pegasus kept an imperturbable calm.

“Geralt!” Yelled Dandelion, trying to shout another thunder clap, rolling through the forest like a giant wagon. “Let us go! Let's seek shelter somewhere!”

“Where?” the witcher replied loudly. “Ride!”

They advanced.

After a while the rain subsided significantly, the wind sounded again in the trees, the crackling thunder ceased to bore their ears. They found themselves amongst a trail of dense alder, then came to a clearing. In the glade grew a powerful beech, under its boughs, on a thick carpet of beechnuts and bronze leaves, was a cart drawn by a pair of mules. The driver who sat on the cart, measured them with a crossbow. Geralt swore, but the thunder drowned out the sound.

“Lower the crossbow, Kolda,” said a small man in a straw hat, turning away from the trunk of the beech, hopping on one leg and buttoning his trousers. “It's not who we expected. But they are customers. Don't threaten the customers. We do not have much time, but there is always a little time to haggle!”

“What the devil?” Dandelion growled behind Geralt.

“Come closer, gentlemen elves,” cried the man in the hat. “Without fear, I'm your man. N'ess and tearth! Va, seidhe. Ceadmil! I am one of your own, understand, elf? To trade with? Well, come here, under the beechwood, it will not fall on your heads so much!”



Geralt was not surprised by the mistake. He and Dandelion were wrapped in grey cloaks that had belonged to elves. He himself wore a doublet given to him by the Dryads, patterned with the leafy motifs favoured by elves, his face was partially covered by his hood and he was sitting on a horse with reins that were typically elven and characteristically decorated. As for Dandelion the dandy, he had already been mistaken a few times for an elf or half-elf, especially since he had started wearing his hair to his shoulders and occasionally used curling irons.

“Watch out,” Geralt muttered, dismounting. “You are an elf. Do not open your mouth unnecessarily.”

“Why?”

“They are hawkers.”

Dandelion inhaled sharply. He knew what they were.

Money ruled everything, and demand induced supply. The *Scoia'tael* that raged in the woods looted valuable items. The spoils were useless to them, however they could trade them for scarcely available equipment and weapons. Thus an itinerant forest trade was born, and with it, came the kind people who like to trade in such paralysis. Speculators who dealt with the Squirrels emerged on the sly, with their carts in the transects, trails and clearings. The elves called them *hav'caaren*, an untranslatable word, but associated with insatiable greed. The term “Hawker” became widespread among humans, and the connotations were even uglier. This was because they were nasty, cruel and ruthless people, who would stop at nothing, not even murder. If they were captured by the military, hawkers could not count on mercy, so they did not to show it to others. If someone crossed their path who they could sell to the soldiers, they reached for their crossbow or knife without hesitation.

Geralt and Dandelion were not in very good position, but fortunately the hawkers had taken them for elves. Geralt tightened his hood around his face and began wondering what to do when they were discovered.

“What bad weather.” The merchant rubbed his hands. “It falls as if someone made a hole in the heavens! Tedd ugly, ell'ea? But it does not matter, there is no bad time for business. There is no good and bad weather, just as there's no bad money eh, eh! Understand me elf?”

Geralt nodded. Dandelion grunted something vaguely from behind his hood. Fortunately, the contemptuous dislike elves had for conversing with people was well known and surprised nobody. The coachman however did not put down his crossbow. It was not a good sign.

“Who are you and where are you from? From which commando?” The hawker, like any serious trader, was not to be put off by the gloomy reserve shown by his customers. “From *Coinneach Dá Reo*? Angus Bri Cri? Or maybe *Riordain*? I know *Riordain* was seen a week ago, he'd sliced the necks of the royal bailiffs circulating the area on a cart, collecting taxes. I'm after money, not wheat. I do not take payment in tar, or grain, or clothes stained with blood - only mink, sable and ermine. But most pleasing to me is the coins, or precious stones and jewellery! If you have any, we can do business. I have first class goods! *Evelienn* - vara en ard scedde, ell'ea, understand me elf? I have it all. Take a look.”

The merchant approached the cart, and pulled the edge of the wet sheet. They saw swords, bows, feathered arrows and saddles. The hawker rummaged through the pile of goods, and pulled out one of the arrows. The tip was toothed and jagged.

“You will not find these anywhere else,” he said boastfully. “Not many others sell them because with spikes like that, if they get caught trading them, the soldiers will tear them to pieces. But I know what Squirrels like, and the customer is king. You cannot make business without taking risks, as long as there is triple profit of course! Back home ... they are nine orems for a dozen. *Aen Naev'de tvedeane*, ell'ea, you understand *seidhe*? I promise that its not a scam, I earn very little myself, I swear on the heads of my children. If you take three dozen at once, well, I'll give you six percent discount! Only on this occasion of course, it is a one time offer ... Hey, *seidhe*, get off my wagon!”

Dandelion fearfully withdrew his hand from the canvas, and pulled his hood further over his eyes. For the umpteenth time, Geralt cursed the bard's curiosity.

“Mir'me vara.” Dandelion muttered, raising his hand apologetically. “Squaess'me.”

“No offence,” the hawker grinned broadly. “But do not look in the cart. There is another, ahem, commodity, but it is not for sale, not for seidhe. That is an order! Heh, heh! Well, here we stand and chatter ... Show me the money.”

Here we go, thought Geralt, looking at the taut crossbow pointing at him. He had grounds to assume that it held the infamous hawker's speciality – a fragmenting tip, which entered the stomach as one, and exited the back as three, sometimes four, mincing the internal organs.

“Tedd n'ess,” he said, putting on an accent. “Tearde. Mireann vara, va'en vort. We'll be back with the commando, then we'll trade. Ell'ea? Understand dh'oine?”

“I understand.” The hawker spat. “I understand that you are miserable, and would like to take the goods, but you haven't got a penny. Get out of here! And do not come back because I have important people to meet and it would be in the interests of your own safety that they do not lay eyes on you. Get out of ...”

He paused, hearing the whinny of a horse.

“The devil!” He growled. “It's too late! They are already here! Hide your faces in your hoods, elves! Do not move or breathe a sound! Kolda, you arsehole, put down the crossbow, and hurry!”

The noise of the rain, thunder and the carpet of leaves muffled the rumble of hooves, allowing the riders to ride quietly and circle around the beech in the blink of an eye. They were not Scoia'tael. Squirrels do not wear armour, and the eight surrounding the tree did. Rain glistened on their helmets, shoulder pads and chain mail.

One of the riders approached the hawker, and stood over him like a mountain. He was already tall, and sat on a mighty battle stallion. His armoured shoulders were covered with a wolf pelt, and his face was obscured by a helmet featuring a large nose guard that reached his lower lip. In his hand he held a menacing weapon, a Nadziak.

“Rideaux!” He cried hoarsely.

“Faoltiarna!” The trader shouted, his voice breaking slightly.

The rider came even closer and leaned over in his saddle. The rain splashed on the steel nose before falling onto the shoulder of the rider and then to the hammer head, which gleamed ominously.

“Faoltiarna!” The hawker repeated, bowing at the waist. He took off his hat, and the rain instantly pasted the thinning hair to his skull. “Faoltiarna! I am one of you, I know the signal and the password ... I come from Faoltiarna, your honor ... I came to the meeting place under this beech, as had been arranged ...”

“These here, who are they?”

“My escort.” The hawker bowed even deeper. “This is what the elves ...”

“The prisoner?”

“On the wagon. In a coffin.”

“In a coffin?” The rider wearing the helmet let out a nasal roar which was partially drowned out by the thunder. “You’ll pay for this! Lord de Rideaux expressly ordered that the prisoner is to be delivered alive!”

“He’s alive, he’s alive,” stammered the dealer hastily. “In accordance with the orders ... He was put in the coffin, but he’s alive ... The coffin wasn’t my idea, your honor. It was Faoiltiar ...”

The rider tapped his stirrup with the hammer. Obeying the signal, three men on horseback dismounted and took off the cover of the cart. When they had thrown the blankets, saddles and harnesses to the ground, Geralt saw, in a flash of lightning, a freshly cut pine coffin. He was careful not to watch too closely however. He felt a cold tingling in the tips of his fingers. He knew what was about to happen.

“Now what shall I do?” The hawker said, looking at the mound of soaked goods on the wet leaves. “You’ve emptied my cart!”

“I will buy it all. Including your escort.”

“Ahhh,” a smile crept onto the overgrown mouth of the oily dealer. “Of course, that will be ... Let me think ... Five hundred if, with the permission of your Excellency, you pay in Temerian currency. But if you pay in florens, then forty-five.”

“So cheap?” Snorted the horseman, a ghastly smile emerging from behind his noseguard. “Come here then.”

“Watch out, Dandelion.” The witcher whispered, discreetly undoing his jacket buckle.

It thundered.

The hawker approached the rider, naively hoping for the transaction of his life. It was to be the transaction of his life ... maybe not the best, but certainly the last. The rider stood up in his stirrups, took his momentum and planted his hammer onto the bald head of the hawker. The merchant fell without a cry, shuddered, shook his hands, and tore his heels into the carpet of wet leaves. One of the horsemen ran to the cart, threw the reins around the driver’s neck, and tightened them, another rushed forward, and finished the job with a dagger.

One rider quickly raised his crossbow to shoulder height, aiming for Dandelion. Geralt however, was already holding a sword he had pulled from the dealer’s wagon. Seizing the weapon by the middle of the blade, he threw it like a javelin. The pierced bowman fell from his horse, still with an expression of boundless astonishment on his face.

“Run Dandelion!”

Pegasus caught up with Dandelion and with a wild leap he jumped into the saddle, but the jump was a little too wild, and the poet lacked skill. He was unable to stay in the saddle and flew to the ground on the opposite side of the horse. It still saved his life though, the attacking rider’s blade cut the air with a hiss over Pegasus’ ears. The gelding was startled, he stumbled, and collided with the horse of the assailant.

“They aren’t elves!” Roared the rider wearing the helmet with the noseguard, drawing his sword. “Take them alive! Alive!”

One of the men who jumped from the cart, confused by this order, hesitated. Geralt, who'd had time to grab his own sword, did not make the same mistake. The ardor of the last two riders was somewhat cooled by the fountain of blood that poured on them. Geralt took the opportunity to kill a second, but the riders were already on his back again. He escaped their swords, parrying their blows, he made a dodge and suddenly felt a pressing pain in his right knee. He felt that he was falling. Yet he was not injured. Without warning, the leg that had been treated at Brokilon refused to obey him.

The man on the ground who was about to knock him out with an axe, suddenly uttered a groan and staggered, as if someone had pushed him.

Before falling, the witcher saw an arrow with long feathers stuck deep into the side of the attacker. Dandelion yelled. It was drowned out by the thunder.

Geralt, clinging to the wheel of the cart, in the brief light of the lightning, saw a girl with flaxen hair coming out of the alder, a bow in her hand. He also saw the horsemen. They could not see her however, because one of them had just went over the rump of his horse, his throat sprayed with crimson pierced by the tip of an arrow. The three remaining riders, including the commander in the helmet, realising the danger of the situation, cried and galloped towards the archer, hiding behind the necks of their horses. They thought that the horse's necks would provide sufficient protection against the arrows. They were wrong.

Maria Barring, nicknamed Milva, stretched her bow. She measured, calmly, with the chord pressed to her face.

The first of the attackers screamed and slipped from his horse, his foot caught in the stirrup, and he was crushed by the shod hooves of his own mount. The next arrow simply swept the second rider away from the saddle. The third rider, the commander, was already close. He stood in his stirrups, and raised his sword to strike. Milva did not even flinch. She looked at her attacker fearlessly, stretched her bow and from a distance of five paces, stuck an arrow in his face, right next to the steel noseguard. The arrow passed through, the helmet dropped to the ground.

The horse slowed to a canter. Without a helmet and a large part of his skull, the rider remained in the saddle for a few moments, then slowly leaned and fell into a puddle. The horse whinnied and ran away.

Geralt got up with difficulty. He rubbed his leg, which hurt, but surprisingly, it seemed to be quite efficient. He was able to stand on it without trouble, and he could walk. Dandelion crawled up from the ground nearby, pushing away the body with the split throat, which had landed on top of him. The poet's face was the color of quicklime.

Milva approached, pulling her arrow from the dead horseman.

"Thank you." The witcher said. "Dandelion, this is Milva Barring. Thanks to her we are still alive."

Milva pulled another arrow from a corpse, checking the bloody tip. Dandelion muttered some indistinct words, bent down in a courteous, though somewhat shaky bow, then fell to his knees and vomited.

"Who is he?" The archer wiped the tip on some wet leaves, and put the arrow back into her quiver. "A friend of yours witcher?"

"Yes. He's called Dandelion, he's a poet."

"A poet." Milva looked at the troubadour who was now dry-vomiting, then raised her eyes. "Well yes, then I understand. I do not understand however, why he is here puking, instead of sitting in a town quietly writing rhymes. Anyway, it's not my business."

“To some extent it is your business. You saved his skin. And mine too.”

Milva wiped her face splashed with rain, in which you could still see the imprint of the chord. Although she fired several times, there was only one mark – the string was always placed at exactly the same position.

“I was already in the alder when you started talking to the hawker,” she said. “I did not want those villains to see me however, and there was no urgency. But then the others came and started all the fun. You knocked down a few, and you certainly know how to shake a sword ... But you are lame, you should have stayed in Brokilon to heal your leg. If your injury gets worse, you risk a limp for the rest of your life. You are aware of this, no doubt?”

“I will survive.”

“That's what I believe, indeed. Because I was riding behind you on your trail to warn you. To warn you to turn back. Nothing will come of your journey. In the South, is war. Nilfgaard's troops march from Drieschot to Brugge.”

“How do you know?”

“Just look around you,” the girl pointed to the corpses of the men and horses with a flourish. “These are Nilfgaardians! Do you not see the sun on their helmets? The embroidery on their trappings? Gather your things, we should take to our heels, there may be more coming from downstream. These men were sent to scout the area.”

“I don't think,” he shook his head, “these men were sent to investigate. They came here for something else.”

“Why were they here then, out of curiosity?”

“They were here for that.” He pointed to the pine coffin lying in the cart, the wood had been darkened by the rain. It was already raining less now and the thunder had stopped. The storm was moving towards the North. The witcher picked up his sword which was lying among the leaves, and jumped onto the cart, cursing softly at his knee, still reminiscent of the pain.

“Help me open it.”

“What are you doing, the dead want to rest ...” Milva broke off, seeing the holes drilled in the cover. “Damn! The hawker was carrying a live one in that box?”

“It's a prisoner,” Geralt levered the lid. “The merchant was waiting for the Nilfgaardians here to give it to them. I heard them exchange a signal and password ...”

The cover tore off with a bang, revealing a man gagged, leather loops attached to the sides of the coffin for his arms and legs. The witcher bent. He looked closely. And once again, more carefully. He swore.

“Hold on,” he said slowly. “Now, that's a surprise. Who would have thought?”

“You know him, witcher?”

In answer to her question, Geralt smiled nastily in full view of the prisoner. “Put the knife away, Milva. Do not cut his shackles. This is an internal affair of Nilfgaard. We should not interfere.”

We will leave him as he is.”

“Did I hear right?” Dandelion said behind them. He was still pale, but curiosity had already overcome his other emotions.

“You want to leave a man bound in chains in the forest? My guess is that you have recognised someone with whom you have a bone to pick, but they are still a prisoner, hell! They were a prisoner of the people who attacked and almost killed us. The enemy of our enemies ...”

He paused, seeing the witcher pull a knife from his boot. Milva cleared her throat softly. The dark blue eyes of the prisoner, narrowed from the constant dripping of rain drops, now widened. Geralt leaned over and cut the loop binding his left arm.

“Look, Dandelion,” he said, grabbing the wrist and raising the released hand. “You see this scar on his hand? Its where Ciri cut him. On the island of Thanedd, a month ago. He's a Nilfgaardian. He came to Thanedd specifically to abduct Ciri. She made this cut, to avoid being kidnapped.”

“This hand obviously hasn't served him very well in defense,” Milva muttered. “Still, something here does not make sense. If this one kidnapped Ciri on behalf of Nilfgaard, why has he fallen into that coffin? Why did the hawker want to sell him to Nilfgaardians? Remove the gag from his mouth, witcher. Maybe he will tell us something?”

“I do not want to listen to him,” he said in a hoarse voice. “My hand itches, when i see him lying there, looking at me. I can hardly hold back. If he starts talking, I will not be able to restrain myself. I haven't told you everything about him.”

“In this case, do what you like,” Milva shrugged. “Hit him, if he's such a bastard. But quickly, because time is pressing. As I said, the Nilfgaardians are not far away. I'll get my horse.”

Geralt straightened up, releasing the prisoner's hand.

He immediately tore from his mouth and spat out the gag, but did not speak. The witcher tossed the knife onto his chest.

“I do not know for what sins they put you in this box, Nilfgaardian,” he said. “I do not care. I leave you this knife, liberation itself. Wait here for your friends or get lost in the woods, whatever.”

The prisoner was silent. Hands and feet bound, lying at the bottom of a wooden box, he looked even more wretched and vulnerable than he had on Thanedd, where Geralt had seen him on his knees, wounded, trembling with fear in a pool of blood. He looked much younger too. The witcher did not give him more than twenty-five years.

“I spared you on the island,” he added. “And I will spare you now. But it's the last time. The next time we meet, I'll kill you like a dog. Remember that. If you want to persuade your comrades to chase after us, take the coffin with you. You will need it. Come on, Dandelion.”

“Come on, quickly!” Milva cried, returning to the path leading West in a gallop. “But not that way! The forest! Son-of-a-bitch! Into the forest!”

“What happened?”

“An army comes from the Ribbon! It's Nilfgaard! What are you looking at? Get on your horses, before they overtake us!”

\* \* \*

The battle in the village had already lasted an hour and still there were no indications that the end was nearing. The foot soldiers that defended from behind stone walls, fences and carts arranged in a barricade, had now repelled three cavalry attacks which had charged at them from the dike. The width of the dike would not let the horses gather frontal momentum and allowed the soldiers to focus their defense. As a result, each wave of cavalry fell apart at every attempt against the barricades from which desperate but stubborn footmen shot at the troops of horsemen with a shower of darts and arrows. The cavalry fired up and swirled, and the defenders fell on them in a quick counterattack, killing all who were left with axes, spears and flails. The cavalry retreated over the dike, leaving the corpses of men and horses, and the soldiers hid behind the barricades throwing the enemy filthy insults. After some time, the cavalry formed up and attacked again. And so on.

“I wonder who fights with whom?” Dandelion asked, though it was hard to understand him. Milva had given him some stale bread and he was trying to soften it in his mouth.

They sat on the edge of a cliff, well hidden among juniper bushes. They could observe the battle without fear of being seen. Or rather, the only thing they could do was watch. They had no other choice. Before them the battle raged, and the forest behind them was on fire.

“It is not difficult to guess,” Geralt finally, but unwillingly decided to answer Dandelion's question. “The men on horseback are Nilfgaardians.”

“And the foot soldiers?”

“They are not Nilfgaardian.”

“The mounted soldiers are the volunteer cavalry of Verden,” Milva said, who had been suspiciously tight-lipped and grim. “They are the ones in the chequered jackets, and those in the village are the soldiers of Brugge. I know their banner.”

Indeed, rejuvenated by their new success, the infantry had hoisted a green flag on the ramparts with a cross embedded in white. Until then, Geralt had not seen any standard, but as he had carefully observed, the defenders had just hoisted one. Apparently they had lost at the beginning of the battle.

“How long will we sit here?” Dandelion asked.

“There you have it,” muttered Milva. “What a question. Look around! If you cannot rotate yourself, get up off your arse and look.”

Dandelion did not have to look or turn round. The entire horizon was streaked with plumes of smoke. In the North and West the smoke was the thickest, where one of the armies had set fire to the forest. The sky to the South, the direction in which they'd been heading towards when the battle had cut off the road, was also black. And in just one hour, in the time they had spent on the mountain, the smoke had also spread to the East.

"Nevertheless," the archer took a moment, looking at Geralt, "I am curious as to what you intend to do now, witcher. Behind us Nilfgaard and burning forest, and lying ahead ... well, you can see. What's your plan then?"

"My plan hasn't changed. Wait out the brawl, then I'm heading South. Over the Yaruga."

"Perhaps you have lost your mind." Milva frowned. "You will see what happens. You can plainly see that this is war, it is not just some playful tour of men. Nilfgaard goes straight from Verden. Going South, they will certainly have passed all of Brugge, and have probably crossed the Yaruga. Perhaps even Sodden is on fire ..."

"I have to reach the Yaruga."

"Perfect. And then?"

"I'll find a raft, and sail with the tide, I'll try to get to the estuary. Then I'll find a boat ... From there, damn it, there must be a boat ..."

"To Nilfgaard?" She laughed. "So, your plans haven't changed?"

"You do not have to accompany me."

"Of course, I'm not obliged to. To which I thank the gods, because I do not seek death. Me, I do not fear anything, but I must say to you: do not be so fearless that you get yourself killed."

"I know," he replied calmly. "I understand this. I would not travel this way if I did not have to. But I have to, so I'm going. Nothing can stop me."

"Ha!" She measured him with her eyes. "Your voice sounds as though someone were scratching the bottom of an old pot with a knife. Had the Emperor heard you, he'd let go of his pants in fear. "To me guards! To me, the Imperial cohort! Woe is me, woe is me! A witcher comes to me in a canoe, he will be here soon, he will take my life and deprive me of my crown! I'm lost!""

"Stop it, Milva."

"Like hell! It's time that someone told you to finally face the truth. Let me never skin a rabbit again if I have ever seen a more idiotic man! You think you are going to snatch the girl away from Emhyr? The girl that he has set his sights on? The girl that he has taken from kings? Emhyr has strong claws, which do not let go easily. Even kings are afraid of him, and you want to take something of his?"

He did not answer.

"You are about to go to Nilfgaard," Milva repeated, nodding her head in pity. "To make war with an Emperor, and to take away his bride. Have you not thought about what might happen? When you get there, when you find this Ciri in her room at the palace, in all her gold and silks, what are you going to say? Come, love, to me, why would you stay here at the Imperial throne, when the two of us can live together in a hut and eat bark till the harvest. Look around you, you ragged cripple! Even the cloak and boots you got from the Dryads belonged to some elf before that, who died of his wounds in Brokilon. You know what will happen when you find your lady? She will spit in your face and laugh, she will order the palace to throw you out and give you as food to the dogs!"

Milva spoke louder and louder, and at the end of her speech she was almost screaming. Not only with anger, but to



outshout the growing noise of the battle. From below, dozens, maybe hundreds of throats bellowed. A new attack had spilled onto the defenders of Brugge. But this time from both sides simultaneously. The cavalry of Verden, in their blue chequered robes, rode along the embankment, while a large detachment of horsemen in black coats came from behind the dike, attacking the defenders at the flank.

“Nilfgaard,” said Milva curtly.

This time the infantry of Brugge had no chance. The cavalry broke through the barrier and instantly spread the defenders with their swords. The banner of the cross fell. Some of the soldiers threw down their weapons and surrendered, and some tried to flee towards the forest. However a third division attacked from the forest, a host of light infantry riders wearing motley uniforms.

“Scoia'tael.” Milva said, getting up. “Now do you understand what is happening, witcher? Has it come to your brain yet? Nilfgaard, Verden and the Squirrels are in cahoots. This is war. As in Aedirn a month ago.”

“It is a raid,” Geralt shook his head. “A raid for loot. They are men on horseback only, not infantry, there is no ...”

“The infantry has already reached the strongholds and assemblies. Those fumes, where do you think they are from? From the salmon smokehouse?”

From the village below, came the wild, shrill cries of fugitives fleeing, and being massacred by the Squirrels. The rooves of huts burst into smoke and flames. The strong wind had dried the thatched tops after the morning downpour, the fire spread rapidly.

“Oh,” muttered Milva, “the village is going up in smoke, and its not long since it was rebuilt after the war. For two years they toiled to build foundations, and it is all destroyed in a few moments. Are you learning anything from this?”

“What can I learn?” Geralt asked sharply.

She did not answer. The smoke from the burning village rose up high, reaching the cliff. It stung their eyes, and made them weep. Screams echoed from the conflagration. Dandelion suddenly turned as pale as a sheet.

The prisoners were rounded up and surrounded by a ring of horsemen. At the command of a knight who wore a helmet with black plumes, the riders began to mow down and stab at the helpless. Those who fell were trampled by the horses. The circle was closing. The cries, which carried up to the cliff, no longer resembled the voices of humans.

“And you are certain we have to go South?” Asked the poet, looking meaningfully at the witcher. “Through these fires? Where there is such butchery?”

“I feel,” said Geralt reluctantly, “that we have no choice.”

“Well,” Milva said. “I can take you through the forests to Owl Hill and back to the Ceann Treise, towards Brokilon.”

“Through the burning forests? So we risk passing the troops, which we barely escaped before?”

“It is safer than taking the road to the South. The Ceann Treise is only fourteen miles from here, and I know the path.”

The witcher looked down at the village which had perished in the fire.

The Nilfgaardians had already dealt with the prisoners and the cavalry had gathered into a marching column. The motley crew of Scoia'tael had started moving, taking the path to the East.

"I cannot go back," he said firmly. "But you can accompany Dandelion to Brokilon."

"No!" the poet protested, though he still hadn't regained a normal color. "I'm going with you."

Milva waved her hand, she picked up her bow and quiver, walked towards her horse, and suddenly turned around.

"The devil," she snapped. "I've spent too much time trying to save the elves from certain doom. I cannot just stand and watch now as you go to your deaths! I will go with you to the Jaruga, you crazy fools, but not by the Southern track, only the route to the East."

"The forests are already on fire there too."

"I'll take you through the flames, I'm used to it."

"You do not have to do that, Milva."

"Of course, I don't have to. Well, get in the saddle! Finally, lets get moving!"

\* \* \*

The three companions did not get far. Their horses could hardly move through the overgrown paths. They did not dare to use the roads, the sound of clattering armour and swords clashing betrayed the presence of troops all around. Twilight surprised them while they were on a trail through a ravine tangled with bushes, and they decided to stop for the night. It was not raining, and the sky was clear, aglow from the fire.

They found a relatively dry place, sat down, and wrapped themselves in cloaks and blankets. Milva went to inspect the area. As soon as she left, Dandelion proceeded to vent his curiosity, which the Brokilon archer had aroused in him.

"That girl certainly likes a bit of action," he muttered. "You're lucky, you have a gift for meeting these kinds of women, Geralt. Slender and graceful, she walks as if she's dancing. A bit too narrow in the hips for my taste, and her shoulders are a little broad, but still feminine, ah yes feminine ... Those two apples on the front, ho, ho ... Soon her shirt will burst open ..."

"Shut up, Dandelion."

"On the road," the dreaming poet continued, "I happened to touch her by accident. Her thighs, I tell you, they are like marble. Oh I tell you, you can't have been bored during the month you spent in Brokilon ..."

Milva, who had just returned from her patrol, had heard Dandelion's theatrical whispers, and felt the stares.

"Talking about me, poet? Why do you stare at me when my back is turned? Do I have bird shit on it?"

"We cannot help but admire the skill in which you handle your bow," Dandelion grinned. "You would not find many competitors in archery tournaments."

"Lies, lies."

"I've read," Dandelion flashed a look at Geralt, "that the best archers are Zerrikanian, those of the Steppe clans. Some reportedly cut their right breast, so that they do not get in the way when tightening their arches. The bust, they say, falls into the path of the chord."

"That is the invention of a poet!" Milva laughed. "He writes that kind of nonsense, whilst dipping his pen into the chamber pot, and only fools believe it. What, we shoot arrows from our tits? We must stand to the side and draw the chord to our mouth, it is as simple as that. Nothing gets in the way of the chord. These stories about cutting, they are an invention of an idle head, obsessed with the breasts of women."

"Thank you for your full appreciation of poets and their poetry. And as for the science of archery, the bow is a good weapon. You know what? I think it is precisely in this direction they will develop the art of war. In future we will fight from a distance. Weapons will be invented so far-reaching, that the opponents will be able to kill one other without seeing each other at all."

"Rubbish," Milva summed up her feelings in one word. "The bow is a good thing, but war is man against his opponent, at swords length, the strongest smashes the weakest. It has always been like that and has no reason to change. If it stops, then all wars will end. Until then, you see what war is like, in that village over the dike. Eh, what's the use of talking in vain. I'll take a walk and look around. The horses whinny like there is a wolf circling nearby ..."

"A beautiful woman," Dandelion gazed at her. "Hmmm ... Remember what she said, when we were sat atop the cliff above the village causeway ... Can you not admit that she had her reasons?"

"Reasons?"

"Relative to ... Ciri," the poet stammered a little. "Our beautiful wench that shoots faster than her own shadow does not seem to understand the relationship between you and Ciri, and it seems to me that she thinks you intend to compete with the Emperor of Nilfgaard for her hand. That is the real theme of your trip to Nilfgaard."

"In regards to this, she is not correct, not even one little bit. So how was she right?"

"Wait, do not fret. But look at the truth. You protect Ciri and you consider yourself her guardian, but this is no ordinary girl. She is a royal child, Geralt. She is predestined for the throne, and there is no doubt about it. A palace, a crown ... Maybe not that of Nilfgaard, I don't know if Emhyr would be the best of husbands ..."

"No. You do not know."

"Well, do you know?"

The witcher wrapped himself in his blanket.

"You obviously have your own theory," he growled. "But don't strain yourself, I know what you're thinking. That it makes no sense to save Ciri from the fate that was written from her birth. Because Ciri, once saved, will be ready to order her servants to throw us down the steps of the palace. Let's leave it. Ok?"

Dandelion opened his mouth, but Geralt did not give him time to speak.

"The girl," he said, his voice becoming more agitated. "Was not kidnapped after all, by a dragon or an evil sorcerer, she was not bought from pirates for a ransom. She does not sit in the tower, in a dungeon or in a cage, she is not tortured or dying of hunger. On the contrary, she sleeps on damask sheets, eats on silver plates, wears silk and lace, adorned with jewellery, and soon a crown. In short, she's happy. And an evil witcher, who once accidentally put a lot of harm in her way, is determined to spoil, destroy, to trample her happiness, with his shoes full of holes, which he inherited from some elf. Yes?"

"That is not what I meant," grumbled Dandelion.

"He's not talking to you." Milva emerged suddenly from the darkness, and after a moment's hesitation she sat down next to the witcher. "That was for me. These were my words that I hurt him so much with, the words that I spoke in anger, not thinking ... Forgive me, Geralt. I know how it feels when a claw is pressed into a fresh wound. Please, do not be angry. I won't do it again. Will you forgive me? Do I have to beg for forgiveness?"

Without waiting for an answer or his consent, she took him firmly by the neck and kissed him on the cheek. He held her shoulders tightly.

"Come closer," he coughed. "And you too, Dandelion. Together ... for more warmth."

They were silent for long time. In the clear, burning sky, the clouds shifted, obscuring the twinkling stars.

"I want to tell you something," Geralt said finally. "But swear that you will not laugh at me."

"Tell me."

"I had strange dreams. In Brokilon. At first I thought it was delirium, something messing with my head. I did after all receive a few blows to it while I was on Thanedd. But even the last few days I am still dreaming the same dream. Still the same."

Milva and Dandelion were silent.

"Ciri," he took a moment, "does not sleep in the palace under a brocade canopy. She's riding on horseback through some dusty village ... The villagers point fingers. They call her a name, which I do not know. The dogs bark. She is not alone. There are others. There's a girl with short hair holding Ciri's hand ... and Ciri smiles at her. I don't like that smile, and I don't like her harsh makeup ... But what I dislike most is that death follows in their footsteps."

"Where is she then?" Milva purred hugging him like a cat. "Not in Nilfgaard?"

"I do not know," he said with difficulty. "But I dreamed the same dream several times. The problem is, I do not believe in such dreams."

"Well you are stupid then. I believe in them."

“I do not know,” he repeated. “But I feel something is happening. Before her is fire, and after her death. I have to hurry.”

\* \* \*

At dawn it started raining. Not like the previous day, when the storm was accompanied by a strong, but short-lived downpour. The sky was dark and veiled by a lead curtain. It started drizzling, finely, evenly, and annoyingly so.

They rode to the East. Milva lead. When Geralt turned her attention and said that the Yaruga was to the South, the archer insulted him and reminded him that she was the guide and she knew what she was doing. They spoke no more. In the end, it was important that they made progress, the direction was not significant.

They rode in silence, wet, cold, shrinking in their saddles. They kept to the forest paths, moving adjacent to the roads, cutting off the highways. As they travelled in the thicket, they heard hooves and the clatter of armour on the road. They avoided the tumult of battle roars in a wide arc. They passed villages devoured by fire, reduced to smoking red rubble, and settlements which had not been more than squares of scorched black earth, smothered in the acidic stench of debris washed by rain. Frightened flocks of crows fed on corpses. They passed groups of villagers bent under the weight of their packs, fleeing the war and escaping their burned homes, only responding with their dull, mute faces, painted in disbelief, their eyes empty, full of terror and misery.

They rode to the East, through the fire and smoke, drizzle and mist, and before their eyes scrolled the horrific tapestry of war. The dreadful images.

The image of a hoist, a black line sticking out among the ruins of burned villages. From the pole hung a naked corpse. Head down. Blood from his torn belly and groin dripped onto his chest and face, coagulating in patches on his hair. On the back of the corpse could be seen the rune Ard. Cut with a knife.

“An'givre.” Milva said, pushing away the damp hair from the nape of her neck. “The Squirrels have been here.”

“What does an'givre mean?”

“Informer.”

The image of a horse, a grey-white horse with a black flank. The horse walked unsteadily along the edge of the battlefield, dodging between the piles of corpses and spears fixed in the ground, neighing quietly, chillingly, dragging his entrails behind him from his open belly. They could not finish him - in addition to the horse on the battlefield, there were stragglers wandering, stripping the bodies.

The image of the girl, arms outstretched, lying near the burnt bypass, naked, bloodied, her glassy eyes staring at the sky.

“They say that war is a thing of men,” Milva growled. “But they have no mercy for women, they have to have their fun. And they are called heroes ... bastards.”

“You're right. But it will change.”

“I changed. I ran away from home. I did not want to sweep and scrub the floor of a cottage. I did not want to wait for them to come, set fire to the cottage, and degrade me on the floor I ...”

She did not finish. She urged her horse onwards.

And then there was the image of the village. Dandelion vomited everything he ate that day, which was only half a biscuit and a sardine.

In the village, the Nilfgaardians – or maybe the Scoia'tael – had settled accounts with a number of prisoners. The number of dead was impossible to determine, or even to approximate. To get rid of them hastily, not only were arrows, swords and lances used, but also lumberjack equipment they had found on site - axes, saws and long handsaws.

There were other images, but Geralt, Dandelion and Milva no longer remembered them. They had expelled them from memory.

They became indifferent.

\* \* \*

For the next two days they travelled only about twenty miles. It was still raining. After the summer drought, the land was now soaked with water and the forest paths had turned to mud slides. The heavy mists and fog took away their opportunity to observe the smoke of the fires, but the stench of burning indicated that the troops were still close and still burned everything in sight.

They had not seen any refugees. They were alone among the trees in the forest. Or so they thought.

Geralt first heard the whinny of a horse following them. With a stony face, he turned Roach. Dandelion opened his mouth, but Milva passed him a silent gesture, she took her bow from the quiver on her saddle.

The intruder emerged from the bushes. He saw that they were waiting for him and stopped his horse, a chestnut stallion. They stood there frozen in silence, which was broken only by the sound of rain.

“I forbade you to follow us,” said the witcher finally.

The Nilfgaardian, who Dandelion last saw in a coffin, was wet from the rain and his eyes were hidden by his soaked hair. The poet barely recognized him. He was clad in chain mail, a leather jacket and overcoat, without a doubt taken from one of the people killed next to the hawker's cart. Dandelion noted, however, the youth of his face, which was recognizable from their adventure near the beech, despite the beard that was just emerging from his chin.

“I have forbidden you to follow,” repeated the witcher.

“I am forbidden,” finally admitted the youngster. He spoke without a Nilfgaardian accent. “But I have to.”

Geralt jumped from his horse and handed the reins to the poet. He drew his sword.

“Get down,” he said calmly. “I see you have already managed to procure a piece of iron. That's good. I could not kill you when you were helpless. Now it's different. Dismount.”

“I will not fight you. I do not want to.”

“I thought so. Like all your countrymen, you prefer a different kind of fight. Such as the kind in the village, which you must have passed, following our trail. Dismount, I said.”

“I am Cahir Mawr Dyffryn aep Ceallach.”

“I did not ask you to introduce yourself. I ordered you to dismount.”

“I will not dismount, I have no desire to fight.”

“Milva,” the witcher nodded at the archer. “Do me a favour, kill the horse he's sitting on.”

“No!” The Nilfgaardian raised his hand before Milva had a chance to place an arrow on her string. “No, please, I will dismount.”

“That's better. And now draw your sword, boy.”

The youngster crossed his arms over his chest.

“Kill me if you want. Or if you prefer, tell this elf to shoot me with her bow. I'm not going to fight you. I'm Cahir Mawr Dyffryn ... son of Ceallach. I want ... I want to join you.”

“I must have misunderstood. Repeat.”

“I want to join you. You're going in search of the girl, I want to help you. I need to help.”

“This is crazy,” Geralt turned to Milva and Dandelion. “He's suffering from insanity. We are dealing with a madman.”

“He will fit in with our company then,” Milva muttered. “He will fit in perfectly.”

“Think about his proposal, Geralt.” sneered Dandelion. “After all, he is a Nilfgaardian nobleman. Perhaps he will make it easier for us to get to ...”

“Keep your tongue in check.” The witcher sharply interrupted him. “Go on, draw your sword, Nilfgaardian.”

“No, I will not fight. And I'm not Nilfgaardian. I come from Vicovaro, and my name is ...”

“I do not care what your name is. Draw your weapon.”

“No.”

“Witcher,” Milva leaned over in her saddle, and spat on the ground. “Time passes, and we are soaked to the bone. The Nilfgaardian does not want to stand against you and, although you put on a fierce air, I highly doubt you will kill him in cold blood. Are we going to have to stand here forever? I will put an arrow in his horse's belly and we can be on our way. He'll not be able to follow.”

Cahir, son of Ceallach, took one jump and caught his chestnut stallion, leapt into the saddle and galloped off, shouting at the horse to run faster. The witcher watched him for a moment, climbed onto Roach, and rode on. In silence. Not looking back.

“I must be getting old,” he muttered after a while, when Roach had caught up with Milva's black bay. “I am beginning to have scruples.”

“Aww well, it happens when you're old,” the archer looked at him with compassion. “A decoction of honey will help. In the meantime, put a pillow on your saddle.”

“Scruples.” Dandelion explained seriously, “This is not the same as hemorrhoids, Milva. You've got the wrong idea.”

“And who would have instantly understood your gibberish! And you talk constantly, you don't even know it! Go, go!”

“Milva,” the witcher asked after a while, protecting his face from the rain as he rode at a canter. “You really would have killed his horse?”

“No.” She admitted reluctantly. “The horse is not guilty. And even this Nilfgaardian ... Why would he follow us? Why did he say he had to?”

“I'll be damned if I know.”

It was raining still, when the forest ended abruptly and they came to a road, winding through the hills from South to North. Or from North to South, according to their point of view. What they saw on the highway, did not surprise them. They had seen it all before. Carts overturned and shattered, dead horses, scattered packs, saddles and baskets. Broken forms, frozen in poses of strange shapes, which until recently had been human beings.

They rode closer, and without fear, because it was obvious that the massacre had not taken place today, but yesterday or the day before. They had already learned to recognize these things, and maybe they truly felt an animal instinct, which had been awakened and sensitised in them over the previous days. They had also learned to explore the battlefield, because sometimes, rarely, they managed to find among the belongings a little lunch or a sack of feed.

They stopped by the last column of the wagon, which had been struck by lightning and lay in the ditch, resting lopsided on its shattered wheel hub. Under the wagon lay a stout woman, her neck bent in an unnatural position. The collar of her cloak, soaked by the rain, had patches of clotted blood from her ear that had been torn away from the earring. On the tarp that covered the cart were the words: “Vera Loewenhaupt and Sons.” But there was no trace of the word Sons.

“They were not peasants,” Milva said with clenched lips. “But merchants. They came from the South, from Dillingen on their way to Brugge, and they were attacked here. Its not good, witcher. I thought we could branch off to the South, but now I truly do not know what to do ... Dillingen, and inevitably Brugge are in the hands of Nilfgaard, we will not reach the Yaruga that way. We must continue East, by Turlough. There, the forests are wild and deserted, the army will not go that way.”



"I'm not going further East." The witcher protested. "I must reach the Yaruga."

"You will reach it," unexpectedly, she replied calmly. "But this is the safer route. If we move South from here, we will fall straight into the jaws of Nilfgaard. There's nothing to gain."

"We will gain time," he growled. "Going to the East will just waste it. I told you, I cannot afford to do that ..."

"Quiet!" Dandelion piped up suddenly, turning his horse. "Stop talking for a moment."

"What is it?"

"I hear ... singing."

The witcher shook his head, Milva giggled.

"You're having hallucinations, poet."

"Quiet! Shut up! Someone is singing, I'm telling you! Don't you hear it?"

Geralt pulled off his hood, Milva also pricked up her ears, and after a moment she looked at the witcher and nodded silently.

The troubadour was right. His musical ear had not betrayed him. That which seemed impossible, turned out to be true. Stood here in the middle of the forest, in the drizzle, with corpses scattered on the road, yet a happy song reached their ears. From the South, someone came, singing briskly and cheerfully.

Milva pulled the reins of her horse ready to flee, but the witcher gestured her to stop. He was intrigued. The singing that they heard was not menacing. Not the rhythmic, pounding voices of marching infantry or the cavalry's cocky song. The song that came did not raise anxiety. Quite the opposite.

The rain rustled the foliage. They began to distinguish the words of the song. It was a merry song, which in this landscape of war and death, was something alien, unnatural and totally inappropriate.

*By the woods can you see, wolf in all his might,  
Grinning madly, wagging gladly, bouncing with delight.  
My, oh my, what a sight! Why no melancholy?  
Must be that still not wed, that is why so jolly!  
Um-ta, um-ta, uhu-ha!*

Dandelion laughed suddenly, pulled out the lute from under his wet coat, and paying no attention to the hisses of Geralt and Milva, he plucked the strings and sang in a loud voice:

*In the grass can you see, wolf just limps along,  
Looking down, awful frown, crying like a dog.  
Why is this mighty beast so badly rampaged?  
Must be that, freshly wed or lately engaged!*

“Hu-hu-ha!” Replied a chorus of many voices, sounding nearby.

A roar of laughter rang out, someone whistled piercingly on their fingers, then from behind the bend in the highway emerged a strange, yet picturesque company, marching in single file, splashing the mud, with rhythmic stomps of heavy boots.

“Dwarves,” Milva said in an undertone. “But it's not Scoia'tael. Their beards are not matted.”

There were six of them. They were clothed in the usual dwarven attire, short, brown coats with hoods, in various shades of grey and shimmering bronze. Having over the years been impregnated with tar and dust on the roads, as well as oily food scraps, coats like that, Geralt knew, had the advantage of being completely water-proof. This practical piece of clothing was passed down from father to eldest son, so it was usually only worn by mature dwarves. A dwarf reached maturity when his beard reached his belt, which occurred usually at the age of fifty five years.

None of the approaching party looked younger than that. But not older.

“They're guiding humans,” Milva muttered, nodding her head at the huddled group emerging from the woods in the wake of the six dwarves. “They are refugees no doubt, they are carrying loaded bundles.”

“The dwarves are already loaded.” said Dandelion.

Indeed, each dwarf was hauling a pack, under the weight of which more than one man or even a horse would have buckled quite quickly. Besides the usual bags and sacks, Geralt saw locked caskets, a copper cauldron and what looked like a little small chest of drawers. One was carrying on his back the wheel of a cart.

The one walking at the head did not carry any luggage. He wore a small hatchet on his belt, a long sword in a scabbard on his back wrapped in deer skins, and on his shoulder a green parrot with wet and ruffled feathers. It was this dwarf that greeted them.

“Good day!” He bellowed, pausing in the middle of the road with his hands on his hips. “The times are such that its better to meet a wolf in the forest than a man, and if it has to be, it is advisable to greet him with a crossbow than to welcome him with good words! But he who greets you with a song to music, thats your man! Or, woman, my apologies good lady! Hello, I am Zoltan Chivay.”

“I'm Geralt,” the witcher introduced himself after a moment's hesitation. “The one who sang is Dandelion. And this is Milva.”

“Rrr-rrwa mother!” Croaked the parrot.

“Shut yer beak!” snapped Zoltan Chivay. “Excuse me. This bird is smart, but is very rude. Ten thalers I paid for this

rarity. He is called Field Marshal Duda. And this is the rest of my company. This is Munro Bruys, Yazon Varda, Caleb Stratton, Figgis Merluzzo and Percival ... Schuttenbach."

Percival Schuttenbach was not a dwarf. From under his wet hood, instead of a tangled beard, protruded a very long and pointed nose, reliably identifying the nationality of the holder to be that of the old and noble race of gnomes.

"And the others," Zoltan Chivay pointed to the nearby group who had caught up and stopped not far away. "Are refugees from Kernow. As you can see they are only women with their toddlers. There were more, but Nilfgaard attacked their group three days ago, and the rest were massacred. We came across them in the woods and now we travel together."

"Yet you walk with confidence on the roads," ventured the witcher. "Singing at the top of your voices."

"I do not think," the dwarf played with his beard, "that crying and walking is a better choice. From Dillingen we walked through the woods, quietly and carefully. Once the troops had passed, we went out into the road to make up time." He paused, looking at the battlefield.

"The views," he pointed to the corpses, "we have become accustomed to. From Dillingen, from the Yaruga, there is nothing but death on the highways ... You were part of this convoy?"

"No. The Nilfgaardians killed some merchants before we got here."

"It was not Nilfgaardians." The dwarf shook his head, looking at the dead bodies with a cold expression. "It was Scoia'tael. Regular soldiers do not bother to pull their arrows from the corpses. A good tip cost half a crown."

"He knows what he's talking about," muttered Milva.

"Where are you going?"

"South," Geralt said immediately.

"I would not recommend it." Zoltan Chivay shook his head again. "There is hell, fire and destruction. Dillingen is probably already taken, and the dark riders are more likely to cross the Yaruga, they will soon occupy the entire valley from the right bank. As you can see, they are already before us, and to the North, they head for Brugge. Therefore, the only reasonable direction to flee is the East."

Milva gave a knowing look to the witcher, who refrained from commenting.

"We are just going to the East," continued Zoltan Chivay. "The only chance is to hide behind the front, and the Temerian army will be coming from the East, from the river Ina. We will then go to the hills, along the forest paths. We will go first to Turlough, then we will continue along the Old Road up the river Chotla by Sodden, which flows into the Ina. If you want, we will walk together. That is if the slowness of our progress does not pose a problem. You, you have horses, but we, our pace is slowed by the refugees."

"I know," said Milva, looking keenly at him, "that a dwarf, even with luggage, can make thirty miles a day. Almost as much as a man on a horse. I know the Old Road. Without the refugees, you would be at the Chotla in three days."

"These are women and children," Zoltan Chivay puffed out his beard and belly. "We can not leave them at the mercy of fate. Are you going to tell me otherwise?"

“No,” the witcher said. “We wouldn't say that.”

“I am glad to hear it. It means my first impressions were right. So then, do we walk together?”

Gerald looked at Milva. The archer nodded.

“Good.” Zoltan Chivay acknowledged the gesture. “Let's get on the road then, before a patrol surprises us. But first ... Yazon, Munro, go and search the carts. If something useful survived, load it up quickly. Figgis, see if our wheel will fit onto that small wagon, it would be perfect for us.”

“It fits!” Yelled the dwarf who dragged the wheel. “As if it were the original!”

“You see, mutton head? You were skeptical yesterday when I told you to take it! Mount it up! Help him, Caleb!”

Within an impressively short amount of time, the wagon of the late Vera Lowenhaupt, equipped with a new wheel, was stripped of tarpaulins and any unwanted items, and was pulled from the ditch onto the road. In an instant, all of the luggage was piled in. After some thought, Zoltan Chivay ordered that there be room left for the children to sit. The command was carried out with hesitation – Gerald noticed that the refugees kept their distance from the dwarves and were reluctant to give up the children.

Dandelion watched with evident disgust as two dwarves tried on clothes pulled from the corpses. The others prowled among the carts, but found nothing they considered worthy of taking. Zoltan Chivay whistled on his fingers, signaling it was time to end the salvaging, then he cast a professional eye over Roach, Pegasus, and Milva's black bay.

“Your horses,” he said, wrinkling his nose with an air of disapproval. “They are useless. Figgis, Caleb, to the drawbar. We will take it in turns. Forwaaarrd!”

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Gerald was sure that the dwarves would have to abandon the cart when it became stuck in the muddy trails, but he was wrong. The dwarves were as strong as bulls, and the roads leading to the forests were not too grassy or muddy. The rain continued to fall incessantly. Milva was sullen and moody and when she spoke, it was merely to grumble that the horses hooves might crack at any time. Zoltan Chivay licked his lips in response, and told her he was a master at preparing horsemeat, which infuriated Milva even more.

They had maintained a regular formation, and at the centre they pulled the cart. Zoltan marched in front of the cart, Dandelion rode next to him on Pegasus and quarrelled with the parrot. Gerald and Milva followed, and behind them dragged the six women from Kernow.

The guide was Percival Schuttenbach, the long-nosed gnome. Although his size and stature was smaller than that of the dwarves, he had equal the amount of strength and his agility far surpassed theirs. During the march he ran around tirelessly, rummaging in the bushes, darting forward and disappearing, then suddenly emerging nervously, making monkey gestures from a distance giving a sign that everything was okay, they could go on.

Sometimes he would come back quickly and give a report of obstacles on the trail. Whenever he returned, he gave the four children sitting on the cart a handful of blackberries, nuts or some kind of weird, but clearly tasty tuber.

Moving at a terribly sluggish pace, they marched for three days. They did not stumble upon the army, and saw no smoke or fire. However, they were not alone. Scout Percival reported to them several times about groups of refugees hiding in the forest. They passed several such groups, and quickly at that, because the peasants, armed with pitchforks and stakes did not encourage them to make contact. It was suggested, however, to try to negotiate with them and leave the group of women from Kernow, but Zoltan was opposed to it and Milva supported him. The women also did not seem very keen to leave the company. This made it all the more strange that they behaved towards the dwarves with reserve and a certain dislike, mingled with fear, they hardly spoke at rest stops and stood on the sidelines. Geralt attributed the behavior of the women to the tragedy they had recently survived, but he suspected that the reason for their reserve could be the fairly liberal manners of the dwarves. Zoltan and his company swore obscenely and often and the parrot, Field Marshal Duda, had an even richer repertoire. They sang bawdy songs, valiantly supported by Dandelion. They spat, blew their noses in their fingers and farted loudly, which was usually followed by laughter, jokes and competitions. They only took the trouble to go deep into the bushes for larger commissions, and for lighter ones, they did not bother to go that far. The latter finally unnerved Milva, who strongly admonished Zoltan one morning when he took a piss on the ashes, still warm from the fire, without any concern for the audience around him. Zoltan was taken aback at this reprimand, and said that people who hide shamefully in the bushes are informers and plotters, it makes them easily recognisable as untrustworthy and deceitful. This eloquent justification however, had no affect on the archer. She bombarded the dwarves with a rich medley of insults and a few specific threats for good measure. It seemed to be highly effective, as everyone obediently and meekly started going to the toilet in the bushes. In order to not be seen as treacherous conspirators, however, they went in groups.

The new company had completely changed Dandelion meanwhile. The poet fit in with the dwarves like a brother, especially when it appeared that some of them had heard of him before and knew a few verses of his ballads. Dandelion never left Zoltan's company. He wore a quilted jacket he had acquired from the dwarves, and he had replaced his tattered feathered hat for a sable cap that made him look like a scoundrel. In his wide copper lined belt, he had planted a knife he'd been given as a gift, giving him the look of a true rogue. The knife had a bad habit of pricking him in the groin every time he bent forward. Fortunately, he soon lost the assassin's dagger and didn't have another to replace it with.

They wandered among the dense forests, which covered the slopes of Turlough. The forests seemed dead, there were no animals. They had probably been scared by the army and fled. There was nothing to hunt, but so far they were not threatened by hunger. The dwarves had brought a lot of supplies. However, there were a lot of mouths to feed, and it didn't take too long for the supplies to run out. Munro Bruys and Yazon Yarda disappeared once it was barely dark, taking with them an empty sack. When they returned in the morning, they had two sacks, both full. One was filled with horse feed, the second was filled with groats, flour, dried beef, a wheel of cheese that had barely been touched, and even a huge Kindziuk, a delicacy consisting of a casing stuffed with beef offal, pressed between two tablets in the shape of bellows to stoke the fire.

Geralt could guess where the bounty had come from. He did not comment immediately, but waited for a suitable moment. Once he was alone with Zoltan, he asked him politely if he did not see anything wrong with robbing other refugees, no less hungry than them, and fighting for survival. The dwarf replied seriously, that yes, he was very much ashamed, but he felt it was part of nature.

"My great vice," he explained, "Is my irrepressible goodness. I just got to do good. However, I'm a rational dwarf, and I know that I can't spread my kindness to all. If I tried to be good for everyone, for the whole world and all the beings inhabiting it, it would be like a drop of drinking water in the salty sea. In other words, a wasted effort. I decided therefore to take solid action, so it does not go in vain. I'm good for myself and my immediate entourage."

Geralt did not ask any more questions.

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During one of their stops, Geralt and Milva chatted longer with Zoltan Chivay, the incorrigible and compulsive altruist. The dwarf was well informed about the course of the war or at least he gave that impression.

“The attack,” he replied, trying again and again to silence Field Marshal Duda, who was now swearing loudly, “Came from Drieschot. It began at dawn on the seventh day after Lammas. The Verdanian army marched with Nilfgaard because Verden, as you know, is now an Imperial protectorate. They moved at a rapid pace, leaving all the villages in ashes from Drieschot to Brugge and abolishing the army stationed there. The Nilfgaardian Black Infantry managed to sneak across the Yaruga when they were least expected and took the fortress at Dillingen. They built a bridge of boats in half a day, can you believe it?”

“We believe anything now.” Milva muttered. “You were in Dillingen, when it began?”

“We were in the area,” said the dwarf evasively. “When the news reached us of an invasion, we were already on our way to Brugge. The roads were a terrible mess, they were full of fugitives and refugees, some leaving the South to go North, others vice versa. They clogged the road, and we were stuck. We got confirmation too, that Nilfgaard was both behind us and in front of us. The ones who'd left from Drieschot had split up. I somehow felt that a large incursion had went to the Northeast, toward the city of Brugge.”

“And the blacks are already now North of Turlough. We're in the middle, on neutral ground.”

“In the middle,” admitted the dwarf. “But not on neutral ground. Imperial squads are flanked by Squirrels, Verden volunteers and various other isolated groups, and they are even worse than Nilfgaardians. They are the ones who burned Kernow, but failed to catch us, and we just about managed to escape to the forest. We had therefore better not stick the tips of our noses out of this forest. We should be careful. We will reach the Old Road, then go along the river Chotla to the Ina and there we will find the Temerian army. King Foltest's troops have probably already recovered from the surprise and will show the Nilfgaardians some resistance.”

“I hope so.” Milva said, looking at the witcher. “The problem is, we have urgent matters in the South. We had thought of going South from Turlough, towards the Yaruga.”

“I do not know what the matters are that push you to go in that direction,” Zoltan's eyes flashed at them suspiciously. “They must be bloody important for you to risk your necks like that for them.”

He paused, waited a little, but no one hastened to explain. The dwarf scratched his behind, coughed and spat.

“I would not be surprised,” he said finally, “to learn Nilfgaard already holds both sides of the Yaruga and the Ina estuary in its claws. Where exactly do you need to be on the Yaruga?”

“No place in particular,” Geralt decided to respond. “Just simply at the river. I want to find a boat to sail to the mouth.”

Zoltan looked at him and laughed, but stopped immediately when he realized it was no joke.

“I must admit,” he said after a moment, “you are dreaming if you think you will get there. You should give it up. All of Southern Brugge is on fire, before you get to the Yaruga you will be impaled or sent to Nilfgaard. Even if by some miracle you manage to get to the river, you have no chance of sailing to the mouth. I told you about the pontoon, slung from Cintra to the shore of Brugge. This bridge is diligently guarded day and night, and nothing crosses the river that way, except maybe the salmon. Your important and urgent matters will have to lose their importance and urgency. You cannot piss any higher, that's my advice.”

Milva's facial expression revealed that she agreed with the dwarf. Geralt had nothing to say. He felt very bad. He felt a dull ache like invisible blunt teeth biting into the bones of his left forearm and right knee, the pain made worse by his fatigue and the constant humidity. He also had a piercing, depressing, and extremely unpleasant feeling. A strange feeling, which he had never before experienced, and one that he could not cope with.

All he felt was helplessness and resignation.

\* \* \*

After two days the rain stopped, and the sun shone on his face. Freed from the fog which had dissipated quickly, the forest breathed again and the birds went on singing, forgetting their silence during the bad weather. Zoltan cheered and ordered a long stop, after which he promised the walk would be easier and that they would reach the Old Road in a day at most. The women from Kernow dried their black and grey clothes on the surrounding branches, shamefully hiding in the bushes in their underwear, scoffing their meals. The scruffy children ran about having fun, disturbing the dignified calm of the steaming forest. Dandelion slept off his fatigue. Milva had disappeared.

The dwarves rested, but remained active. Figgis Merluzzo and Munro Bruys went in search of mushrooms. Zoltan, Yazon Yarda, Caleb Stratton and Percival Schuttenbach sprawled not far from the cart and played 'Screwed', their favourite card game, to which they devoted every free moment, even on wet evenings. The witcher sometimes sat and played with them and encouraged them, as he did now. He still could not understand the complicated rules of the game, but he was fascinated by the cards themselves, which were beautifully and meticulously painted. Compared to human playing cards, these were true masterpieces of printing. Geralt once again argued that the techniques the dwarves used were strongly advanced and weren't just exclusive to mining, steel and metallurgy. If dwarves, despite their abilities, did not hold the monopoly of the games market it was because people much preferred to play dice, also gamblers paid little interest to aesthetics. Human gamblers, and the witcher had taken the opportunity to observe more than one, always played in crumpled boxes so dirty that before laying them on the table they had to be laboriously detached from their fingers. The figures were painted so sloppily that it was only possible to distinguish the Lady from the Jack because the Jack sat on a horse, although the horse looked more like a lame weasel.

The images on the dwarven boxes excluded such mistakes. The king wearing a crown was truly royal, the Lady was beautiful and seductive, and the Jack, armed with a halberd, was rakishly moustached. In the dwarven tongue, these figures were called Hraval, Vaina and Ballet, but when Zoltan and his company played, they used the names common to humans.

The sun shone, the moisture evaporated from the forest, Geralt encouraged the players.

The basic principle of Screwed was something resembling a horse auction at market, such was the intensity and tension in the voice of the player. The pair presenting the highest "price" tried to get as many folds as possible, while the second pair tried to prevent it in every way. The game ran loudly and violently, and each player sat with a big club next to him. They rarely used the clubs, but they were often waved about.

"How can you play this game, with that empty head? Are you deaf? You bid clubs, instead of hearts? What do I bid hearts and sing an operetta too? Oh, I should take my stick and whack you over your stupid noggin!"

"I had four clubs and a jack, I thought I had the best bid!"

"Four clubs! Unless you counted your little pecker when holding the cards in your lap. Think a little, Stratten, its not university, it's just a card game! Even a pig could rob a mayor if he had good cards. Deal, Varda."

"Double hearts."

"You little shit!"

“He already played his king, and crapped his pants. Doubleton of clubs!”

“Screwed!”

“You must be asleep, Caleb. Screwed a double there! Whats your bid?”

“A load of hearts!”

“Raise. Haaa! And what? Nobody screwed? Nothing to say, my lads? Open, Varda. Percival, you blink in his direction once more, I'll punch you so hard in the eyes, you won't be able to close them till winter.”

“Clubs.”

“Queen!”

“Followed by a King! Your Queen is fucked! I win and ha, ha, and I still have something I keep for a rainy day! A Jack, King, pair of ...”

“And ten of trumps! He who takes advantage, we chop the .... Ah bollocks! Oi, Zoltan? You're turning soft!”

“Fucking gnome. Eh, I would take this the club and ...”

Before Zoltan had a chance to pick up his club, a shrill scream came from the forest.

Gerald jumped up first. He cursed as he ran, because once again he felt the pain through his knee. Just behind him rushed Zoltan Chivay, seizing his sword wrapped in its skins on the cart. Percival Schuttenbach and the rest of the dwarves ran after them, armed with their clubs and at the back Dandelion followed, who'd been awakened by the screaming. From one side, Figgis and Munro appeared. Throwing their baskets of mushrooms down, both dwarves caught the fleeing children. Milva came out of nowhere, pulling an arrow from her quiver and pointing it in the direction the cry had come from.

But it wasn't necessary. Gerald had heard it, seen it and he knew what it was.

The child that had screamed, was a freckled girl with pigtails, maybe eight or nine years old. She was rooted to the spot a few steps in front of a pile of rotting tree trunks. Gerald jumped up quickly, grabbed her under the arm, interrupting her wild screech, and from the corner of his eye he spotted the movement between the logs. He retreated quickly, bumping into Zoltan and his dwarves. Milva, who also saw the movement among the stumps, stretched her bow.

“Don't shoot,” he hissed. “Take the little one away quickly. And get back, but take it easy. Do not make any sudden movements.”

At first it seemed that it was one of the rotting logs that had moved, as if it had suddenly become animated, to escape the sunlight and seek refuge in the shadow of the trees. It was only after a closer look it was possible to distinguish the other details, mainly four pairs of thin legs joined onto a dirty shell, mottled and divided into segments rather like armour.



“Take it easy.” Repeated Geralt quietly. “Do not provoke it. Don't be deceived by its apparent immobility. Its not aggressive, but it can move very quickly. If it feels threatened, it will attack, and its venom has no antidote.”

The creature crawled slowly on the logs. It watched Dandelion and the dwarves, slowly rotating, their eyes bulging, fixated. It barely moved. It polished the ends of its legs, lifting them one by one and carefully inspecting them, displaying its impressive, sharp mandibles.

“There was so much screaming,” said Zoltan without any emotion, who was standing next to the witcher. “That I thought it was something really terrible. For example, the Verden cavalry, or the angi'vare. And here we have an overgrown crustacean. We must admit, nature can take interesting forms.”

“No I do not admit,” said Geralt. “That which is sitting there, is an Okoglow. A creation of Chaos. A dying relic from the times before the conjunction of the spheres, if you know what I mean.”

“Sure, I know.” The dwarf looked into his eyes. “Although I am not a witcher, I know of Chaos and such beasts. I am just very curious as to what you will do with this relic. Specifically, I wonder how you will do it, witcher. Will you use your own sword or would you prefer my sihill?”

“Nice sword.” Geralt glanced at the sword, which Zoltan drew from its laquered scabbard and deer skins. “But I will not need it.”

“Curious,” Zoltan repeated. “So we just stand here and look at it? Will the relic not feel threatened? Or maybe you want to turn back and ask the Nilfgaardians for help? What do you suggest, monster slayer?”

“Get me the ladle and cauldron lid from the cart.”

“What?”

“Do not argue with a specialist Zoltan.” said Dandelion.

Percival Schuttenbach made his way to the cart and in the blink of an eye provided the required items. The witcher winked at the company, then with all his strength began banging the spoon on the lid.

“Enough! Enough!” shouted Zoltan Chivay after a while, pressing his hands to his ears. “You fuck, your going to damage the ladle! The shellfish has gone! He fled already, damn it!”

“And how he ran!” Percival was delighted. “Up went the dust! Its damp, and there was still dust behind him, by my beard!”

“The okoglow,” Geralt explained coolly, handing the dwarves back their battered kitchen utensils, “has an extremely sensitive and warped sense of hearing. It has no ears, but it still listens so to speak, using its entire body. In particular, the metallic sound it is not able to bear. It feels pain when ...”

“Even from its bowels,” Zoltan interrupted. “I know because I also experienced this, when you started banging on the lid. If the monster has more sensitive hearing than me, I pity him. It will not come back here at least? Will he not bring his friends?”

“I do not think many of his species are still alive. As for this one, he will certainly not return to this area soon. There's no need to worry.”

“Monsters aside,” the dwarf frowned. “Your concert with the cooking pan was probably heard from the Skellig Islands, and its possible that some music lovers are already headed this way. It would be better if we weren't here when they arrive. Pack up the camp boys! Hey, women, get dressed and round up the children! Come on, get moving!”

\* \* \*

When they stopped for the night, Geralt decided to finally clarify some things that had been bothering him. Zoltan Chivay did not seem as if he intended on playing a round of cards, so the witcher found no problem in drawing him to a secluded place for a man to man chat. He began without beating about the bush.

“Tell me, how did you know I am a witcher?”

The dwarf's eyes flashed at him and he smiled slyly.

“I could brag to you about my insight. I could say how I notice that your eyes change colour at dusk like the sun. I could also say, that I am well travelled and have heard alot about Geralt of Rivia. But the truth is more banal. Do not look at me with those menacing eyes, wolf. You are discreet, but your friend the bard sings and talks, his mouth doesn't close. That's how I know your profession.”

Geralt refrained from asking the next question. And rightly so.

“Well, okay.” Said Zoltan. “Dandelion blurted everything. He must have felt that we appreciate honesty, and that we are sympathetic towards you. He did not need to test us, because we do not hide our nature. In short: I know why you must head to the South in such a hurry. I know of the urgent and important matter that leads you to Nilfgaard. I know who you are looking for there. And not just because of the rumours of the poet. I lived in Cintra before the war and heard stories about the child of surprise and the white haired witcher, bound by destiny.”

Geralt remained silent.

“The rest,” said the dwarf, “is a matter of observation. You are a witcher, a monster slayer, however, you let that vile beast escape. The monster had only frightened the child, he'd done nothing wrong, so you dropped your sword, and hit the lid of a cauldron. Because you are no longer a witcher, but a noble knight, who rushes to rescue kidnapped or oppressed virgins.”

The witcher still said nothing.

“You drill me with your eyes. You are worried I will betray you. You wonder how I will turn this secret against you. Do not torment yourself. We will go to the Ina together, and help each other. We both face the same goal: to survive and move on. In order to continue the noble mission, or to simply live, but so as not to have to be ashamed in the hour of death. You think that everything has changed. The world has changed. And yet this world is, the same. And you're the same as you were. Do not torment yourself.”

“Forget separating from us.” Zoltan resumed his monologue, not embarrassed by the silence of the witcher. “Give up on your long and lonely journey to the South, through Brugge and Sodden to the Yaruga. You have to look for another way to Nilfgaard. If you want I will counsel you ...”

“No need,” Geralt rubbed his knee, which after a few days the pain had still not abandoned. “Keep your advice,

Zoltan.”

He found Dandelion playing cards with the cheering dwarves. Without a word, he took the poet's sleeve and pulled him into the forest. Dandelion immediately realized what was going on, one look at the witcher's face was enough.

“Oi parrot,” Geralt said quietly. “Gossip. Big mouth. I should tear out your tongue, you blockhead. You need a bit between your teeth.”

The troubadour was silent, but his face remained calm.

“When it was first known that you were coming with me,” continued the witcher. “Some reasonable people were astonished. They were amazed that I would allow you to travel with me. They advised me to take you to a lonely place, strangle you, rob you and then hide your body in the hollow of a tree under a carpet of leaves. I really regret not having listened.”

“Is it revealing such a great secret, to say who you are and where you are going?” Dandelion suddenly lost his temper. “Should we be suspicious of everyone and pretend all of the time? These dwarves ... they are our company ...”

“I do not have a company.” He growled. “I don't have one. I do not want to have one. I don't need it. Do you understand?”

“Sure, he understands.” Milva said from behind his back. “And I understand. You don't need anybody, witcher. You often show it.”

“I am not conducting a personal war,” he turned sharply. “These companions are unnecessary to me because I'm not going to Nilfgaard to save the world, to overthrow the evil Empire. I'm going to find Ciri. That's why I have to go alone. Forgive me if this sounds uncomfortable in your ears, but I do not give a damn about the rest. And now go away. I want to be alone.”

When after a while he turned round, he saw only Dandelion had gone.

“I had the dream again,” he stated dryly. “Milva, I'm losing time. I'm losing time! She needs me. She needs help.”

“Tell me,” she said quietly. “Get it out. Even if it was terrible, tell me.”

“It was not terrible. In my dream ... She danced. She danced in a smoky hut. And she was, damn it, happy. Music was playing, someone yelled ... The whole hut shook from the cries and the music ... And she danced, danced, and stamped her feet ... And over that damn roof shack, in the cold, night air ... danced death. Milva ... Maria ... She needs me.”

Milva turned her eyes.

“She's not the only one,” she whispered. So he could not hear.

\* \* \*

At the next stop, the witcher showed interest in Zoltan's sword, the sihill, which he had taken a brief look at during the affair with the okoglow. Without hesitation, the dwarf stripped the weapon of its deer skins and removed it from its sheath.

The sword measured about forty inches, and weighed no more than thirty five ounces. The blade was covered in mysterious runic signs that gave it a bluish color and it was sharp as a razor. With a little practice you could've shaved with it. The handle, twelve inches long, was wrapped in strips of salamander skin, it had a cylindrical copper cap which served as a pommel, and then the hilt, although quite small, was very ornate.

"A beautiful thing." Geralt whirled the sihill, it whistled as he passed it in a flash from his left hand to his right using two fingers. "In fact, its a pretty piece of iron."

"Huh!" Percival Schuttenbach snorted. "A piece of iron! Take a better look at it, because in a moment you will say its a piece of horseradish."

"I once had a better sword."

"And I don't deny that," Zoltan shrugged. "Because inevitably it came from our forge. You witchers, know how to brandish your swords, but do not make them. They are only made in Mahakam, beneath Mount Carbon."

"Dwarves temper the steel," added Percival, "And forge the main layers. But we gnomes, deal with the decorative cut and sharpening. In our workshops. Using our Gnomish technology, as once we made our gwyhyrs, the best swords in the world."

"The sword I wear now," Geralt bared his blade. "Comes from Brokilon, from the catacombs of Craag An. I got it from the Dryads. It is a first-class weapon, and yet neither dwarven or gnomish. This is an elven blade, a hundred or two hundred years old."

"He has no fucking idea!" Cried the gnome, taking the sword in hand and running his fingers along the blade. "The finish is Elven, yes. Handle, hilt and pommel. It also has elven etchings, engraving, and ornamentation. But the blade was forged and sharpened in Mahakam. And it is true that it was forged a few centuries ago, because you can easily see, the steel is inferior and the craftsmanship more primitive. Here, put Zoltan's sihill next to it, do you see the difference?"

"I see. But mine does not give the impression of being less well made."

The gnome snorted and waved his hand. Zoltan smiled proudly.

"The cut of the blade," he explained with a magisterial tone, "and the feel of the blade, is not what differentiates it from mine. The thing is, your sword is a simple composition of steel and iron, and the blade of my sihill has been forged from an alloy of refined graphite and borax ..."

"Modern technology!" Percival could not resist, he had heated up a bit since the conversation had lead onto matters he knew well. "The construction and composition of the blade comprise of several layers of soft core and hard steel, not the soft steel ..."

"Slowly, slowly," the dwarf stopped him. "He's not a metalurgist Schuttenbach, don't bore him with the details. I'll explain it to him straight. The good steel, witcher, hard steel, magnetite, is extremely difficult to sharpen. Why? Because it is hard! When we do not have the technology, as used to be the case for us and is the case for you today, and want to get a sword with a sharp blade, you must coat the edges with a soft steel, less resistant to treatment. Your Brokilon sword was made with this method. Modern blades are made the opposite way - a soft core with a hard edge.

Treatment is time consuming and as I said, requires modern technology. But the result is a blade, that can cut a cambric cravat in the air.”

“Can your sihill do that?”

“No.” The dwarf smiled. “You can count the number of swords made like that on one hand and few of them left Mahakam. But I guarantee that the mucky crab we crossed paths with yesterday would not have survived my sihill, the shell would not have provided much resistance. You would have cut it to pieces without much effort.”

The talk of swords and metallurgy continued for some time. Geralt listened with interest, shared his own experiences, and took the opportunity to enrich his knowledge asking about this and that, examining and testing Zoltan's sihill. He did not know that the very next day he would have to demonstrate the theory with practice.

The first sign that people lived in the area, was a very regular stack of bark chips, which Percival Schuttenbach had spotted by the road while he was at the front of the group.

Zoltan stopped the procession and sent the gnome to scout further. Percival disappeared, and after half an hour he returned at full speed, excited and breathless, waving from afar. He reached them, but instead of immediately informing them, he grabbed his long nose with his fingers and blew with all his might, producing a sound reminiscent of a shephard's horn.

“Don't scare the animals!” Snapped Zoltan Chivay. “And talk. What's up ahead?”

“A hamlet,” the gnome panted, wiping his fingers on his many-pocketed overcoat. “In the clearing. Three cottages, a barn, a shed, a few hutches ... A dog runs about in the yard, and the chimney smokes. Food is being prepared, oatmeal, milk and more.”

“What, you were in the kitchen?” Dandelion laughed. “You looked in the pots? How do you know it was oatmeal?”

The gnome looked at him with superiority, and Zoltan snorted angrily.

“Don't insult him, poet. He knows the smell of food a mile away. If he says that its oatmeal, its oatmeal. Damn, I don't even like it.”

“Why not? I like oatmeal. I'd be happy to eat it.”

“Zoltan is right,” said Milva. “And you be quiet, Dandelion, because its not poetic. If there's milk in the oatmeal, then there is a cow. And any peasant, would have noticed the fumes of the fires, taken his cow and escaped into the woods. So why does he stay? We should go into the forest, make a detour. It smells bad to me.”

“Calm down, calm down,” muttered the dwarf. “We will be ready to escape if needs be. Maybe the war is over? Maybe the Temerian army has finally advanced? How would we know in this place? Maybe there was a big battle, Nilfgaard was pushed back, maybe the front is behind us, and the peasants and their cows returned home? We need to find out. Figgis, Munro, both of you stay here and keep your eyes open. We will do a little reconnaissance. If there is danger, I'll let you know with the call of the Sparrowhawk.”

“Call of the Sparrowhawk?” Munro Bruys anxiously played with his beard. “But you have no idea how to imitate birdsong, Zoltan.”

“Exactly. When you hear a strange noise, that you do not recognise, that'll be me. Percival, you lead. Geralt, you going with us?”

“We'll all go.” Dandelion dismounted. “If its a trap, we'll be safer in a large group.”

“I'll leave Field Marshal here.” Zoltan took the parrot from his shoulder and handed it to Figgis Merluzzo. “He may decide to suddenly launch his profanities at point bank range, and our stealth approach would go to hell. Come on.”

Percival quickly led them to the edge of the forest, through dense bushes of wild lilac. Ahead of the bushes, the terrain sloped slightly, ending in a piled heap of gnarled tree stumps. Beyond, lay a large clearing. Milva peered cautiously.

The gnome's report had been accurate. In the middle of the clearing there were three cottages, a barn and several hutches covered with moss. A huge puddle of manure glistened in the yard. The buildings and a small rectangle of grass, which was rather disheveled, were surrounded by a low fence, broken in parts. Behind the fence, a grey dog barked. On the roof of a cottage stood a column of smoke, lazily crawling through a hole in the thatch.

“In fact,” Zoltan whispered, sniffing, “that certainly does smell tasty. Especially since my nostrils have become accustomed to the smell of burnt forest. I see neither guards nor horses which is reassuring, and I reckon it is a band of ruffians who have taken up refuge here. Hmm ... I feel we have nothing to fear.”

“I will go.” Milva declared.

“No,” protested the dwarf. “You look too much like a Squirrel. If they see you, they may be frightened and humans tend to be unpredictable when they're scared. Yazon and Caleb will go. As for you, keep your bow ready to shoot, to cover them if need be. Percival will be ready to warn the others. Stay alert, in case we need to retreat.”

Yazon Varda and Caleb Stratton cautiously emerged from the thicket and moved towards the buildings. They walked slowly, carefully looking around.

The dog saw them straight away. He barked furiously, running around the yard, and didn't respond to the soft clicking and whistling of the dwarves. The cabin door opened.

Milva immediately raised her bow and stretched the string smoothly. She quickly loosened it again.

On the threshold stood a short, thin girl with long braids. She screamed something at the dwarves, and waved her hands. Yazon Yarda spread his hands, and shouted something back. The girl began to scream. Geralt and the others heard it, but they were not able to distinguish the words.

Those words must have had an impression on Yazon and Caleb, because the two dwarves turned on their heels and ran back towards the lilac bushes. Milva stretched her bow again, moving the tip, looking for a target.

“What the devil?” barked Zoltan. “What's going on? What made them run away like this? Did you see something, Milva?”

“Shut your trap.” The archer hissed, still letting her tip move from cottage to cottage, from shed to shed. But there was still nothing to see. The girl with the braids disappeared into the cabin, slamming the door behind her.

The dwarves raced as if all the demons of Chaos trod on their heels after them. Yazon yelled something, maybe

cursing. Dandelion suddenly turned pale.

“He is yelling ... Oh, mother!”

“What is goi ...” Zoltan stopped because Yazon and Caleb had arrived, both red with exertion. “What is it? Tell us!”

“There is plague ...” Caleb gasped. “Black smallpox ...”

“Did you touch anything?” Zoltan Chivay retreated abruptly, almost knocking Dandelion over. “Did you touch anything in the yard?”

“No ... The dog didn't let us get close enough ...”

“Thanks be to that damn mutt.” Zoltan raised his eyes skyward. “May the gods grant him a long life and a pile of bones the size of Mount Carbon. The girl in the hut, did she have pimples?”

“No. She's healthy. The sick are lying in the last hut, the rest of her family. Many have already died, she said. Aye, aye, Zoltan, the wind was blowing towards us!”

“Enough teeth chattering,” said Milva, lowering her bow. “If you did not touch anything infected, you will be fine, don't worry. Indeed, thats if there really is any smallpox. The girl may have wanted to scare you.”

“No,” asserted Yazon, still shivering. “Behind the hut there was a pit ... And inside it, corpses. The girl didn't have enough strength to bury the dead, so she threw them into the pit ...”

“Well!” Zoltan sniffed. “There's your oatmeal, Dandelion. I don't know about you, but somehow I'd rather pass. Let's get out of here, alive.”

Frantic barking suddenly rose from the village.

“Hide yourselves!” The witcher hissed, kneeling.

On the opposite side of the clearing, a rowdy group of horsemen galloped around the broken fence, whistling and surrounding buildings, then burst into the yard. The riders were armed but wore no uniforms. On the contrary, they were casually dressed in colourful clothes, and their equipment gave the impression of being completely mismatched - not taken from the barracks, but found on the battlefield.

“Thirteen.” Percival Schuttenbach counted quickly.

“Who are they?”

“They aren't Nilfgaard or any other regular army,” said Zoltan. “They're not Scoia'tael either. It seems to me, they are deserters. A single band.”

“Or marauders.”

The riders were loud, they frolicked in the yard. The dog received a blow from a stick and fled. The girl with the braids jumped from the door, she yelled. But this time the warning did not work nor was it taken seriously. One of the riders galloped by, took her by the hair, pulled her from the threshold, and dragged her through the puddle. Others jumped from their horses, helped to drag the girl to the end of the yard, tore off her clothes and threw her on the pile of rotten straw. The girl fought tooth and nail, but she had no chance. Only one of the marauders had not joined in the fun, he looked after the horses tied to the fence. The girl began to shriek in despair. Then the cries became less frequent, spasmodic, and finally ceased altogether.

“Warriors!” Milva broke up. “Heroes ... bastards yes!”

“Obviously they are not afraid of smallpox.” Yazon Varda shook his head.

“Fear,” whispered Dandelion, “is a human thing. In them is no longer anything human.”

“Except their guts,” Milva croaked, carefully embedding her arrow on the string. “Which I’m about to drill through with this arrow, those villains.”

“There are thirteen of them,” said Zoltan Chivay with a sombre look. “And they have horses. You can kill one or two maybe, but the rest will attack us. Besides, it could be a detachment. The devil knows how many could follow them.”

“So what, I must watch quietly, do nothing?”

“No.” Geralt had hung his sword around his back and had tied his hair. “I’m sick of watching quietly. I’m tired of inaction. They have to be dispersed. You see the one who’s keeping the horses? When I reach there, shoot him from the saddle. If you can, take a second. But only when I reach there.”

“Then there will be eleven.” The archer turned around.

“I can count.”

“What about the smallpox?” Muttered Zoltan Chivay. “If you go there, you will be contaminated with plague ... with the devil, witcher! Putting us all in danger ... Damn it, this is not the girl you are looking for!”

“Shut up, Zoltan. Go back to the cart, hide in the forest.”

“I’m going with you.” Milva said hoarsely.

“No. Cover me from afar, you’ll help me more effectively.”

“And me?” Dandelion asked. “What shall I do?”

“What you usually do. Nothing.”

“You are crazy ...” Zoltan growled. “Only you against all of them ... What is wrong with you? You want to play the Hero, the saviour of virgins?”



“Shut up.”

“Then let the devil take you! Wait ... Leave your sword. There are a lot of them, it's better that you do not have to cut twice. Take my sword. With it, once is enough.”

The witcher accepted the dwarf's weapon without hesitation and without a word. Again he pointed out to Milva, the straggler guarding the horses. Then he jumped over the stumps and walked briskly towards the sheds.

The sun was shining. Grasshoppers leapt from under his feet. The rider guarding the horses saw him, and pulled a spear from its sheath by his saddle. He had very long, matted hair, which fell onto his ragged chain mail, patched with rusty wire. He wore new shoes with shiny buckles, they had obviously been looted recently.

The guard shouted, then from behind the fence came another marauder. This one carried a belt with a sword around his neck and had just finished fastening his trousers. Geralt was already quite close. From the heap of straw he heard laughter from those entertaining themselves with the girl. He breathed deeply, every breath in him intensifying his desire to kill. He could have calmed himself down, but he didn't want to. He wanted to take pleasure from this.

“Hey you, who are you? Stop!” Shouted long haired, weighing the javelin in his hands. “What do you want?”

“I'm tired of watching.”

“Whaaat?”

“Does the name Ciri mean anything to you?”

“I'll ...”

The rider didn't manage to say anything more. An arrow with grey feathers hit him in the centre of the chest and he dropped from the saddle. Before he fell to the ground, Geralt already heard the whistle of a second arrow. The tip hit the other soldier in the abdomen, low, right between his fingers that were holding his fly. He howled like an animal, bent in half and fell back over the fence, knocking over and breaking the poles.

Before the others had time to turn and seize their weapons, the witcher was already among them. The dwarf's sword danced and sang, its song was as light as a feather and its razor sharp steel revealed its wild lust for blood. The bodies it cut offered almost no resistance. The blood spurted on his face, he did not have time to wipe it.

Even if the deserters had harboured intentions of fighting back, the sight of the falling corpses and streams of blood effectively discouraged them. One of them, with his pants around his knees, did not even have time to pull them up. He was slashed in the carotid artery and fell on his back, with his appendage waving ridiculously, his masculinity left unsatisfied. A second rider, his head cleanly shaven, tried to protect his face with both hands, and immediately the sword cut both of his wrists. The others fled, scattering in different directions. The witcher chased them, mentally cursing the pain, which had again manifested in his knee. He hoped that his leg would not refuse to obey him.

Two managed to reach the fence, and tried to defend themselves, waving their swords. Paralysed with terror, they were sluggish. The witcher's face was once again splashed with the blood that gushed from the arteries cut by the dwarven blade. The others used this time to escape and jump on their horses. One immediately fell, struck by an arrow, wriggling and flapping like a fish thrown out of the net. The two that were left, launched their horses into a full gallop. However, only one managed to escape, because Zoltan Chivay suddenly appeared on the battlefield. The dwarf whirled his axe and threw it, hitting one of the fleeing riders in the middle of the back. The marauder roared, and flew from the saddle, kicking his legs. The last clung to his horse's neck, cleared the ditch full of corpses and galloped down towards the road.

“Milva!” The witcher and dwarf cried simultaneously.

The archer was already running towards him. She stopped, frozen with her legs apart. She lowered her bow and tightened the arch, raising it higher and higher. They heard the sound of the chord, but Milva had not changed position, she had not even twitched. They only saw the arrow when it had reached its target. The rider slumped forward on his horse, the feathered projectile protruding from his shoulder. But he did not fall. He straightened up and with a cry, pushed his horse into a faster gallop.

“What a bow.” Zoltan Chivay groaned in awe. “And what a shot!”

“A shot of shit.” The witcher wiped the blood from his face. “The son-of-a-bitch has escaped and he’ll bring more.”

“She hit him! And it was fired from two hundred steps!”

“She could have aimed for the horse.”

“The horse is not guilty.” Milva snorted angrily, walking up to them. She spat, watching the rider disappearing into the forest. “I missed the miserable scoundrel because I was a little breathless ... Pah, poisonous snake, run away with my tip! May it curse you!”

They heard a whinny from the road and immediately after, the piercing howl of a murdered man.

“Ho, ho!” Zoltan looked at the archer with admiration. “He did not get far! Your arrow didn’t fail! Was it poisoned? Or was it magical? Because after all, even if the rogue had caught smallpox, the damn disease doesn’t spread *that* fast!”

“It wasn’t my arrow.” Milva gave the witcher a knowing look. “It wasn’t smallpox either. But I think I know what it was.”

“I think I know too.” The dwarf bit his moustache, smiling mischievously. “I always noticed that you look behind you, I know there is someone following us on the sly. On a chestnut stallion. I do not know who he is, but since you didn’t mind ... well, its not my business.”

“Especially since we benefit from such a rear guard.” Milva said, looking meaningfully at Geralt. “Are you certain that this Cahir is your enemy?”

The witcher did not answer. He handed Zoltan his sword.

“Thanks. It’s not bad.”

“Especially in such good hands,” the dwarf approved, with a smile on his face. “I’ve heard stories about witchers, but to overcome eight people in less than two minutes ...”

“That’s not something to be proud of. They did not know how to defend themselves.”

The girl with braids rose onto all fours, then stood on her feet, and with shaking hands tried unsuccessfully to improve the remnants of her torn garments. The witcher was surprised, seeing that in general, she was in absolutely no way similar to Ciri, when only a moment before he swore she looked like her twin sister. With an uncoordinated

movement the girl rubbed her face, and moved unsteadily towards the cottage, not avoiding the puddle of manure.

“Hey, wait,” called Milva. “Hey, you ... Can we help you? Oi!”

The girl did not even look at her. She stumbled over the threshold, almost falling, holding onto the frame. She slammed the door behind her.

“The gratitude of man knows no bounds,” said the dwarf. Milva turned like a spring, her face frozen.

“What is there to be grateful for?”

“Yes.” The witcher said. “What is there?”

“The marauder's horses,” Zoltan did not lower his eyes. “She can kill them for their meat, and won't have to kill the cow. She is resistant to smallpox apparently, and now will not have to fear hunger. She'll survive. And the fact that thanks to you her torture was shortened, and the cottages weren't set on fire. She will understand after a few days, when she's had time to gather her thoughts. Come on, let's get away, before the pestilence blows our way ... Hey, witcher, where are you going? Searching for gratitude?”

“No. Some boots,” said Geralt coldly, bending over the long-haired straggler, who's dead eyes were fixed at the sky. “Looks like these will fit me perfectly.”

\* \* \*

Over the next few days, they ate horse meat. The boots with shiny buckles were quite comfortable. The Nilfgaardian called Cahir still rode behind them on his chestnut stallion, but the witcher did not look back.

He finally figured out the secrets of Screwed and even played with the Dwarves. He lost.

They did not mention what happened in the forest clearing. There was no point.

*Mandrake a. rare, plant species from the nightshade family, which includes herbaceous plants, stems, the roots of the tuber show similarities with the human form. The leaves are gathered in a rosette. M. autumnalis a. officinalis, grown on a small scale in Vicaro, Rowan and Ymlac it seldom grows wild. The berries are green, then turn yellow and are eaten with vinegar and pepper; the leaves are use in their raw state. The root (radix mandragorae) is today valued in medicine and pharmacy. Previously it once held great importance in certain superstitious beliefs, especially among the people of the North; they carved human figures on them (alruniki, alraune) and then stored them in homes as a valued talisman. It was considered as protection against disease and in the process provided happiness and fertility to women to ensure easy births. They were worn in clothes and during the new moon were placed into new clothes. The root of the mandrake was a popular trade commodity, whose price could reach up to sixty florens apiece. In trade it was often out of ignorance or fraudulent intent mistaken for belladonna root. Mandrake was also used in witchcraft as a magical ingredient in elixirs as well as poisons. The superstition came during the time of the persecution of the witches. The preparation of the mandrake poison was being investigated in the trial of Lucracia Migo. It is also assumed that the legendary Philippa Eilhart also used the mandrake as a poison.*

Effenberg and Talbot, *Encyclopaedia Maxima Mundi*, Vol XI

## CHAPTER THREE

The old road had changed somewhat since the witcher had travelled it last. The road, once paved with flat basalt slabs, built by the elves and dwarves hundreds of years ago, had become a ruin of pocked marks and corroded holes. Sometimes, the open holes were so deep they resembled small quarries. The marching pace slowed down, the dwarven cart maneuvered among the holes with great difficulty, getting stuck again and again.

Zoltan Chivay knew the cause of the devastation of the road. After the last war with Nilfgaard, there was an extreme increased in demand for building materials. People then realized that the old road had a near inexhaustible source of hewn stone. And since the route was carelessly located in the wilderness and the road led from nowhere to nowhere, it had long ago lost its importance for transport and severed little use, they ravaged it without mercy, without measure.

‘All your big cities,’ complained the dwarf between the loud rasping of his parrot, ‘are built on ours and the elves foundations. The smaller towns and castles you have built yourselves, but you continue to take our stones. All this time, it was thanks to us non-humans for your development and progress.’

Geralt said nothing.

‘But you destroy even this.’ Zoltan cursed, shaking his head and helped move the cart around another of the holes. ‘Why are you not removing the stones gradually from the ends of the road? You are like children! Instead of eating the whole donut, as is right and proper, you just lick the jam from the inside and discard the rest, because it was not as tasty.’

Geralt explained that this was the fault of political geography. The western end of the old road was located in Brugge, the eastern in Temeria and the middle in Sodden, every kingdom devastated their part as they needed it. In response, Zoltan obscenely described a place where they could remove the kings and their politics. Field Marshal Duda added something offensive about the royal mothers.

The further along they went, the worse it got. Zoltan’s comparison to the donut and the jam turned out to be increasingly less relevant – the road looked like a yeast cake, which had been laboriously gouged of all its raisins and almonds. It seemed that they approached the inevitable moment when the cart would break down or become stuck in a hole for good. They were saved, however, by something that had destroyed the old road. They encountered a paved path

running to the south that had been opened by the heavy carts carrying the timber from the forests. Zoltan rejoiced, because according to him the path led to one of the forts on the river Ina. He hoped to meet the army already there. The dwarf firmly believed that, as in the previous war just behind the Ina, the army at Sodden would launch a devastating counter-attack from the Northern Kingdoms, after which the remnants of the broken and miserable Nilfgaard army would cross back over the Yaruga.

And indeed, changing the direction of their journey once again brought the war in sight. At night the sky glowed bright red in front of them, during the day columns of smoke lined the horizon. Since they could not be sure who was beating and burning and who was beaten and burned, they advanced cautiously, and sent Percival Schuttenbach ahead to investigate.

One morning they experienced a surprise: they found a riderless horse, a chestnut stallion. Its green saddle had the embroidery of Nilfgaard and was covered in dark blood stains. It was impossible to know whether it was the blood of the slain rider or whether it was shed later when the horse had a new owner.

‘Well the problem is ended.’ Milva said, looking at Geralt. ‘If there was a problem.’

‘The real problem is that we do not know who the rider was, who was thrown from the saddle.’ Zoltan murmured. ‘And that they do not follow in our tracks or those of our strange rear guard.’

‘He is a Nilfgaardian.’ Geralt clenched his teeth. ‘His accent was barely noticeable, but some refugees hiding in the woods, may have recognized...’

Milva looked down.

‘I should have killed him then, witcher.’ She said quietly. ‘He would have had a lighter death.’

‘He escaped from the coffin,’ Dandelion nodded, looking at Geralt meaningfully, ‘just to rot in a ditch.’

Thus was pronounced the epitaph to Cahir, the son of Ceallach, the Nilfgaardian who emerged from a coffin, who claimed that he was not Nilfgaardian. They spoke about him no more. Geralt - despite repeated threats – decided to keep the chestnut and threw Zoltan Chivay into the saddle. Although the dwarf’s legs were not long enough to reach the stirrups, the stallion was obedient and quiet and he rode on him quiet comfortably.

\* \* \*

At night, the horizon still shone red and during the day the smoke rose in ribbons into the sky, dirtying the blue. Soon they came across burned buildings; the fire still crawled over the ridges and charred beams. Next to the ruins sat eight people and five dogs. They were all devouring the carcass of a partly charred horse. At the sight of the armed dwarves, they abandoned their feast in a panic. Only one man and a dog remained, neither of which showed any terror, they continued to tear flesh from the ribcage of the carrion. Zoltan and Percival tried to interrogate the man, but failed to learn anything. The man only groaned, shuddered, put his head between his arms and continued to strip the bones of its remains. The dog barked and bared its teeth to the gums. The body of the dead horse gave off a disgusting stench.

They did not risk abandoning the path, which soon led them to another burning ruin. The fire had been set to a fairly large village, around which there must have been a skirmish because next to the smoldering ruins was a fresh burial mound. Some distance from the mound near the road side stood an oak. On the branches hung acorns.

And people.

‘We have to look.’ Zoltan Chivay decided, putting an end to discussions about risks and dangers. ‘Let’s get closer.’

‘Why the hell,’ Dandelion raised his voice, ‘do you want to look at those hanged men, Zoltan? For loot? I can see from here that they have no boots.’

‘You’re an idiot. This is not about the boots, but the military situation. The developments in the theater of military operations. What are you laughing at? You are a poet, you don’t know about strategy.’

‘I hate to disappoint you, but I do know.’

‘And I tell you, you wouldn’t know strategy if it jumped out of the bushes and kicked you in the ass.’

‘You’re right. Strategy, which jumps out of the bushes, I leave to dwarves. And hanging from an oak, too.’

Zoltan waved his hand and walked to the tree. Dandelion who could not resist his curiosity, spurred on Pegasus, and went after the dwarf. Geralt, after a moment’s reflection, followed them. Milva trailed after him.

The crows that were feeding on the corpses reluctantly rose into the air, squawking and rustling their feathers. Some flew off in the direction of the forest; others simply moved to the higher branches of the huge tree, watching with interest from the shoulder of the dwarf, Field Marshal Duda obscenely insulted their mothers.

On the first of the seven hanged was a board around his neck with the inscription: “Traitor to the Nation”. From the second hung the sign “Collaborator”, the third “Elf Snitch”, the forth “Deserter”. The fifth was a woman wearing only underwear, torn and bloody, her board read “Nilfgaard whore”. Two of the men did not have boards and could it could only be inferred that they were hung by chance.

‘Good news.’ Zoltan Chivay rejoiced, pointing to the boards. ‘See? Our army has passed this way. Our gallant boys have gone on the offensive and repelled the aggressors. And they had, so I see, plenty of time for rest and entertainment.’

‘And what does this mean for us?’

‘That the front has already moved, and separates us from Nilfgaard’s army. We’re safe.’

‘And the smoke in front of us?’

‘Those are ours.’ The dwarf said. ‘Burning the villages where the squirrels were given aid. We are already behind the front, I tell you. From this crossroads the southern route leads straight to Ameria, the fort in between the Chotla and the Ina. The way looks good, we can continue. We no longer have to fear the Nilfgaardians, we are safe.’

‘There is no smoke without fire.’ Milva said. ‘And where there is fire there is something to be burned. I think it is stupid to rush towards the fire. It is stupid and careless to stay on the road, where at any moment we could be surprised by riders. Let’s go back to the woods.’

‘The army of Sodden went this way.’ The dwarf insisted. ‘We are behind the front. We should not be afraid to travel

he road, and if we do come across an army, it will be ours.'

'Risky.' The archer shook her head. 'Were you such a soldier and a strategist, Zoltan, you'd know that the Nilfgaardian cavalry make forays into their opponents outposts. It is possible that there are terrorists here. But we do not know what lies ahead. To the south, the sky is black with smoke; the army burns its way to Aemeria. And we're not behind the front, but at the front. We could run into troops from both sides, deserters, looters or the Scoia'tael. Let's go to the Chotla, but along the forest paths.'

'You're right,' supported Dandelion, 'I also don't like those smoke clouds. Even if Temeria went on the offensive, before us may be Nilfgaardian units. The Black ones penetrate deep into enemy territory. Together with the Scoia'tael, raiding, burning, killing, causing confusion and panic and then turning back. I remember what happened in Upper Sodden during the previous war. I believe we should continue through the forest. The forest will be safer.'

'I wouldn't be so sure.' Geralt said pointing at the last hanged man, who, although hung high, his calf was torn to shreds and in place of his feet, there were only stumps with bones sticking out. 'Look. A ghoul did that.'

'Monsters?' Zoltan Chivay stopped and spat. 'A corpse eater?'

'Exactly. We will need to guard well at night.'

'KRR-rrwa mother!' Field Marshal Duda croaked.

'You took the word right out of my mouth, bird.' Zoltan frowned. 'So we have a dilemma. What do we do? Go into the woods, where there are ghouls, or take the road, where there are troops and marauders?'

'Into the woods.' Milva said with conviction. 'And the denser the better. I prefer ghouls to men.'

\* \* \*

They travelled the forest, initially cautious, tense, and alert and responded to every rustle in the undergrowth. Soon, however, they regained their countenance, humor and their former pace. They did not see any ghouls, or the slightest trace of their existence. Zoltan joked that all the monsters and demons that had eyes, had learned of the approaching army and seen the action of what the volunteers of Vergen had done to the deserters and fled into the deepest wilderness, where they were hiding in fear and chattering teeth.

'They need to guard their wives and daughters.' Milva growled. 'The monsters are aware that there are horny soldiers in the procession, and they would not let even a sheep pass. And if they put clothing on a willow tree, it would be just them and the knot hole.'

Dandelion, who had no longer lost his humour and talkativeness, tightened the strings on his lute and began to compose a couplet to the use of willows, lustful soldiers and knot holes; the dwarf and the parrot competed in helping with the rhymes.

\* \* \*

‘O.’ Zoltan said.

‘What? Where?’ Dandelion asked, while standing in his stirrups and looking into the gorge in the direction the dwarf was looking. ‘I don’t see anything!’

‘O.’

‘Don’t talk like your parrot! O, what?’

‘The river.’ Zoltan replied calmly. ‘It flows into the Chotla. It is called O.’

‘Ahh...’

‘Oh, no!’ Percival Schuttenbach laughed, shaking his head. ‘A flows into the Chotla upstream, well away from here. This is O, not A.’

The ravine, through which the river, with the complicated name ran, was overgrown with nettles which reached above the heads of the dwarves, they had an overwhelming smell of mint and rotten wood and resounded with the constant croaking of frogs. It also had very steep slopes, which proved to be disastrous. The old cart which had until now bravely endured all obstacles and potholes, ended its journey on the banks of the river O. It slipped from the hands of the dwarves, rolling down the hit to the bottom of the ravine, where it shattered into pieces.

‘Rrrrrr... Mother!’ Field Marshal Duda croaked, creating a chorus counterpoint to Zoltan and his company.

\* \* \*

‘Truth be told,’ Dandelion said, eyeing the remains of the cart and the luggage strewn about it. ‘It was a happy accident. Your creaky cart was slowing down the march. Face it Zoltan, we have been lucky as hell that nobody has discovered or pursued us. If we had to run, we could do nothing but leave the cart with all of your packs and sacks.’

The dwarf snorted angrily into his beard, but surprisingly Percival Schuttenbach supported the troubadour.

Support, the witcher saw, which was accompanied by several significant winks. It was assumed the winks were to be stealthy, but the exaggerated pantomime of the little gnome’s face excluded discretion.

‘The poet is right.’ Percival said, grimacing and blinking. ‘We are near the fork between the Chotla and Ina. Before us lies Fen Carn, with the same rough terrain. Passing it would be difficult with the cart. And if we were to meet up with the Temerian army over the Ina, with our cargo... We could have trouble.’

Zoltan rubbed his nose, thinking.

‘Well, good.’ He said finally, looking at the remains of the cart, floating down the river on a lazy current. ‘We’ll separate. Munro, Figgis, Caleb and Yazon will stay here. The rest of us will continue. We will have to load the horses



with provisions and equipment. Munro, you know what to do? You have shovels?’

‘We do.’

‘Do not leave any trace! Mark the spot secretly! And do not forget where you hid everything!’

‘Rest assured.’

‘Catch up to us when you can.’ Zoltan tucked his hatchet into his belt and threw his backpack over his shoulder along with Sihil. ‘We are crossing over O, then along the Chotla to Ina. Farewell.’

‘Interesting.’ Milva muttered to Geralt, when their weakened squad departed on the road, waving farewell to the four dwarves left behind. ‘I wonder what was in those boxes, that they needed to bury them and mark the place. And so that none of us saw.’

‘It’s not our business.’

‘I don’t think,’ Dandelion said softly while carefully guiding Pegasus among the fallen trunks, ‘that the boxes contained clean underwear. They had high expectations for that shipment. I’ve talked to them on many evenings to know what they are hiding.’

‘And what might they be hiding, in your opinion?’

‘Their future.’ The poet looked to see if anyone was listening. ‘Percival is a professional gem cutter; he wants to set up his own workshop. Figgis and Yazon are blacksmiths, and spoke of a forge. Caleb Stratton wants to get married but his bride’s parents expelled him once for being penniless. And Zoltan...’

‘Stop, Dandelion. Gossiping is for women.’

‘I apologize, Milva.’

‘There is no need to.’

Once they cross the river, the dark damp strip of trees became more sparsely and turned into low birch trees and dry grassland. Despite this, they rode slowly. They followed the example of Milva, who immediately after leaving the forest, placed a freckled little girl with braids into her saddle. Dandelion also seated a child on Pegasus, and Zoltan, took two on his chestnut stallion, as he walked alongside holding the reins. But the pace did not increase; the women of Kernow were in no condition to go faster.

\* \* \*

It was almost evening, when after hours of wandering among the gorges and ravines, Zoltan Chivay stopped and

exchanged a few words with Percival Schuttenbach, after which he turned to the rest of the company.

‘Do not worry and do not laugh at me.’ He said. ‘But it seems that I have gotten us lost. I don’t know, dammit, where we are or which way to go.’

‘Don’t talk nonsense.’ Dandelion exclaimed angrily. ‘What do you mean you don’t know? After all, we are following the course of the stream. And there in the ravine, is your river O. Am I right?’

‘You are. But note which direction it flows.’

‘Damn. That’s impossible!’

‘It’s possible.’ Milva said grimly, patiently pulling dry leaves and pine needles from the hair of the girl with freckles, who she was carrying on her horse. ‘All the turns have confused use. We have turned in the wrong direction.’

‘But it is still the river O.’ Dandelion repeated stubbornly. ‘If we stay with it we can’t get lost. The river will meander, and twist, but eventually it will empty into an estuary. It is the order of the world.’

‘Do not play smart, singer.’ Zoltan wrinkled his nose. ‘Shut your mouth. Can’t you see I’m thinking?’

‘No, there’s nothing to suggest it. I tell you again, if we keep to the river, and then...’

‘Stop babbling.’ Milva growled. ‘You’re a city rat. Your world order is enclosed by stone walls; the cobbled streets of your views may be worth something. But look around! Valleys and ravines, steep and overgrown banks. How do we keep to the river? After the ravine slopes down into scrub and swamp, then up again, then down and then back up? Try it a few times without dropping the reins. We have women and children, Dandelion. And evening is coming.’

‘I noticed. I will be silent. Let us hear what you propose as someone who is familiar with the forest.’

Zoltan slapped the parrot on the head, cursing, his finger got caught in a lock of his beard, he pulled at it furiously.

‘Percival?’

‘We roughly know the desired direction.’ The gnome looked at the sun, hanging just above the treetops. ‘The first proposal is this: We turn around and walk away from the mud to dry ground and go through Fen Carn, following the river to the Chotla.’

‘What about the other plan?’

‘The O is shallow. Although after the recent rains it carries more water than normal, it can be easily forded. We move onto the opposite shore. Following the direction of the sun we will come to the junction of the Chotla and Ina.’

‘No.’ said the witcher. ‘The second plan I have definitely ruled out. Nor should you think about it. After the second bank we would sooner or later end up in the mossy forests. That is an ugly place. My advice is to avoid it.’

‘You know these places? You’ve been there before? You know how to get there?’

The witcher rubbed his forehead, taking his time to answer.

‘I’ve been there once,’ he recalled in a low voice. ‘Three years ago. I came from the opposite side, from the east. I was going to Brugge and I wanted to shorten the path. How I escaped from there, I don’t remember. I was brought out half-dead on a cart.’

The dwarf stared at him for a while, but did not ask any more questions.

They turned back in silence. The women from Kernow walked with difficulty, stumbling and supporting the children, but none make a word of complaint. Milva rode alongside the witcher, the little girl with the braids asleep in her arms.

‘If I understand,’ she said, ‘something in those woods three years ago, almost ended your life. You’ve a dangerous craft, Geralt.’

‘I can not deny it.’

‘I know what happened back then,’ boasted Dandelion. ‘You were seriously wounded, a carter drove you out. At his family’s farm you later found Ciri. Yennefer told me.’

At the sound of that name, Milva smiled slightly. This did not escape the attention of Geralt. He decided that when the next time they camped he would box Dandelion’s ears for his uncontrollable tongue. Knowing the poet, it would have no effect; especially considering Dandelion sung everything he knew.

‘Maybe we made a mistake by not going through the moss forests,’ Milva mused aloud. ‘Maybe you could have found your girl... The elves believe that if you re-visit a place where something important happened, you may repeat the event... They call it... Dammit, I forgot. Noose of fate?’

‘The loop.’ Geralt corrected her. ‘The loop of destiny.’

‘Ugh!’ Dandelion spat, ‘can you stop talking about relationships and ropes. Once an elf, from the valley of flowers foretold that I was going to hang from a gallows. I certainly do not believe in these cheap prophecies, but two days ago I dreamed I hanged. I woke up completely covered in sweat, I couldn’t swallow or catch my breath. So do not be surprised now that I don’t like listening to talk of the gallows.’

‘I was not talking to you, but to the witcher.’ Milva said. ‘And close your ears, so you don’t trap any bugs. Well, Geralt? What do you think of the loop of destiny? If you went into the mossy forest would the event repeat?’

‘It is well we turned back.’ He answered curtly. ‘I do not have the slightest desire to repeat that nightmare.’

\* \* \*

‘You’re welcome.’ Zoltan shook his head while looking around. ‘We’ve gotten to a charming place, Percival.’

‘Fen Carn,’ muttered the gnome, scratching the tip of his long nose. ‘The Meadow of the Tombs... I always wondered where the name came from...’

‘Now you know.’

The broad valley before them was covered in the evening mist. As far as the eye could see, the haze covered a sea of ancient burial mounds and worn boulders. Some of the boulders were the usual shapeless lumps. Others, the menhirs and obelisks, were evenly hewn and squared. Still others, standing closer to the center of the stone forest, were grouped in circles, in a way that excluded the accidental work of nature.

‘Certainly,’ continued the dwarf. ‘A charming place to spend the night. An elf cemetery. If I remembered correctly, the witcher, recently mentioned ghouls? Well, know that I can feel them among those tombs. There must be everything. Ghouls, graviers, vampires, devourers, even elfen spirits, the entire troop. All in there. And you know what they are whispering now? There is no need to fetch dinner because it has already come.’

‘Why don’t we turn around?’ Dandelion suggested anxiously. ‘Let’s run away while there is still light?’

‘I am also of the same opinion.’

‘The women are stumbling,’ Milva said angrily. ‘The children fall from their arms. The horses are tired. We must stop, Zoltan, you said before only another half a mile, a mile and a half ago, they need to rest. And now what? You want them to walk a mile back? Shit! Cemetery or no cemetery, they’ll spend the night where they are!’

‘Of course,’ Geralt supported the girl, while he dismounted. ‘Don’t panic. Not all necropolises are just swarms of monsters and ghosts. Fen Carn, while I’ve never been here, if something dangerous had occurred, I would have heard about it.’

No one made a comment, not even Field Marshal Duda. The Kernow women took their children, sat down in a tight crowd, silent and clearly frightened. Percival and Dandelion tethered the horse and let them to graze on lush grass. Geralt, Zoltan and Milva approached the edge of the meadow, watching the cemetery that sank into the shadows and mists.

‘To make matters worse, today the moon is full,’ muttered the dwarf. ‘Oh, tonight will be a feast for the ghouls, I can feel it, oh we are going to give... What is that shining in the south? A kind of glow?’

‘You know that glow,’ Geralt said. ‘Again, someone had lit thatched roofs over somebody’s head. You know what, Zoltan? Somehow I feel safer here in Fen Carn.’

‘I feel it to, but when the sun is up. Hopefully the ghouls let us live up till dawn.’

Milva fumbled in her saddlebags and pulled out something shiny.

‘A silver arrow head.’ She explained to them. ‘I saved it for just this occasion. It cost me five crowns in the bazaar. Can such a thing kill a ghoul, witcher?’

‘I don’t think there are ghouls.’

‘You said so yourself,’ Zoltan snapped. ‘That the hanged man on the oak was eaten by ghouls. And we are in a cemetery now, where there are ghouls.’

‘Not always.’

‘I’ll hold you to your word. You’re a witcher, a specialist, you’ll defend us from them, I hope. Do these ghouls fight better than marauders?’

‘You can’t compare them. I asked you not to panic.’

‘Will this be enough for a vampire?’ Milva turned the silver tip, running her thumb along it to make sure it was sharp. ‘Or a spirit?’

‘It might work.’

‘On my Sihil,’ Zoltan growled, barring his sword, ‘are etched dwarven runes to an ancient dwarven spell. Any ghoul that gets within the reach of my sword will remember me. You’ll see.’

‘Ha,’ Dandelion exclaimed who during their conversation had approached them. ‘So there are the famous secret dwarven runes. What is on the sword?’

“Go fuck the motherfuckers.”

‘Something is moving between the stones!’ Percival suddenly shouted. ‘Ghoul, ghoul!’

‘Where?’

‘There, there! It is hiding behind the rocks!’

‘One?’

‘I saw only one!’

‘It must be hungry as hell to try and get us before night.’ The dwarf spat on his hands and grabbed the hilt of Sihil. ‘Ha! Now they will know that gluttony leads to destruction! Milva, tuck an arrow in his ass and I’ll bag the guts!’

‘I see nothing there,’ Milva whispered with the fletching of the arrow resting on her cheek. ‘Nothing but the weeds among the rocks are moving. Could you be mistaken, gnome?’

‘No,’ protested Percival. ‘Do you see that boulder that looks like a broken table? The ghoul is hidden there, behind that rock.’

‘Stay here.’ Geralt, with a quick movement drew the sword from the sheath on his back. ‘Look after the women and care for the horses. If the ghoul attacks the horses will go crazy. I will go and check it to see what it is.’

‘You’re not going alone,’ said Zoltan. ‘The other day in the meadow, I left because I was scared of smallpox. I could not sleep for two nights from the shame. Never again! Percival, where are you going? To the rear? You are the one who saw the ghoul, now you can take the vanguard. Don’t be afraid, I’m right behind you.’

They stepped carefully among the mounds. They tried to make as little noise in the weeds, which reached above Geralt's knees, and the dwarf and gnomes waists. As they approached the dolmen, they split up, making it impossible for the ghoul to escape. But their strategy was futile. Geralt knew this would happen: his medallion had not wavered at all.

'There is no one,' Zoltan said, looking around. 'Not a soul. It was a hallucination, Percival. A false alarm. You've stirred up fear where none was needed; you really do deserve a kick in the ass.'

'I saw it!' The gnome persisted. 'I saw it jump between the rocks! He was thin and black as a tax collector...'

'Shut up, stupid gnome, because of you...'

'What is that strange odor?' Geralt asked suddenly. 'Do you notice it?'

'You're right.' Said the dwarf, sniffing like a bloodhound. 'It smells weird.'

'Herbs.' Said Percival, sucking in air through his long sensitive nose. 'Wormwood, basil, sage, anise... Cinnamon? What the hell?'

'How do ghouls smell, Geralt?'

'Like carrion.' The witcher looked around quickly, looking for tracks in the grass, then with a few quick steps he returned to the dolmen and tapped the hilt of his sword on the stone. 'Come out,' he said through clenched teeth. 'I know you are in there. Hurry up, otherwise I'll stab my sword through the hole.'

From a perfectly camouflaged pit under the dolmen came a quiet scratching.

'Come out,' repeated Geralt. 'I won't hurt you.'

'Not one hair on your head will fall,' Zoltan assured in a sweet voice, but with a bloodthirsty look in his eyes, as he reached over his shoulder to grab Sihil. 'There is nothing to worry about.'

Geralt shook his head and with a determined gesture order him back. From the hole below the dolmen, came the sound of scratching again and the strong sent of herbs and roots. After a minute they saw grey-streaked hair followed by a noble face with an impressively crooked nose, which did not belong to a ghoul, but a thin middle-aged man. Percival was not mistaken. The man did in fact look like a tax collector.

'I can go without fear?' He asked, lifting his black eyes under shaggy greying eyebrows to Geralt.

'You can.'

The man scrambled out of the hole, brushed his black coat, tied at the waist with something resembling an apron, straighten his canvas bag, causing another wave of herbal scents.

'Gentlemen, I propose that you put away your weapons,' he said in a calm voice, his eyes searching the surroundings. 'You will not need them. As you can see, I do not wear a sword. I never do. I also do not carry anything of worth in my pouch. My name is Emiel Regis. I come from Dillingen. I am a surgeon.'

‘Of course,’ Zoltan Chivay grimaced slightly. ‘Herbalist, barber or surgeon. No offence, but you smell like an apothecary.’

Emiel Regis smiled a thin-lipped smile and raised his hands apologetically.

‘The smell gave you away, sir surgeon,’ said Geralt, sliding his sword into its sheath. ‘Did you have a specific reason why you were hiding from us?’

‘Specific?’ The man turned his black eyes on him. ‘No. Rather a general one. I was simply afraid of you. Such are the times.’

‘True enough.’ The dwarf nodded and pointed with his thumb at the glowing sky. ‘Such are the times. I imagine you are a refugee, like us. Curious, however that you ran so far from your home town of Dillingen just to hide here, to conceal yourself among the graves. Well in war, life can become quite a jumble. You’ve frightened us, and we you. Fear has big eyes.’

‘For my part,’ the man who had introduced himself as Emiel Regis did not look up at them. ‘There is no threat. I hope the reverse is true.’

‘What do you take us for, footpads?’ Zoltan’s beard bristled. ‘We, sir surgeon, we are also refugees. We are heading towards the Temerian border. If you wish, you can join us. The more the merrier, and it is safer than being alone, and a medic could come in handy. We are accompanied by women and children. You don’t happen to have medicines in that stinking bag you carry for skinned feet?’

‘Something can be found,’ the surgeon said quietly. ‘I will help as I can. As to journeying together, I appreciate the offer, but I’m not a refugee, gentlemen. I did not flee Dillingen because of the war, I live here.’

‘What?’ The dwarf took an involuntary step back. ‘You live here? Here, in the cemetery?’

‘The cemetery? Not exactly, I have a hut not far from here. In addition to my house and shop in Dillingen, of course. But I spend the summer here, every year, from June to September, from the solstice to the equinox. I collect medicinal herbs and roots and distill elixirs here...’

‘You know about the war,’ said Geralt, ‘even though you live in a remote area, away from the world and its people. How?’

‘From the refugees that have passed through. Less than two miles from here along the river Chotla, there is a large camp. Grouped there are a couple of hundred refugees, the villagers of Sodden and Brugge.’

‘And the Temerian troops?’ Zoltan said interested. ‘Are they moving forward?’

‘I don’t know about that.’

The dwarf cursed and then squinted at their new acquaintance.

‘So you live here, Mister Regis.’ He drawled. ‘And during the night walk among the graves. Are you not afraid?’

‘Why would I be afraid?’

‘This gentleman here,’ Zoltan pointed to Geralt, ‘is a witcher. He saw signs of ghouls. Walking corpses, do you understand? And it is known that ghouls tend to be the residents of cemeteries.’

‘A witcher,’ the surgeon looked at Geralt with undisguised curiosity. ‘A slayer of monsters. Well that is interesting. Explain to your companions, Sir Witcher, that this necropolis is over a half a millennium old. As for food, ghouls aren’t picky, but after five hundred years of chewing on old bones, they have left.’

‘That is one less worry.’ Zoltan said, looking around. ‘Well, Sir Surgeon let me invite you back to our camp. Do you like cold horse meat?’

Regis looked at them thoughtfully.

‘Thank you,’ he said gravely. ‘But I have a better idea. I invite you to my house. My summer home is more than a hut, rather a cabin. It is small though so you’ll have to sleep under the stars. But next to the cabin is a spring with drinking water. And a fireplace where we can heat the horse meat.’

‘We accept with pleasure.’ The dwarf bowed. ‘There may not be ghouls here, but the thought of spending the night in a cemetery doesn’t appeal to me. Come on, we’ll introduce you to the rest of our company.’

As they approached the camp, the horses snorted and beat the ground with their hooves.

‘Stand a little upwind, Mister Regis.’ Zoltan threw the medic a meaningful look. ‘The smell of sage frightens the mounts, and to me, I’m ashamed to admit it, I associate it with pulling teeth.’

\* \* \*

‘Geralt,’ murmured Zoltan as Emiel Regis disappeared behind a hanging curtain, which substituted as a door for his cabin. ‘Let’s keep our eyes open. I do not like this smelly herbalist.’

‘Any particular reason?’

‘I’m suspicious of people who spend their summers near cemeteries. Additionally, cemeteries far from human settlements. Don’t herbs grown in pleasanter places? This Regis looks more like a grave robber. Surgeons, alchemists and their kind like digging for corpses so they can later do various experiments on them.’

‘Experiments, Zoltan. Such practices are done on fresh corpses. This cemetery is extremely old.’

‘Yeah,’ the dwarf scratch his beard thoughtfully, and watched the Kernow women prepare to spend their night under cherry bushes growing around the cabin of the medic. ‘Could it be he is stealing the valuables hidden in the tombs?’

‘Ask him.’ Geralt shrugged. ‘You accepted his invitation extending his home to us, without affections, and now, suddenly, you have become as suspicious as an old maid given a compliment.’



‘Hmm,’ Zoltan thought. ‘You have a point. But we’re here; we should see what he has in the hut. Oh yes, just to be sure...’

‘Get in there and ask to borrow a fork.’

‘Why a fork?’

‘Why not?’

The dwarf looked up at him, but finally decided to; he strode to the hut, knocked on the door frame and entered. He spent a long time inside, before he again appeared at the door.

‘Geralt, Percival, Dandelion, come see something interesting. Well, go ahead, Regis has invited you.’

The interior of the cabin was dark and filled with heavy, intoxication smells from bundles of herbs and spices hanging on the walls. The only furniture was a bed, also covered in herbs, and a crooked table, covered with countless glass, earthenware and porcelain bottles. The scant light that allowed them to see it all came from a squat, hourglass-like pot-bellied stove. The stove was wrapped around with a web of glowing tubes, bent into arcs and spirals. Under one of these, was a wooden bowl, which was catching clear liquid falling from the tube.

Upon seeing the stove, Percival Schuttenbach widened his eyes, opened his mouth and sigh with undisguised awe. ‘Oh, oh, oh,’ he shouted with an enthusiasm that was impossible to hide. ‘What do I see here? A real alchemical calcinator! And on top an alembic equipped with a rectification device and a copper cooler! Beautiful work! Did you build this yourself, master surgeon?’

‘Yes,’ Emiel Regis modestly acknowledged. ‘I am dedicated to making elixirs, so I have to distill. To extract the fifth essences, as well as...’

He paused, seeing Zoltan place his thumb below the tube to catch a drop and then licked it. The dwarf sighed. Even in the darkness, his ruddy face was a picture of indescribably bliss.

Dandelion could not stand it, so he tasted it too. He moaned softly.

‘Fifth essence,’ he said, smacking his lips appreciatively. ‘Maybe even six or seven.’

‘Well, yes.’ The surgeon smiled slightly. ‘I told you a distillation...’

‘Moonshine.’ Zoltan corrected him indignantly. ‘And what a residue. Try it, Percival.’

‘But I do not understand organic chemistry.’ The gnome said distractedly, on his knees examining the details of the construction of the alchemical stove. ‘It is doubtful I would recognize the ingredients...’

‘It is a distillation of Alraune,’ Regis dispelled his doubts, ‘with the addition of belladonna. The alcohol fermentation enzymes I used...’

‘In other words, yeast?’

‘You could call it that.’

‘Are there any glasses around here?’

‘Zoltan, Dandelion.’ The witcher stood with his hands folded across his chest. ‘Are you deaf? The moonshine is made of mandrake. Leave the kettle alone.’

‘But dear, Geralt.’ The alchemist dug a small beaker from out of the dusty retorts and bottles and cleaned it thoroughly with a rag. ‘There is no need to fear. The mandrake is correctly cured, and the proportions are carefully selected and accurately weighed. For one pound of yeast I get five ounces of Alraune and only half an ounce of belladonna...’

‘It is not about that.’ Zoltan looked at the witcher, he understood the point, he turned serious and carefully backed away from the stove. ‘It is not that, Mister Regis, but about how much the Alraune costs. It is too expensive a drink for us.’

‘Mandragora.’ Dandelion whispered admiringly, pointing to the towering pile in a corner booth resembling small bulbs of sugar beets. ‘This is mandrake? True mandrake?’

‘The female variety,’ said the alchemist. ‘I find it in abundance in the cemetery, where we met. Which is precisely why I spend my summers here.’

The witcher looked meaningfully at Zoltan. The dwarf winked. Regis cracked a half smile.

‘Please, please, gentlemen, if you like, you are cordially invited to a tasting. I appreciate your tact, but in the current situation I have little chance of bringing elixirs to Dillingen during war. It would all go to waste, and therefore do not talk about prices. Excuse me, but I only have one drinking vessel.’

‘One is enough,’ said Zoltan, taking the cup and carefully filling it. ‘To your health, Mister Regis. Uuuuch...’

‘I beg your pardon,’ Regis apologized. ‘The quality of the distillate is still not fully meeting the demanded requirements... This is still a work in progress.’

‘Well, it is the best thing I have drunk in half my life.’ Zoltan caught his breath. ‘Here, poet.’

‘Aaaach... Oh, wow excellent! Try it, Geralt.’

‘For the host.’ The witcher bowed slightly towards Regis. ‘Where are your manners, Dandelion?’

‘I beg your forgiveness, gentlemen,’ the alchemist said. ‘I do not drink. My health is no longer what it was, so I had to give up... many pleasures.’

‘Not even a sip?’

‘It is a matter of principle.’ Regis said quietly. ‘I never violate the principles I set for myself.’

‘You have my admiration. I can only envy such principles.’ Geralt took a sip, after a moment’s hesitation he drank it to the bottom. After tasting it, it was impossible to keep tears from his eyes. It spread a pleasant warmth to his stomach.

‘I’ll get Milva.’ He offered, handing the empty vessel to the dwarf. ‘Don’t drink it all before we return.’

Milva sat with the horses and played with the freckled girl with the braids that she had carried that day in the saddle. When she learned of Regis’s hospitality, she initially shrugged, but it did not take long to convince her.

When they entered the hut, they found the company inspecting the stored mandrake roots.

‘This is the first time I’ve seen one,’ said Dandelion, turning the branched root in his hands. ‘They are indeed, somewhat reminiscent of a man.’

‘Twisted by back pain.’ Zoltan said. ‘And the other, looks like a pregnant woman. And this one, excuse me, looked like to people lying together.’

‘You only have one thing on your mind.’ Milva bravely swallowed the moonshine, and burst into a coughing fit. ‘So... it is a strong spirit! Is it really made from mandrake? Ha, then lets drink then! It’s not every day this happens to us. Thank you, sir surgeon.’

‘The pleasure is all mine.’

The constantly topped up vessel was circulated among those present and provoked a good mood, relaxation and talking.

‘I often used to hear, that the mandrake is a vegetable with great magical power.’ Said Percival Schuttenbach.

‘You can say that again,’ Dandelion confirmed, emptied the cup, shook his head and continued. ‘Many ballads are composed on the subject. Sorcerers add mandrake to elixirs, which provide them with eternal youth. Sorceresses make an ointment with Alraune called glamour. When a sorceress used the ointment, she becomes so beautiful that the people around them eye’s start to pop. I can also tell you that mandrake is a powerful aphrodisiac, used in love magic, especially to break resistant women. Hence the popular name of mandrake: pucelesta. Which means, heaven to whores.’

‘Stupid.’ Milva commented.

‘I heard,’ the gnome said, raising the cup, ‘that if the Alraune root is removed from the ground, it cries and complains as if alive.’

‘Bah!’ Zoltan said, shaking his head. ‘If it only complained! The mandrake, they say, has a scream so horrible you can lose your senses from it, and to top it off it shouts spells and curses at him who snatched it from the ground. Such a risk can pay with your life.’

‘I think it is a story for the donkeys,’ Milva took the cup, drank from it and shuddered. ‘I don’t believe that a plant could have such power.’

‘It has been proven true!’ The dwarf cried passionately. ‘But wise herbalists have invented a way to protect themselves. When they find Alraune they tie a rope to the root and the other end they attached to a dog...’

‘Or a pig.’ Said the gnome.

‘Or a wild boar.’ Dandelion said with exaggerated seriousness.

‘You are stupid, poet. The trick is to get the dog or the pig to pull the weed from the ground, then all the curses fall on it, while the herbalist is safely hidden in the bushes far away, and gets away alive. What, Mister Regis? Did I say something?’

‘The method is interesting,’ admitted the alchemist with a smile, ‘especially for its ingenuity. The problem, in my opinion, is that it is overly complicated. In theory, there should be enough rope without animal traction. I don’t think mandrake have the ability to recognize who is pulling the rope. Spells and curses would always fall on the rope, which is after all cheaper and less cumbersome to use than a dog or a pig.’

‘Are you mocking me?’

‘Not at all. I said I admire the ingenuity. Though the mandrake, in my personal opinion, is not able to cast spell or curses, however, when fresh it is highly toxic. Even the soil around the root can be poisoned. Fresh juice if splashed in the face or on a cut hand, and even inhalation of the vapor, can be fatal. I personally use gloves and a mask on my face, which means I don’t have anything against the method of the rope and a dog.’

‘Hmm...’ thought the dwarf. ‘And what about the terrible screaming the picked Alraune issues?’

‘Mandragora has no vocal chords,’ the surgeon said. ‘This is typical for plants, is it not? However, a toxin which drips from a fresh plant may have a strong hallucinogenic effect. Whispers, voices, screams and other sounds can be perceived sensations by an irritable nervous system.’

‘How could I forget?’ wailed Dandelion, just emptying another cup. ‘Mandragora is still very poisonous! We handled it! And now we sit here drinking it...’

‘Only a fresh root is toxic,’ said Regis. ‘These have been professionally stored and properly cured, the distillate is filtered. There is no reason for concern.’

‘Of course not,’ Zoltan said. ‘You can even run it through nettles, fish scales and old lace. Give me the cup, Dandelion, because you’re holding up the queue.’

The cup started moving again. Everyone sat comfortably on the trampled ground. The witcher hissed and swore under his breath. Carefully he straightened his leg as the knee had a stabbing pain in it again. He saw Regis looking at him intently.

‘A recent injury?’

‘Not very. But it still hurts. Do you have an herb here, capable of pain relief?’

‘It depends on the type of pain.’ The surgeon smiled slightly. ‘And what causes it. In your sweat, witcher, I sense a strange smell. Were you treated with magic? With any magic elixirs or preparations?’

‘I received several medications. I had no idea that they could still be smelled in my sweat. You have an incredibly sensitive sense of smell, Regis.’

‘Everyone has their advantages. As well as their weaknesses. What illness or injury were you magically treated for?’

‘A broken arm and legs.’

‘How long ago was that?’

‘Just over a month.’

‘And you already walk? Incredible. The Dryads of Brokilon, correct?’

‘How do you know this?’

‘Only dryads know the medications that would rebuild a bone so quickly. On the tops of your hands I see dark spots, places through which the purple comfrey and the symbiotic conynhaela penetrated the skin. Only the dryads use conynhaela and purple comfrey doesn’t grow outside of Brokilon.’

‘Bravo. A faultless deduction. However, I’m interested in something else. I broke the bones of my thighs and forearm. Yet I feel a strong pain in the knee and the elbow.’

‘It’s typical,’ the surgeon nodded. ‘The magic of the Dryads rebuilt your damaged bone, but also caused a small revolution in the nerve endings. A side effect most noticeable in the joints.’

‘What can be done for it?’

‘Sadly, nothing. For a long time you will be able to infallibly predicted bad weather. In winter the pain will worsen. I can not recommend any medication for soothing the pain. Especially narcotics. You’re a witcher; it would be unacceptable for your body.’

‘So the best thing is your mandrake.’ The witcher raised the glass that Milva had filled and given to him, and drank to the bottom, then coughed until tears came to his eyes. ‘Damn, I feel better.’

‘I’m not sure,’ Regis said with a tight-lipped smile, ‘you are treating the disease properly. I remember you should cure the causes not the symptoms.’

‘Not for this witcher.’ A ruddy faced Dandelion snorted. ‘For him and his worries, booze will do him good.’

‘You should too.’ Geralt froze the poet with a look. ‘Especially if it numbs your tongue.’

‘Do not count on it.’ The surgeon smiled again. ‘One of the ingredients is belladonna. It contains various alkaloids, including scopolamine. The strong alcohol before you, will inevitable make each of you give me a display of eloquence.’

‘A display of what?’ Percival asked.

‘Eloquence. Sorry. Let us use simpler words.’

Geralt's lips turned up in an imitation of a smile.

'Right,' he said. 'It is easy to fall into mannerisms and start using those words every day. The people around them then consider them a pompous fool.'

'Or by an alchemist.' Said Zoltan, pouring another cup.

'Or by a witcher,' snorted Dandelion, 'who has been reading, in order to impress a certain sorceress. The sorceresses, gentlemen, do not go crazy for convoluted far-fetched tales. Am I right, Geralt? Come on, tell us...'

'Skip a few rounds, Dandelion,' interrupted the witcher coldly. 'Some of the alkaloids have started to act too quickly on you. You talk too much.'

'I might end up with those secrets of yours, Geralt.' Zoltan frowned

'Dandelion has told us nothing new. You can't avoid being a walking legend. The stories of your adventures are played in puppet theaters. Among them is the story of you and a sorceress named Guinevere.'

'Yennefer.' Regis corrected him softly. 'I saw one of those shows. The story of you hunting a djinn, if my memory serves me.'

'I was in that one.' Boasted Dandelion. 'We had fun. I can tell you...'

'Tell it all.' Geralt got up. 'Don't forget to drink and exaggerate. I'm going for a walk.'

'Whoa,' said the dwarf. 'No need to get angry...'

'You don't understand, Zoltan, I'm going to relieve myself. It happens, even to a walking legend.'

\* \* \*

The night was cold as hell. The horses snorted and steam streamed from their nostrils. The surgeons hut in the moonlight looked fabulous. Exactly like the witch's hut in the forest. Geralt buttoned his pants.

Milva, who had left the house shortly after, cleared her throat uncertainly. Her shadow cast a shadow next to the one cast by Geralt.

'Why don't you go back inside?' She asked. 'Are you really offended?'

'No.' he denied.

'So why do you stand here alone in the moonlight?'

‘I’m counting.’

‘Huh?’

‘Since we left Brokilon, twelve days have passed, during which we have travelled about sixty miles. Ciri, so the rumors say, is in Nilfgaard, the capital of the empire, a place that separates me by two thousand five hundred miles. A simple calculation shows that at this rate I’ll get there in a year and four months. What do you say to that?’

‘Nothing.’ Milva shrugged her shoulders and cleared her throat again. ‘I can not count as well as you. I can’t read nor write at all. I’m stupid, a simple wench from a village. I’m not good company for you. Not even for a conversation.’

‘Do not say that.’

‘But it is true!’ she said sharply. ‘Why tell me the days and miles? Do you want my advice? Do you want me to encourage you? To dispel your fears and ward off the sorrow that is worse than a broken bone? I can’t! You need another. Talk to Dandelion. He is wise, learned. Beloved!’

‘Dandelion is a braggart.’

‘Sure. But sometimes he tends to tell the truth. Let’s go back in. I want to drink more.’

‘Milva?’

‘What?’

‘You never told me why you decided to come with me.’

‘You never asked.’

‘I’m asking now.’

‘It is too late. Now I don’t even know.’

\* \* \*

‘Well finally, you’re back.’ Zoltan greeted them cheerfully. ‘Now we are all here, imagine this, Regis has decided to journey with us.’

‘Really?’ Geralt looked at the alchemist. ‘Why the sudden decision?’

‘Zoltan,’ Regis lowered his eyes, ‘made me realize that the war that sweeps around me is much more serious than the stories I have heard from the refugees. Returning to Dillingen is off the table and hiding in the wilderness doesn’t seem

wise. Neither does wandering around alone.'

'And we, though most would not know it to look at us, are safe to travel with. Did the one look you took suffice?'

'Two,' corrected the surgeon. 'One for the women in your care. The second for their children.'

Zoltan belched loudly. The bottom of the cup scratching the tube.

'Appearances can be deceiving,' he joked. 'Maybe we are going to sell those women as slaves? Percival, do something about this machine. We want to drink, but it drips like a running nose.'

'The distillate is cool enough. The spirit will come out warm.'

'Never mind that, the night is cold.'

The liquor stimulated conversation. Dandelion, Zoltan and Percival were flushed, their voices had changed even more – in the case of the poet and the gnome it came out a lisp. They grew hungry and chewed on cold horse meat and horseradish, which was in the hut in decent supply. The alchemist collected a mass of roots as strong as the liquor and they were reduced to tears. But it added fire to the discussion.

Regis showed surprise when it turned out that the final purpose of the journey was not an area in the mountains of Mahakam, which had long been the home of the dwarves. Zoltan, who had become even more talkative than Dandelion, said he would not return under any circumstance to Mahakam, venting his displeasure of the order prevailing there, particularly in regards to the politics and the governor, Brouver Hogg who had absolute power over the dwarven clans.

'Old fart!' He yelled and spat into the coals of the stove. 'When you look at him it is hard to tell if he is alive or stuffed. He almost never moves. It is impossible to understand what he is talking about, because his beard and moustache are glued to a stern withered chin. But he rules everyone, so everyone dances to his music...'

'One can not say that the policies of Lord Hogg are wrong,' said Regis. 'It is thanks to his strong views that, the dwarves have broken away and do not fight in the Scoia'tael commandos. And the pogrom have stopped, no punitive expedition has started on Mahakam. The normalization of relations with people has brought results.'

'Bullshit,' Zoltan drank from the cup. 'The old bastard did not seek any congeniality in the case of the Squirrels, but it was that too many youngsters threw in their jobs in the mines and forges to join with the elven commandos to enjoy freedom and adventure. Once this phenomenon had grown in scale, Brouver Hogg tied it up very shortly. He shitted on people for helping the Squirrels and ignored the humans retaliatory measures, including those accused pogroms. He celebrated because he deemed any dwarves that didn't settled in towns or cities to be renegades. As for the threat of an expedition to Mahakam, do not be ridiculous, there is no danger, and never will be. Which one of the kings would dare undertake anything against the Mahakam? I'll tell you something else, even if the Nilfgaardians occupied the entire valley below Mahakam, they wouldn't dare move. Do you know why? Let me tell you: Mahakam is steel. And not just any kind. There's coal, there is the magnetite ore, and inexhaustible supplies. Everywhere and all for free.'

'And the technology is in Mahakam,' Percival interjected. 'Iron, steel and metallurgy! Blast furnaces, not some shitty chimney. Water and steam hammers...'

'Here, Percival, wet your whistle.' Zoltan passed the gnome a full cup. 'You'll bore us all with your techniques. But not everyone knows that Mahakam exports steel. To the Northern Kingdoms, but also to Nilfgaard. And if someone raised a hand, we would start destroying workshops and flooding mines. And then you humans will go to war with nothing but sticks of wood, flint and donkey jaws.'



‘As annoyed as you are with Brouver Hogg and those in power in Mahakam,’ noted the witcher, ‘you started to say “we.”’

‘Of course,’ confirmed the dwarf with passion. ‘There is such a thing as solidarity, no? I admit that I’m proud that we are smarter than those cocky elves. There is no denying it, huh? The elves have for a couple of hundred years have pretended that you, humans did not exist. They stared into the heavens, smelled the flowers and turned their eyes away from you humans. And when it turned out that this was useless, they suddenly woke up and laid their hands on weapons. They decided to kill and be killed. And we, dwarves? We adapted. You believe you have conquered us, you must be dreaming. We have conquered you. Economically.’

‘Truth be told,’ Regis said, ‘it was easier for you to adapt than the elves. Elves integrate their country and territory, you integrate your clan. Where your clan lives, that is your homeland. Even if by chance some extremely short-sighted ruler attacked Mahakam, you’d flood your mines and destroy your workshops without regret and move elsewhere. Maybe to another distant mountain. Even into a human city.’

‘Right! In your cities we can live very well.’

‘Even in the ghettos?’ Dandelion gasped after taking another mouthful of moonshine.

‘And what is wrong with the ghettos? I like to live among my own kind. Why bother to integrate?’

‘So we may enter the guilds.’ Percival wiped his nose with his sleeve.

‘In the end they’ll allow it,’ the dwarf spoke with conviction, ‘and if not, then we’ll start our own guilds, and give them some healthy competition.’

‘But in Mahakam it is safer than in the towns and cities,’ Regis said. ‘Cities can be burned and destroyed during turbulent times. It would be sensible to wait out the war in the mountains.’

‘Those who feel like it can go.’ Zoltan took another cup. ‘I prefer freedom, and I can not find that in Mahakam. You can not imagine what it is like under the old government. They spoke recently about the regulation of affairs, what they call social relations. For example, if you can wear suspenders or not. Eat fish immediately or wait until the jelly is set. If you play the ocarina in accordance with our centuries-old traditions, or if played with the harmful influences and decadence of the rotten human culture. After many years of work, you can apply for a marriage permit. How far from the mine are you allowed to whistle. And other similar matters of great interest. No boys, I’m not going back to Mount Carbon. I have no desire to spend the rest of my years down the mine. Forty years on the bottom, breathing methane was enough. But we have other plans, right, Percival? We already have a secured future...’

‘Future, future...’ The gnome emptied the cup, blew his nose and looked at the dwarf with his bleary eyes. ‘Do not say a peep, Zoltan. Because we can still be caught, and then our future will be the noose... Or Drakenborg.’

‘Shut your mouth.’ Snarled the dwarf, looking at him menacingly. ‘You’ve said too much!’

‘Scopolamine.’ Regis muttered under his breath.

\* \* \*

The gnome talked nonsense. Milva frowned. Zoltan, forgetting that he already told everyone about the old fart, Hogg the Mahakam thane, started again. Geralt, forgetting he had already been told or this, listened. Regis also listened and even added comments, completely calm about being the only sober one among those present. Dandelion strummed his lute and sang.

*It is not unusual beautiful women are hard to see,*

*The more proud the tree, the high you have to climb it.*

‘Idiot.’ Milva commented. Dandelion continued unfazed.

*A girl can be a tree but a fool who is not, should get an ax and end the problem.*

‘The grail...’ Percival Schuttenbach muttered. ‘The grail... Made from a single piece of milky opal... Oh, so great... I found it on top of Montsalvat. The edge was rimmed with jasper and the base was made of gold. A veritable wonder...’

‘Do not give him more spirits.’ Zoltan said.

‘What a minute,’ Dandelion said with interest, also mumbling. ‘What happened to this legendary grail?’

‘I traded it for a mule. I needed a mule to carry the load... Corundum and crystalline carbon. I had this... Eeep ... A bunch of... Eeep... Cargo, it was heavy, without a mule I couldn’t move it... What did I want with a grail?’

‘Corundum? Carbon?’

‘Well, to you they would be rubies and diamonds. Very... eeep... useful.’

‘For what?’

‘For drills and files. For bearings. I had a whole pile...’

‘Do you hear that, Geralt?’ Zoltan waved his arms in the air, almost knocking himself over on his back. ‘He dreams of a heap of diamonds. Beware, Percival, who you meet while asleep! He may take your diamonds.’

‘Dreams, dreams,’ Dandelion stammered again. ‘And you, Geralt? Have you dreamed of Ciri again? Because you must know, Regis, that Geralt has prophetic dream! Ciri is a Child Surprise, Geralt is tied to her by ties of destiny, and therefore he sees her in his dreams. Know that we are also headed to Nilfgaard to retrieve our Ciri, who has been kidnapped by the Emperor Emhyr. Whatever it takes to get her, the son of a bitch, we’ll get her before he realizes! I would say more to you, boys, but it is a secret. A terrible, deep, dark secret... No one can know about this, understand? Nobody!’

‘I have not heard anything,’ Zoltan said, looking boldly at the witcher. ‘It seems I have an earwig in my ear.’

‘These earwigs are a real pest,’ said Regis, pretending to poke in his ear.

‘We travel to Nilfgaard...’ Dandelion rested on the dwarf. It should have helped him maintain balance, but instead proved to be highly unstable. ‘But it as I said, a secret. A secret goal!’

‘Indeed, artfully concealed,’ nodded the surgeon, glancing at the pale with anger, Geralt. ‘Analyzing the direction of your journey, even the most suspicious person could never guess the purpose of your trip.’

\* \* \*

‘Milva, what is it?’

‘Do not talk to me, you drunken fool.’

‘Hey, she’s crying! Hey, look...’

‘Go to hell, I say!’ The archer wiped her tears. ‘Because I’ll hit you between the eyes, little shit... Pass the cup, Zoltan...’

‘I don’t know where it is...’ muttered the dwarf. ‘Ah, here it is. Thanks, surgeon... And where the hell is Schuttenbach?’

‘He went out. Some time ago. Dandelion, I recall you promised to tell me a story about a child surprise.’

‘Right away. Now, now, Regis. Just a little drink... And I’ll tell you everything... About Ciri and the witcher... In detail...’

‘For fuck’s sake bastards!’

‘Keep you voice down, dwarf! You are going to wake the children sleeping outside the hut!’

‘Don’t be angry, archer. Here, have a drink.’

‘Eeeech.’ Dandelion surveyed the hut with blurred vision. ‘I just saw the Countess de Lettenhove...’

‘Who?’

‘Whatever. Damn, this moonshine really loosens the tongue... Geralt, can I pour you another? Geralt!’

‘Leave him alone.’ Milva said. ‘Let him dream.’

\* \* \*

Standing on the edge of the village the barn rumbled with music, the music caught up to them before they had even rode up, filled with excitement. Unconsciously they began to sway in their saddles walking the horses at a trot, first in rhythm to the beating of the drum, then in accordance with the melody and flutes. The night was cold, the moon shone bright. In the light, the barn looked like an enchanted castle from the stories.

In the light falling from the door was the flickering shadows of men and women dancing.

When they entered, the music immediately stopped, dying in mid note. The villagers sweaty and tired from dancing away, huddled along the walls and posts. Ciri, walking beside Mistle, saw the startled eyes of the girls and women, hard, unfriendly looks from the younger boys and men. She heard whispering and muttering, in a short time it became as loud as the bleating of bagpipes, and the hum of a violin. They whispered: 'Rats, Rats... Bandits...'

'Do not worry,' Giseller said aloud, and threw a money pouch to the silent musicians. 'We came to have fun. A feast is for everyone, right?'

'Where is the beer?' Kayleigh shook his pouch. 'Where is your hospitality?'

'And why is everyone so silent?' Spark looked around. 'We came from the mountains for fun. Not a funeral.'

Finally one of the villagers ventured forth and went to Giseller with an earthen pitcher, with foam dripping over the edge. Giseller bowed and took a deep drink, and politely thanked them. Several of those present raised their pints in toast. But the other remained silent.

'Hey, neighbors,' said Spark, 'I want to join the dance, but as you can see, you'll first need to start moving!'

Along one wall of the barn was a long table, full of heavy earthenware. The elf clapped her hands and jumped nimbly onto the oak table. The villagers picked up the dishes as quickly as possible, those that were not managed to be taken away, were viscously kicked by Spark.

'Well, gentlemen,' Spark said with her fists on her hips, shaking her hair. 'Show me what you know. Music!'

She did a quick step with her heels. The drum and dulcimer repeated it. The flutes and fiddles picked up the melody, making it more complicated, challenging Spark to change pace and rhythm. The elf, light and colorful as a butterfly, easily adjusted. The villagers began to clap.

'Falka!' Spark shouted, squinting her eyes. 'You're quick with the sword! What about dancing? Can you follow the steps?'

Ciri, released herself from Mistle's arms, unwound the scarf from her neck and took off her beret and jacket. She jumped onto the table next to the elf. The villagers cheered, the drums boomed and the bagpipes whined.

'Play, Musicians!' Spark cried. 'Keep your ear! And with spirit!'

Leaning to one side and throwing her head far back the elf tapped her feet, danced, beating her heels in a rhythmic and rapid staccato. Ciri, captivated by the rhythm, repeated the steps. The elf laughed, jumped and changed the rhythm. Ciri with a violent jerk of her head, shook her hair off her forehead, she repeated the steps perfectly. Dancing both at the same time, they were mirror images of each other. The villagers shouted and applauded. The melody raised above the deep bass growl of the drums and the bleating of the bagpipes.

Both danced, as straight as a cane, touching elbows, with their hands supported on hips. The plates and table shook with the rhythm of their heels, in the light of tallow candle and oil lights, the dust stirred.

‘Faster!’ Spark urged the musicians. ‘With more vigor!’

It was not dancing, it was an obsession.

‘Dance, Falka! Forget about everything!’

Heel, toe, heel, toe, step forward, step back, jump, strafe, move arms, toss her head, heel toe, heel toe. The table was shaking, the light quivered, the audience wavered, everything was spinning, the whole barn danced, danced... villagers cried, Giselher screamed, Asse screaming, Mistle laughing and clapping, all clapping and stomping, the barn shaking, the earth shaking, the world shaking on its foundations. World? What world? The world is no more, nothing, just the dance, dance... Heel, toe, heel... Spark’s elbow... Fever, fever... Just a fiddle playing, flutes, bagpipes, drums raising and lowering the tempo, there is no need, there is just the rhythm, Spark and Ciri, their heels, the table swaying, rumbling and sways the whole barn... The rhythm, the rhythm is them, the music is them, they are the music. Spark dances, her dark hair swaying around her forehead and shoulders. The strings of the fiddles song bears a fever, a hotness, which reaches to the highest registers. The blood pounds in her temples.

Forget. Forget.

‘I am Falka. I was always Falka! Dance, Spark! Clap, Mistle!’

The fiddle and the flute played a sharp closing note. Spark and Ciri end their dance by stomping their heels, their elbows continuing to touch. Breathless, shaky, sweaty, they dash to each other, to embrace, each covered in sweat, heat and happiness. The barn exploded with a loud cry and the applause of dozens of hands.

‘Falka, you devil,’ Spark gasped for breath. ‘When we get tired of robbery, we can head into the world to make money as dancers...’

Ciri was also gasping for breath. She was incapable of speech and could only laugh breathlessly. Tears ran down her face.

The crowd suddenly cried in agitation. Kayleigh violently pushed a villager, the villager pushed Kayleigh back, both struggled against each other, flailing with fists. Reef quickly approached them and in the light of the torches a dagger flashed.

‘No, Stop!’ Spark screamed shrilling ‘Don’t fight! This is a night of dance!’

The elf took Ciri’s hand and they both jumped down from the table onto the trampled ground.

‘Musicians, play! Who wants to show us how to dance, who is brave?’

The monotone humming of the bagpipes became a prolonged wail, followed by the sharp edge of the fiddle. The villagers laughed, overcoming their shyness. One of them, a tall blonde, proceed to Spark. The second, younger and slimmer, timidly bowed before Ciri. She proudly tossed her head, but soon smiled delightedly. The boy grabbed Ciri around the waist. She placed her hands on his shoulders. His touched pierced like a fiery blade, filled with hidden desire.

‘With vigor, musicians!’

The barn shook with shouts, vibrating to the rhythm and the melody.

Ciri danced.

*Vampir: or vampire, one who is undead, revived by Chaos. After their first life is lost, their second life is lived in the dark of night. They leave their tombs, in the light of the moon and attack sleeping people, most likely young women and without waking them from their slumber, drink their sweet blood.*

Physiologus

*The villagers had eaten garlic in great abundance, and for greater certainty, placed garlands of garlic around their necks. Some, especially the women, placed the garlic everywhere. The whole village smelled horribly of garlic, the villagers then thought they were safe and that there was nothing the vampire could do to them. Great was their surprise when the vampire arrived at midnight, he was not frightened and began to laugh and started grinding his teeth in delight. "It is good," he cried "that ye are seasoned, because I eat meat well-seasoned and it is more to my tastes. Also throw on some salt and pepper and do not forget the mustard."*

Silvester Bugiardo, *Liber Tenebrarum* or *The Book of Scary but true tales that have never been explained by science*

*The moon shines, the dead flies, the dress flutters, flutters...*

*Miss, are you not afraid?*

Folk song

## CHAPTER FOUR

The birds, as usual, proceeded the sunrise by filling the grey, misty morning silence with a veritable explosion of chirping. As always, the first who were prepared to march were the women and children of Kernow. Equally fast and energetic was the surgeon Emiel Regis, with a walking stick and a leather bag on his shoulder. The rest of the company, who had enjoyed the evening with the distillery, were not so fresh. The cold morning woke up and energized the revellers, but was not completely able to eliminate the effects of the mandrake moonshine. Geralt woke up in a corner of the cabin with his head in Milva's lap. Zoltan and Dandelion lay in a pile of roots, snoring so loudly that the bundles of herbs on the wall swayed. Percival was found behind the cabin, curled up next to a small tree covered with cherries, lying on a straw mat, Regis used to clean muddy boots. All five betrayed clear, although different symptoms of fatigue, as well as an intense desire to quench their thirst at the spring.

However, when the mist had been dispelled and the red ball of the sun blazed on the crown of the pines and larches of Fen Carn, the company was on its way, marching swiftly among the tombs. Regis led, behind him followed Percival and Dandelion, singing a song about three sisters and an iron wolf. Behind them stomped Zoltan Chivay, leading his chestnut stallion by the bridle. The dwarf had found in the hut of the surgeon a gnarled piece of ash wood, which he was banging against the menhirs, as he passed he wished the long dead elves, eternal rest. For his part, Field Marshal Duda, who sat on his shoulder, shouted from time to time, but his curses somehow seemed tired and unconvincing.

The least resistant to the effects of the mandrake proved to be Milva. She marched with great difficulty, she was sweaty, pale and irritated like a wasp. She did not respond to the chirpy girl with the braids she carried in her saddle. Geralt thought it best not to make conversation, the more so because he also was not in a good humour. The fog and the song being sung loudly about the iron wolf, masked the sounds of a group of peasants they came upon suddenly. The peasants, meanwhile, had heard the company coming from afar and were waiting, standing motionless among the tombs that rose from the earth, their grey sackcloth clothing camouflaged them perfectly. Zoltan almost stuck one with his stick, think they were a tombstone.

‘Uh oh!’ He shouted ‘Sorry, neighbour! I didn’t see you there. Good morning! Hello!’

A chorus of voices from ten gloomy eyed peasants mumbled a greeting. The peasants wielded shovels, hoes and wooden pegs in their hands.

‘I said Good morning.’ repeated the dwarf. ‘I guess you are from the Chotla camp. Correct?’

Instead of answering, one of the men pointed at Milva’s horse.

‘Black horse,’ he muttered. ‘Do you see?’

‘Black horse,’ said a second man, licking his lips. ‘It will be useful to us.’

‘Huh?’ Zoltan saw the looks and gestures. ‘A black horse, so what? It’s a horse, not a giraffe, there are no surprises there. What are you doing here, neighbours, in the cemetery?’

‘And you?’ the peasant cast a look of disgust at the company. ‘What are you doing here?’

‘We bought this land.’ The dwarf looked him straight in the eye and tapped his stick on a menhir. ‘I am measuring the steps, to make sure we were not cheated on acres.’

‘And we are here hunting a vampire!’

‘What?’

‘A vampire.’ The eldest of the peasant emphatically repeated, scratching his forehead under a dirty, stiff felt hat. ‘Somewhere here he must have a lair, the demon. We have ash stakes, which we’ll pierce his heart with so he will never rise again.’

‘I have holy water which has been blessed by a priest!’ Another peasant cried eagerly, shaking the jar lightly. ‘It will annihilate the bloodsucker forever!’

‘Ha, ha.’ Zoltan said with a smile. ‘Hunting I see and well prepared as well. A vampire, you say? Well you are in luck, we have a specialist in the company, of ghouls there ...’

He stopped in midsentence, because the witcher had strongly kicked him in the ankle.

‘Who has seen the vampire?’ Geralt asked, giving a stern look to his companions ordering them to be quiet. ‘How did you know that it could be sought here?’



The peasants whispered among themselves.

‘No one has seen him,’ the man in the felt hat, finally admitted, ‘nor heard him. How do we see him when he flies at night in the dark? How are we going to hear him when he flies with the wings of a bat without making a sound?’

‘We have not seen the vampire,’ said another peasant, ‘but we have seen the traces of his work. During the full moon of the last two nights the vampire has killed two people. One female and one boy. It was terrible! The unfortunate ones had been torn to pieces and all the blood from their veins drank. So are we to wait idly for the third night?’

‘Who said that the perpetrator is a vampire and not some other monster or predator? Whose idea was it to search the cemetery?’

‘Our holy priest told us. He is a learned and pious man, thanks to the gods that he came to our camp. He immediately realized it was a vampire that assails us. As punishment for having neglected our prayers and temple donations. He is now at the camp praying and commanded us to seek the tomb where the dead one sleeps during the day.’

‘And why here?’

‘Where else would you find the tomb of a vampire if not in a cemetery? And this is after all an elven graveyard; every child knows that the elves are a vile and godless race, that one of every two elves is condemned to die again! All of this evil is because of the elves!’

‘And the priests’ Zoltan nodded seriously. ‘True. Every child knows. How far away is this camp of yours?’

‘Oh, not far ...’

‘Do not give the location to them, father,’ shouted a boy with shaggy hair and eyebrows, the same one who had shown his displeasure before. ‘The devil knows who the hell they are, they could be a gang. Let them give us the horse and then they can be on their way.’

‘You speak the truth,’ the old peasant said. ‘We must finish the task, because time is running out. Give us the horse. The black one. We need it to find the vampire. Take down the child from the saddle, woman.’

Milva, who during the entire conversation was staring impassively at the clouds, slowly looked down at the peasant, her features sharpened dangerously.

‘Are you talking to me, pig?’

‘Of course you. Give us the black horse, we need it.’

Milva wiped her sweaty neck and clenched her teeth. The look in her tired eyes became that of a wolf.

‘Where are you going, fellows?’ The witcher smiled, trying to alleviate the escalating situation. ‘Why do you need the horse, which you ask for so politely?’

‘And how can we otherwise find the tomb of the vampire? Everyone knows that if you ride around the cemetery on the back of a black horse, when it stops in front of a grave and refused to move, that is where the vampire is. Then we

must dig it up and drive a stake through its heart. We must have the black horse!’

‘Could you not use another coloured horse?’ Dandelion asked conciliatory, offering the reins of Pegasus to the peasant.

‘We can not.’

‘Then you are unlucky,’ Milva said through clenched teeth, ‘because I’m not giving up my horse.’

‘Why will you not give it? Have you not been listening to what I said, woman? We must...’

‘You do. But it is not my business.’

‘There is an amicable solution.’ Regis said softly. ‘As I understand, Miss Milva is averse to putting her horse into someone else’s hands...’

‘You can be sure of that.’ The archer said, spitting loudly. ‘I shudder at the thought.’

‘So that the wolf and the sheep remain happy, healthy and serene,’ the surgeon continued, ‘I propose that Lady Milva rides the stallion and performs the necessary circuit of the necropolis.’

‘I will not ride around the cemetery!’

‘No one asked you, girl!’ Cried the peasant with the hair in his eyes. ‘We should just take the horse. Women belong in the kitchen with the pots and stove. Although a girl, may be useful after we draw the monster out, as the tears of a virgin when thrown on a vampire, burn like a firebrand. But the woman must be clean and not touched by a man. I can’t see what benefit you’d be.’

Milva took a step forward and swiftly threw her right fist. There was a crunch, the boy’s head flew back and his shaggy neck and chin became a perfect target. She took another step and hit him in the throat with an open hand, reinforcing the momentum of the blow with a twist of her hips and shoulders. The young man leaned back, tripped over his own feet and fell with an audible crack, striking the back of his head against a boulder.

‘Now you can see what I’m worth.’ The archer said, her voice trembling with rage, as she rubbed her fist. ‘Whose the man now, and who belongs with the stove? There is nothing better than a fist fight. The one still standing on their feet is the man and the one on the ground is the fool. Am I right oaf?’

The peasants hurried to agree, they stared at Milva with their mouths hanging open. The peasant with the felt hat knelt down next to the young man and patted him on the cheek. Without effect.

‘Dead,’ he moaned, looking up. ‘He is dead. What have you done, woman? You killed this man for nothing?’

‘I did not mean to.’ Milva whispered, dropping her hands and going pale. Then she did something that nobody, absolutely nobody expected.

She turned, bent, leaning her forehead against a boulder and vomited violently.

\* \* \*

‘What’s wrong with him?’

‘A slight concussion.’ Regis replied, rising and tying his bag. ‘His skull is thick. He regained consciousness. He can remember his name and what happened. This is a good sign. The lively emotions of Lady Milva did not, fortunately, have consequences.’

The witcher looked at the archer, who was sitting next to them on rock, her eyes lost in the distance.

‘She isn’t a delicate lady susceptible to such emotions,’ he muttered. ‘I would blame the residue of the belladonna from yesterday.’

‘She has vomited before.’ Zoltan interjected quietly. ‘The day before yesterday, at dawn. Everyone was still asleep. I think it was because of the mushrooms we got in Turlough. I have also had a sore gut for two days ‘

Regis gave the witcher a strange look from under his greying eyebrows, smiled mysteriously and wrapped himself in his black cloak. Geralt went to Milva and cleared his throat.

‘How do you feel?’

‘Miserable. How is the boy?’

‘He’ll be fine. He regained consciousness. Regis, however, forbade him to get up. The peasants are assembling a stretcher; we’ll take him to camp between two horses.’

‘Take my horse.’

‘We are using Pegasus and a chestnut. They are calmer. Come on, it is time to be on our way.’

\* \* \*

The enlarged company now resembled a funeral procession, and move at the same rate.

‘What do you think of their vampire?’ Zoltan Chivay asked the witcher. ‘Do you believe their story?’

‘I have not seen the victims. I can not say anything in advance.’

‘It is obviously nonsense,’ Dandelion said with conviction. ‘The peasants said the victims had been torn apart.’

Vampires don't do this; they bite into an artery and suck the blood, leaving behind two clear signs of fangs. The victims often survive. I read about it in a specialized book. There were also engravings depicting vampire bites on the necks of virgin swans. What do you think, Geralt?

'What can I say? I've not seen these engravings. I also don't know a lot of virgins.'

'Don't mock. You've seen more than once the signs of a vampire bite. Have you ever encountered a vampire that tears its victim to pieces?'

'No. It doesn't happen.'

'Never, if we are dealing with higher vampires,' Emiel Regis joined the conversation. 'From what I understand, the victims of Alps, Katakan, Mula, Bruxa, Nosferat are not hurt terribly. However, Fleders and Ekimma are quite brutal with their victims.'

'Well done,' Geralt looked at him with unfeigned admiration. 'You did not miss any kind of vampire. And you have not mentioned any of the mythical ones, which only exist in fairy tales. Truly, an impressive knowledge. So you would know that Fleders and Ekimma do not live in this climate.'

'That's nice,' said Zoltan, waving his stick around. 'But what in our climate is capable of tearing a woman and man apart? Were they torn apart in a fit of rage?'

'The list of creatures that this could be attributed to is quite long. It could be, for example a pack of feral dogs, plagues of which are quite common during times of war. You can not imagine what these dogs are capable of. Half of the victims attributed to chaotic monsters are actually on account of packs of stray mutts.'

'Exclude monsters then?'

'Of course not. It could have been a striga, gravier, ghoul, harpies ...'

'But not a vampire?'

'Probably not.'

'The peasants spoke of a priest,' Percival reminded them. 'Do priests know about vampires?'

'Some are versed in many things, often their opinions are worth hearing. Unfortunately, not all of them.'

'Especially not those who roam the forests with refugees,' snorted the dwarf. 'More than likely it will be a superstitious fanatic from the forest. He sent this expedition into your graveyard, Regis. When collecting mandrake during the full moon, did you ever notice a vampire? Even a little one?'

'No, never.' The surgeon adopted a half-smile. 'And no wonder. The vampire, as you heard, flies in the darkness on bat wings, without any noise. It would be easy to miss.'

'And even easier to see where it is not and never has been,' confirmed Geralt. 'When I was younger, quite a few times I've wasted time and energy chasing illusion and superstition, that a whole village had described to me, including

the mayor. Once I stayed for two months in a castle threatened by a vampire. There was no vampire. But there was a good cook.'

'No doubt there were those cases. However, where the vampire rumour was justified,' Regis said, without looking at the witcher. 'Then, I imagine, the time and energy was not used in vain. The monster died from your sword?'

'Sometimes.'

'Either way,' said Zoltan, 'the peasants are in luck. I intend to wait at the camp for Munro Bruys and the boys. Nor could it hurt to rest. And whatever killed the girl and the boy, better look out, because there will be a witcher in the camp.'

'And while we're at it,' Geralt pursed his lips, 'I'll ask you not to go around telling everyone who I am and my name. This goes for you to, Dandelion.'

'As you wish.' The dwarf nodded. 'You have your reasons. Well, you warned us just in time, because the camp is already in sight.'

'And in earshot,' Milva said, breaking a long silence. 'The clamour sounds like fear.'

'That sound you hear,' said Dandelion in an instructive tone, 'is the typical symphony of a refugee camp. As usual, issued by the throats of hundreds of people, as well as cows, sheep and poultry. The solo part is executed by nagging women, children fighting, the cock crowing and a donkey, which, if I'm not mistaken, someone has shoved a thistle under its tail. The title of the symphony is: "The human community struggles to survive."'

'The symphony,' Regis said, turning up his arched nose, 'is usually acoustic-olfactory. From the group of people fighting for survival arises the delightful smell of cabbage stew and vegetables, without which, it seems, they can not survive. The distinctive accent of perfume also forms the effect of physiological needs, handled wherever they can, usually on the outskirts of the encampment. I could never understand why the struggle for survival manifested a reluctance to dig latrines.'

'May you be swept away with the devil for all your clever chatter,' Milva said angrily. 'Instead of using fifty unintelligible words, use just three: Cabbage and shit.'

'Cabbage and shit always comes in pairs,' Percival Schuttenbach proclaimed a profound truth. 'One produces the other. Perpetuum mobile.'

\* \* \*

Soon they had arrived in the bustling, stinking camp, between the fires, carts and sheds, they immediately became the center of interest to all of the refugees gathered here, which was a good two hundred, and perhaps even more. The interest grew rapidly and in ways difficult to believe - suddenly someone shouted, suddenly someone screamed, suddenly someone jumped onto someone's neck, someone started laughing wildly and someone started sobbing. Confusion arose. From the cacophony of male, female and children's voices it was initially difficult to deduce what was happening, but soon the matter was clarified. Two of the women from Kernow who had been traveling with them had found in the camp their husband and his brother, who they had thought had died or disappeared without a trace during the maelstrom of war. The joy and tears were endless.

‘Something as trivial and melodramatic,’ Dandelion said with conviction, pointing his finger at the touching scene, ‘can only happen in real life. If I tried to finish one of my romances this way, I would be made fun of mercilessly.’

‘Inevitably,’ Zoltan confirmed. ‘Although all are glad of something so banal. It relieves us when destiny is favourable, instead of continually crushing. Come, we’ve delivered the women. In the end they finally got here. Come on, there is no use standing here.’

The witcher felt for a moment to propose that they wait for a bit, in case any of the women want to express their gratitude to the dwarves. He abandoned it though, as there was no indication. The women, exultant with their meeting had ceased to notice them at all.

‘What are you waiting for?’ Zoltan looked at him sharply. ‘Until they shower you with flowers in thanks? Until they anoint you with honey? Let’s go, there is nothing here for us.’

‘You are undoubtedly right.’

They had not gone far when a shrill little voice stopped them. The girl with the freckles and braids caught up to them. She was panting and in both hands she held a bouquet of wildflowers.

‘Thank you,’ she squeaked, ‘for caring for me and my brother and mother. You have been good to us and all that. I picked some flowers for you.’

‘Thank you.’ said Zoltan Chivay seriously.

‘You are good,’ the little girl added, placing one flower in her pigtail. ‘I do not believe what the old woman said. You are not disgusting underground goblins. You are not a white freak from hell, and you Uncle Dandelion, you’re not a gaudy peacock. The old woman lied. And you Aunt Milva, you’re no pervert with a bow, Aunt Milva, I like you. For you I’ve picked the prettiest flowers.’

‘Thank you.’ said Milva with a sad voice.

‘We all thank you.’ Zoltan repeated. ‘Hey, Percival, you disgusting underground goblin, give the child a present. Something to remember us by. Do you have in your pockets a worthless stone?’

‘I have, here, young lady. This is a beryllium aluminium silicate, commonly known as...’

‘An emerald.’ Finished the dwarf. ‘Do not confuse the child, she will not remember anyway.’

‘Oh lovely! Green! Thank you very, very much!’

‘Take care.’

‘And don’t lose it.’ Dandelion muttered. ‘Because that stone is worth a much as a small farm.’

‘Bah,’ Zoltan said, planting on the bonnet of flowers he received from the girl. ‘A stone is a stone, what else can you say. Take care, girl. Let us go, we can set up camp by the ford and wait for Munro Bruys, Yazon Varda and the others. They should be along soon. It is strange we have not seen them. Damn, I forgot to take away the cards. I bet they are

sitting somewhere and playing cards!’

‘We must get fodder for the horses,’ Milva said. ‘And drink. Let’s go down to the river.’

‘Maybe we will be able to find some hot food.’ Dandelion said. ‘Percival, take a tour of the camp and make use of your nose. We can eat where there are the best cooks.’

To their surprise, the way to the river was fenced and guarded and those guarding the river demanded a penny per horse. Zoltan and Milva began to get angry, but Geralt, not wanting any problems or the associated publicity, calmed them. Surprisingly, it was Dandelion who dug up a few coins from the bottom of his pocket.

Percival Schuttenbach soon appeared, sullen and angry.

‘Did you find something to eat?’

The gnome blew his nose and wiped his fingers on the fleece of a sheep returning from the river.

‘I found it. I don’t know whether we can afford it. Here they want money for everything and the prices made me fall on my ass. For flour and barley they ask a crown a pound. A bowl of watery soup, two nobles. A bowl of fish caught in the northern pike of Chotla which in Dillingen cost a pound ...’

‘And feed for the horses?’

‘One measure of oats, a thaler.’

‘How much?’ cried the dwarf. ‘How much?’

‘How much,’ Milva growled. ‘Just ask the horses how much. If we leave them to eat grass, they will fall. And on top of that there isn’t any grass around here. With the local circumstances there is nothing we can do. We could haggle with the peasant selling the oats and have Dandelion give him the rest of his money. Or from Zoltan and his parrot, he could receive a nasty stream of abuse, which, of course would do nothing. But the horses are eager to get their heads in a bag of feed.’

‘Bloody rip off!’ Cried the dwarf, venting his anger with blows of his stick on the passing wheels of the carts. ‘I wonder if we are allowed to breathe for free, or if he is charging for every breath. Or for every shit!’

‘You’re not far from the truth,’ said Regis. ‘The satisfaction of physical needs also costs here. Do you see that tent? The man who stands before it? He is marketing the charms of his daughter. The price is negotiable. A moment ago I saw a chicken and some tobacco accepted.’

‘I predict a bad end for your race,’ Zoltan said grimly. ‘Every rational creature in this world, when they fall into poverty, misery and unhappiness, commonly join with their kinsmen, because among them it is easier to survive the bad times, because they help each other. But among you humans, each of you looks at only how to make something out of misfortune. If hungry, then food is not distributed, the weakest is devoured. Such a procedure makes sense for wolves, allowing the individual to survive healthier and stronger. But among intelligent races such selection usually allows the dominant and biggest bastards to survive. Analyze this how you want.’

Dandelion objected violently, and started to protest and bring forth cases of price gouging and utilitarianism by dwarves, but Zoltan and Percival drowned him out by imitating the sounds of a raspberry, which was considered by

both races as a sign of contempt for the opponent's arguments in the dispute. An end was put to the dispute by the sudden appearance of a group of peasants led by the famous vampire hunter, the old man in the felt hat.

'We are here about Clog,' said one of the peasants.

'We don't want to buy,' the dwarf and the gnome said in unison.

'Clog is the one who had his head smashed,' said a second man. 'We had the notion to marrying him off.'

'I have nothing against it,' Zoltan said angrily. 'I wish him happiness in his new way of life. Health, happiness and prosperity.'

'And lots of small Clogs' Dandelion said.

'No, no, gentlemen,' said the peasant 'Do not laugh, how are supposed to marry him? After you knocked him in the head his mind is completely addled, he can not even distinguish between day and night.'

'Well, that doesn't sound so bad after all,' Milva said, looking at the ground. 'It seems to me that he is already better. Definitely better than he was this morning.'

'I do not know what Clog was like this morning,' replied the peasant. 'But I saw him bowing before a shovel and say to the shovel that it was a pretty girl. I don't want to talk about it anymore – pay the blood money.'

'What?'

'When a knight kills a peasant, he has to pay the blood money. So the law now stands.'

'I am not a knight!' Milva screamed.

'That is the first,' supported Dandelion. 'Secondly, it was an accident. Thirdly, Clog is still alive, so it can not therefore be a question of blood money, but of damages and compensation. But, this is the fourth, we have no money.'

'So give us the horses.'

'Hey, Hey,' Milva's eyes narrowed ominously. 'Leave quickly peasant. Take care where you pass.'

'Krrrrwa mother!' croaked Field Marshal Duda.

'Oh the bird has hit the nail on the head,' Zoltan drawled while patting the axe in his belt. 'Know this peasants that I do not have the best opinions about the mothers of individuals who think only about profit, even if it is earned from the broken head of a fellow traveller. Get going, good people. If you leave immediately, I promise that I will not chase you.'

'If you won't pay us, let us take this to a higher authority.'

The dwarf gnashed his teeth and reached for his axe when Geralt grabbed him by the elbow.



‘Peace. Is this how you want to solve this problem? By killing them?’

‘Why just kill them? It is easy enough to cripple.’

‘Enough of this, dammit.’ spat the witcher, turning to the peasant. ‘Who is this higher authority that you mentioned?’

‘Our elder Hector Laabs, Mayor of the village Breza.’

‘Lead us to him. We will somehow come to an agreement.’

‘He is busy,’ announced the peasant. ‘Prosecuting a witch. He is at the court hearing the people under the maple tree. We caught a witch who was allied with the vampire.’

‘Again with the vampire.’ Dandelion spread his hands. ‘Do you hear? Again with the same. They dig up a cemetery, then catch a witch who is an accomplice to a vampire. Countrymen, why not instead of plowing, harvesting and gathering you become witchers?’

‘Do not make stupid jokes,’ said the peasant. ‘There is nothing to laugh about. We have a priest, and he is more reliable than a witcher. The priest has ruled that the vampire keeps company and makes it dealings with the witch. The witch summons the vampire and points it towards the victims.’

‘It was so,’ said the second peasant. ‘The treacherous witch was hiding among us. But the priest saw her use spells and now she will burn.’

‘Of course,’ the witcher muttered. ‘Come on; let’s take a look at this court of yours. I will talk to your mayor about the unfortunate accident that Clog met with. We will come up with some acceptable reparation. Isn’t that right, Percival? I bet you could still find a rock in one of your pockets. Lead on, my good people.’

The procession move in the direction of a spreading maple tree, under whose branches people gathered excitedly. The witcher trailed behind a bit, trying to strike up a conversation with one of the peasants, who according to his face seems a somewhat honest man.

‘Who is this witch, you have captured? Did she really practice black magic?’

‘Oh, Sir,’ muttered the peasant. ‘I don’t know. This girl is a vagabond, a stranger. And not altogether healthy in the head. She is a grown up already, but will only play with little children. She is also like a child, and says no ma, no pa. But I do not understand those things. The priest, and everyone, is saying that he did all kinds of witchcraft.’

‘Everyone but the accused,’ Regis said quietly, walking next to the witcher. ‘I suppose when she was asked she said no ma, no pa.’

There was no more time to make specific inquiries. They passed through the crowd although not without the help of Zoltan and his ash stick.

On the wheel of a wagon loaded with sacks was tied a girl of no more than sixteen years, with arms wide apart, her toes barely touching the ground. Her shirt had been torn from her emaciated arms, and used to bind her. From the girl came a blend of mad giggling and sobbing.

Beside the wagon blaze a fire. A blacksmith was fanning the flames with a bellow; another took a horseshoe in a pair of callipers and deposited it into the red-hot coals. Above the din rose the excited cry of the priest.

‘Vile witch! Godless woman! Confess the truth! Ha, look at her, countrymen; she is doped with some evil weed! Witchcraft is painted on her face!’

The priest was thin; his face dark and dry as a smoked fish. The black robe hung on him like a peg. Around his neck gleamed a sacred symbol, Geralt could not recognize what deity, and didn’t know much about them anyway. Recently, the rapidly growing pantheon was of completely no interest to him. It was likely the priest belong to one of the new religious sects. These older sects dealt with more profitable activities and were less interested in chasing young girls, tying them to carts and inciting superstitious mobs against them.

‘Since the beginning of time woman has been the seat of evil! The tool of Chaos, the partner in the conspiracy against the world and the male gender! A woman is ruled by carnal lust, Countrymen! Therefore, she readily serves demons to be able to satisfy her insatiable and unnatural lust!’

‘Now we learn something fundamental about women,’ murmured Regis. ‘This is phobia, in its pure, clinical form. Holy men often dream of *vagina dentata*.’

‘I bet its worse,’ Dandelion replied, also in a whisper. ‘He probably daydreams all the time about a normal one, without teeth. And the desire has risen to his brain.’

‘And that deranged girl will pay for it.’

‘Can we not find anyone,’ growled Milva, ‘who will stop this black fool?’

Dandelion looked meaningfully and with hope towards the witcher but Geralt avoided his gaze.

‘And who else but this female witch is to blame for our current troubles and misery?’ The priest continued to shout. ‘Why, it was none other than the witches of Thanedd Island who betrayed our kings, assassinating the King of Redania! Why, it is none other than the elven witch of Dol Blathanna who incites the Squirrels against us! You see now, what familiarity with witches has bought us! Tolerance of their filthy practices! Turning a blind eye to their arbitrariness, their insolent pride, their wealth! And who is to blame? The Kings! The self-satisfied leaders have renounced the gods, expelled the priests who held positions on their councils, and replaced them with witches who were awarded with honours and gold! And here is the result!’

‘Aha! Herein lies the vampire.’ Dandelion said. ‘You’re wrong Regis. This is about politics, not vaginas.’

‘And the money.’ added Zoltan Chivay.

‘Therefore I tell you!’ shouted the priest his voice cracking. ‘Before we are engulfed in war with Nilfgaard, clean out your home of this abomination! Burn this ulcer with white-hot iron! Let us cleanse with a baptism of fire! Do not let those who deal with spells live!’

‘Do not allow it! To the stake with her!’

The girl attached to the wagon laughed hysterically, rolling her eyes.

‘Slowly, slowly,’ said an, until now silent villager of enormous size, who was surrounded by a groups of silent men

and women. 'We heard screams. And everyone can scream, even a crow. From you priest I expected greater respect than that of crows.'

'Do you deny my words, Mayor Laabs? The word of a priest?'

'I deny nothing,' spat the giant and adjusted his course pants. 'This girl is an orphan and a stray; she doesn't mean anything to me. If she is in league with the vampire, take her and kill her. But as long as I am mayor of this camp I will be here to punish the real offenders. If you want to punish, then bring forward your proof of guilt.'

'I will show you!' shouted the priest, giving a signal to his lackeys, the same ones who had recently been putting horseshoes into the fire. 'Before your eyes I'll show you. To you, Laabs and to all those present!'

The lackeys brought from behind the wagon and set on the ground a small cauldron.

'Here is the proof!' the priest yelled and kicked the cauldron, overturning it. Onto the earth, poured a clear liquid, containing small pieces of carrots, green unrecognizable ribbons and a handful of small bones.

'The witch has been brewing magic potions! A witches elixir that enables them to fly in the air! To her vampire lover, to commune with him and concoct further vicious crimes! I am familiar with the ways and means of sorceresses; I know what this decoction was made with! The witch boiled a cat alive!'

The crowd murmured with horror.

'How gruesome,' Dandelion shuddered. 'Boiling a living creature? I feel sorry for the girl, but this has gone a little too far...'

'Shut up,' Milva said.

'Here is the proof!' barked the priest as he lifted a small bone from the steaming pool. 'Here is irrefutable proof! The bone of a cat!'

'That is a bird bone,' said Zoltan Chivay serenely, rolling his eyes. 'A jay, I think, or a dove. The maid was preparing a little broth, that's all.'

'Shut up, heathen midget!' shouted the priest. 'Do not blaspheme, or the gods will punish with the hands of devout people! This is a concoction of cat, I say!'

'From a cat! Definitely a cat!' shouted the surrounding peasants. 'The girl had a cat! A black cat! Everyone knows it was! It was always following her! And now where is the cat? It's gone! She must have cooked it!'

'She has cook it! Cooked it in her concoction!'

'Right! The witch has made cat soup!'

'No other evidence is needed! The fire for the witch! But first torture! Let her confess everything!'

‘Rrrrwa mother!’ Field Marshal Duda croaked.

‘I’m sorry for the cat,’ Percival suddenly spoke loudly, ‘it was a beautiful beast. Its skin shone like anthracite, the eyes were like beryl, the long whiskers and the tail, fat like a raccoon! A cat like a painting. It must have been great at catching mice!’

The peasants went silent.

‘And how do you know, Sir Gnome?’ grumbled one. ‘How do you know what the cat looked like?’

Percival Schuttenbach blew his nose and wiped his fingers onto his leg.

‘Oh because it is there, sitting on the wagon. Behind you.’

The peasants turned around as if on cue, and murmured in chorus while looking at the cat, who sat on the bags loaded on the wagon. Meanwhile, the cat, without regard for anyone lifted its rear leg and concentrated on licking its bum.

‘Well, it has been shown,’ rang the voice of Zoltan Chivay in the silence. That your irrefutable proof is conclusively under the tail of a tomcat. What’s your second proof? Another cat? It would be nice if we had a couple. We could breed them, and no rodent would be seen in a barn for half a mile away.’

Several peasants snorted, others, including Hector Laabs, laughed heartily. The priest turned purple.

‘I’ll remember you, blasphemer!’ roared the priest, pointing a finger at the dwarf. ‘Wicked kobold! Creature of darkness! Where’d you come from? Perhaps you are in collusion with the vampire? Wait, while we punish the witch, then we’ll take you to the torture! But first we will judge the witch! We have already put the horseshoes into the coals; we’ll see what she reveals when her ugly skin hisses! I assure you that she will admit her crimes of witchcraft, do they need more evidence than a guilty plea?’

‘It depends,’ said Hector Laabs. ‘If you, priest, had hot horseshoes pressed to you, you would probably admit to fucking a mare. Ugh! You say you’re a man of God, but blast both races.’

‘Yes, I am a man of God!’ roared the priest, shouting over the swelling grumble of the peasants. ‘I believe in divine justice, punishment and vengeance! And in God’s court! The witch is brought before a trial of God, the judgement of God ...’

‘An excellent idea,’ the witcher cut in loudly, leaving the crowd.

The priest looked at him with hate; the peasants stopped murmuring and stared open-mouthed.

‘The judgement of God,’ continued Geralt, in the absolute silence, ‘is absolutely certain and fair. The trials by ordeal are also accepted by the secular courts and have their own rules. These rules provide that in the event of prosecution of a woman, child, old man or a person deprived of reason, there may be a defender. Is this not true, Mayor Laabs? I wish to be her defender. Delineate a field. Those of you who are convinced of the guilt of the girl and have no fear of God’s judgement. Let him stand forth and fight me.’

‘Ha!’ cried the priest, his eyes still measuring him. ‘Not very cunning, worthy stranger. A challenge to a duel? Anyone can clearly see you are a scoundrel and a bully! With your sword, you want to pass the judgement of God?’

‘If you do not like the sword,’ said Zoltan, coming to stand next to Geralt, ‘and if this fellow does not fit you, maybe I will be worthy? Come on let those who accuse the girl beat me with the axe.’

‘Or me with the bow.’ said Milva, squinting, also emerging from the crowd. ‘One arrow at a hundred paces.’

‘You see, people, how quickly they multiply to defend the witch?’ shouted the priest, then turned and twisted his face into a sly smile. ‘Well, scoundrels I accept the ordeal for your trio. We will hold the judgement of God, to determine the guilt of the witch and to verify your virtue, at the same time! But not with swords, axes, spears or bows. You say, you know the rules of the judgement of God? I know them too! There is a horseshoe in the white-hot coals! A Baptism of fire! Come, supporters of witchcraft! He who removes the horseshoe from the fire and brings it to me and does not show a trace of burns will prove that the witch is not guilty. But if the judgement of God shows something else, then you die with her! I have spoken!’

The murmurs of displeasure from Mayor Laabs and his group were drowned out by the shouts of those gathered by the priest, anticipating a great show and rejoicing. Milva looked at Zoltan, Zoltan the witcher, the witcher at the sky, and then at Milva.

‘Do you believe in gods?’ He asked in a low voice.

‘I believe,’ said the archer quietly, staring intently at the embers in the fire. ‘But do not expect they are bothered with hot horseshoes.’

‘From the fire to the bastard is all of three steps.’ Zoltan hissed through clenched teeth. ‘Somehow I’ll endure; I worked in a forge ... But pray for me to those gods of yours ...’

‘Wait a minute.’ Emiel Regis, put his hand on the dwarf’s shoulder. ‘Please refrain from praying.’

The surgeon approached the fire, respectfully bowed to the priest and to the audience and then without the slightest hesitation, reached his hand into the burning coals. The crowd gasped in unison, Zoltan cursed. Milva grasped Geralt’s arm. Regis straightened up, looked calmly at the horseshoe in his hand and without hurrying, approached the priest. The priest stepped back, but crashed into the peasants who were behind him.

‘This is what you wanted, if I’m not mistaken, Reverend?’ Regis asked, holding up the horseshoe. ‘A baptism of fire? If so, I suppose that God’s verdict is unequivocal. The girl is innocent. Her defenders are innocent. And I imagine that I myself am also innocent.’

‘After ... after ... show me your hand ...’ the priest stuttered. ‘It must be burned ...’

The surgeon smiled at him with pursed lips and then move the horseshoe to his left hand and demonstrated his right hand to the priest, which was quite healthy, then lifted it to show everybody. The crowd roared.

‘Whose is this horseshoe?’ Regis said. ‘Let the owner come pick it up.’

No one answered.

‘These are diabolical arts!’ cried the priest. ‘You’re a witch or a devil incarnate!’

Regis threw the shoe on the ground and turned around.

‘Then perform an exorcism on me.’ He suggested coldly. ‘I’ll allow it. But the judgement of God has already taken place. I understand that disparaging the results of an ordeal is an act of heresy.’

‘Die, Begone!’ shouted the priest, waving in front of the surgeon an amulet and performing other cabalistic hand gestures. ‘Down to the infernal abyss, Devil! Let the earth below you part ...’

‘Enough of this!’ Zoltan shouted angrily. ‘Hey, people! Mayor Laabs, how long must we endure this madness? Do you think ...’

A piercing cry drowned out the voice of the dwarf.

‘Niiiiilfgaaaard!’

‘Horses come from the west! Cavalry! Nilfgaard is coming! Save yourself, who can!’

The encampment was turned into total pandemonium within an instant. People rushed to their wagons and huts, jostling and falling all over each other. All a deafening roar and din.

‘Our horses!’ Milva yelled, sending kicks and punches around her. ‘Our horses, witcher! To me, quickly!’

‘Geralt!’ Dandelion screamed. ‘Help!’

The crowd parted, scattering like a wave in the surf, in the twinkling of an eye, it took Milva with it. Geralt grabbed Dandelion by the collar but was not carried away because he managed to latch onto the wagon, which the girl accused of witchcraft was tied to. The wagon jerked suddenly and moved from its place, the witcher and the poet crashed to the ground. The girl shook her head and stared laughing hysterically. The wagon slowly drifted away, the laughter was lost among the general roar.

‘We’ll be trampled!’ Wailed Dandelion on the ground. ‘Crushed! Auuuuuu!’

‘Rrrrwa mother!’ croaked an invisible Field Marshal Duda.

Geralt raised his head, spat out the sand and saw a hilarious scene.

Only four people had not joined in the general panic, and one of which was against his will. The latter was the priest, his neck stuck in an iron grip by the Mayor Hector Laabs. The two other people were Zoltan and Percival. The gnome with a quick movement pulled up the back of the priest’s robe, the dwarf armed with pincers pulled from the fire a burning horseshoe and threw it down the pants of the priest. Released from Laabs grip, the priest rushed forward like a comet with a smoking tail, and his screams were drowned in the roar of the crowd. Geralt saw the mayor, gnome and dwarf go to congratulate each other for their success, when they fell straight into the next wave of the mob fleeing in panic. Everything disappeared in clouds of dust, the witcher could see nothing more, He had no time to look anyway as he was busy saving Dandelion, who had been knocked over by a pig running blind. When Geralt bent to lift the poet, someone knocked a ladder onto his back from a passing wagon. The weight knocked him to the ground. Before he could push the ladder off, fifteen people had run across it. When he finally managed to free himself, a wagon overturned with a crash, three sacks of wheat flour, costing a crown a pound fell onto the witcher. The sacks burst and the world was drowned in white clouds.

‘Get up, Geralt!’ yelled the troubadour. ‘Get up, damn it!’

‘I can’t,’ gasped the witcher, blinded by the valuable flour and grabbing with both hands his knee which was immobilized with pain. ‘Save yourself, Dandelion ...’

‘I won’t leave you!’

From the western edge of the camp they heard gruesome screams mixed with the sounds of galloping hooves and the neighing of horses. The yelling and hoof beats intensified, metal struck metal it sounded like a pieces of iron colliding with a bell.

‘A battle!’ cried the poet. ‘They’re fighting!’

‘Who? With who?’ Geralt sought to clear his eyes blinded by the flour and sand. Not far away, something began to burn; there was a breathtaking heat and a choking smoke cloud. The rumble of hoof beats grew louder, the earth shuddered. At first he saw a cloud of dust, then there were dozens of horse’ fetlocks at a canter. Everywhere around. He overcame the pain.

‘Under the wagon! Hide under the wagon, Dandelion, otherwise we’ll be trampled!’

‘Do not move ...’ whined the poet clamped to the earth. ‘Let’s stay in place ... I’ve heard that horses never step on a man lying on the ...’

‘I’m not sure,’ Geralt gasped, ‘if the horses have heard about this. Under the wagon! Quick!’

At that moment, one of the horses who did not know about proverbs kicked him in the head in passing. The witcher’s eyes suddenly lit up with red and gold of all the constellations in the firmament, and a moment later an impenetrable blackness covered the sky and the earth.

\* \* \*

The Rats jumped up, awakened by a protracted scream whose rumbling echoes multiplied on the cave walls. Asse and Reef took up their swords, Iskra cursed loudly, because her head hit a rocky protrusion.

‘What is it?’ Kayleigh screamed. ‘What’s happening?’

The cave was dark, though outside the sun was shining. The Rats rested after a night spent in the saddle fleeing pursuers. Giseller put a torch into the fire, lit it up, stood up and approached the place where Ciri and Mistle slept together, as usual, away from the rest of the gang. Ciri sat with her head bowed, Mistle covered it.

Giseller raised the torch. The others also approached. Mistle covered Ciri’s bare shoulder with a fur.

‘Listen, Mistle,’ the leader of the Rats said seriously, ‘I have never interfered into what you two do in bed. I have never said a word of derision. I always try to look the other way and ignore it. It is your affair and your preference; I have nothing against yourselves while you are discreet and quiet. But this time you’ve exaggerated a bit.’

‘Do not be stupid,’ Mistle broke in. ‘What do you think, that... The girl was screaming in her sleep! It was a nightmare!’

‘Did you scream, Falka?’

Ciri nodded.

‘Was it a terrible dream? What did you dream?’

‘Leave her alone!’

‘Shut up, Mistle. Falka?’

‘A person, someone I knew,’ Ciri stammered, ‘a horse kicked him. Hooves... I could feel how it tore... I felt his pain... His head and knee... It still hurts me. Forgive me. I have awakened.’

‘Do not apologize.’ Giseller said with tight lips, looking at Mistle. ‘You deserve the apology. A dream? Well, anyone could have a dream. Anyone.’

Ciri closed her eyes. She was not sure Giseller was right.

\* \* \*

He was woken by a kick.

He was lying on his back with his head resting on the wheel of the overturned wagon, beside him, crouched Dandelion. The man who had kicked him was wearing a round helmet and a jacket. Beside him was another. Both were hold the reins of horses, from their saddles hung spears and shields.

‘The miller or the devil?’

The other soldier shrugged. Dandelion, Geralt saw, did not take his eyes off of the shields. He too had long since noticed that on the shields were lilies. The emblem of the Kingdom of Temeria. The same sign was worn by other mounted soldiers that were swarming around. Most were busy catching horses and looting corpses. Corpses, which were mostly wearing black Nilfgaardian cloaks.

The encampment was a smoking ruin after the assault, but it appeared the peasants who survived did not flee too far. Mounted soldiers with lilies on their shields pushed them to form groups, shouting at them.

Milva, Zoltan, Percival and Regis were nowhere to be seen. Next to them sat the hero of the recent witch trial, the black cat, staring impassively at Geralt with golden eyes. The witcher was somewhat surprised, usually cats did not like to be any proximity of him. He did not have time to reflect on this unusual phenomenon as one of the soldiers hit him with a spear.



‘Get up, both of you! Hey, this white one has a sword!’

‘Drop the sword!’ shouted the other soldier, calling over others.

‘Drop the sword on the ground or I’ll put a spear through you!’

Geralt obeyed. He felt a ringing in his head.

‘Who the devil are you?’

‘Travellers.’ said Dandelion.

‘Sure,’ the soldier snorted. ‘Travelling home? Fleeing? Have you shed your colours and defected from your units? Many in this camp are such travellers, they tasted military bread but Nilfgaard scared the shit out of them! Some are old friends of ours! From our squad!’

‘And these traveller await another trip,’ laughed the other soldier. ‘A very short one! Up, on a branch!’

‘We are not deserters!’ cried the poet.

‘It shows. Listen to you lot.’

From the circle of archers on horseback came a detachment of light cavalry led by some men dressed in heavy armor and helmets with proud plumes on them. Dandelion looked at the approaching knights, wiped the flour from his clothes then spit into his hands and tousled his hair.

‘You, Geralt, remain silent.’ He warned. ‘I will speak. These are knights. They have defeated Nilfgaard. We haven’t done anything. I know how to talk when it comes to nobles. We must show them that they are dealing with their peers and not common people.’

‘Dandelion, for pity’s sake...’

‘Don’t worry, everything will be fine. I know the language when speaking with knights and nobles, half of Temeria knows me. Hey, out of the way, lackey, move! I would speak with your masters!’

The soldiers looked at him doubtfully, but raised their spears and reluctantly parted. Dandelion and Geralt walked towards the knights. The poet walked proudly and with lordly mien, little suited to somebody covered in flour.

‘Halt!’ shouted one of the knights. ‘Not another step! Who the fuck are you?’

‘And who am I to answer?’ Dandelion said with his hands on his hips. ‘And for what reason? Who are the noble lords who harass innocent travellers?’

‘You are not the one asking questions, scoundrel! Answer!’

The minstrel cocked his head and examined the coats of arms on the shields and mantles of the knights.

‘Three red hearts on a field of gold.’ He noted, ‘this implies that you are an Aubry. The head of the shield shows a lambel with three teeth and therefore you must be the firstborn son of Anzelm Aubry. I know your father well, Sir Knight. And you, Sir Knight, what do you bare on your coat of silver? A black column flanked by two griffins heads? The Paperbrock family coat of arms, if I’m not mistaken and in such matters I am rarely wrong. The black column, so they say, reflects a savvy member of the family.’

‘Shut up, dammit.’ Geralt moaned.

‘I’m the famous poet Dandelion!’ boasted the bard, ignoring him. ‘Surely, you’ve heard of me. So lead me to your leader, your commander, because I’m used to talking to my equals!’

The armoured horsemen were silent, but the expressions on their faces became increasingly less friendly and the fingers in their iron gauntlets gripped the reins tightly. Dandelion, apparently did not notice.

‘So what’s with you?’ he asked in astonishment. ‘What are you looking at, Sir Knight? Yes, I’m talking to you, Sir Black column. You should not make such a face. Someone apparently advised that if you narrow your eyes and thrust your jaw forward, you’d look more masculine, dashing and threatening? That someone deceived you. You look like someone who hasn’t been able to take a shit for a week!’

‘Take them!’ shouted the eldest son of Anzelm Aubry, who carried the shield with three red hearts. The knight with the black column of the Paperbrock family nudged his horse with his spurs.

‘Take them! And tie up the bastards!’

\* \* \*

They walked behind the horses, dragged by ropes attached to their wrist and to the pommel of the saddles. They walked, sometimes ran, because the riders did not take pity on the horses nor the prisoners. Dandelion fell twice and was dragged on his stomach, screaming until they relented. The soldiers helped him to his feet with their spears and ruthlessly drove them further. Dust blinded their eyes, choked them and dug in their nose. Thirst burned in their throats.

Only one thing comforted them – the road was heading south. Geralt was finally moving in the right direction – and fairly quickly. However, he did not rejoice. He imagined the journey differently.

They arrived at a place at a time where Dandelion was horse from cursing mixed with cries for mercy, and the pain in Geralt’s elbows and knees had become a veritable torture, severe enough to make the witcher begin to consider radical, though desperate action.

They reached a military camp, scattered around a half-burned and ruined fortress. They were led past campfires and tents decorated with pennants of chivalry, surrounding a large bustling fairground by a huge, scorched palisade.

Upon seeing a trough for horses, Geralt and Dandelion pulled on their ropes. The riders were not initially willing to let them go to the water, but the son of Anzelm Aubry was reminded of Dandelion’s friendship with his father and took

pity on them. They pushed between the horses, drank and washed their faces with their tied hands. A jerk on the ropes immediately returned them to reality.

‘Who have you brought me this time?’ asked a tall, thin knight in richly gilded armor, tapping the handle of an ornately decorated baton. ‘Don’t tell me it is more spies?’

‘Spies or deserters,’ confirmed the son of Anzelm Aubry. ‘They were caught in the camp by the Chotla, when we repelled the attack by the Nilfgaardians. They are very suspicious elements!’

The knight in the gilded armor snorted, then examined Dandelion closely, his hard, yet still young face brightened suddenly.

‘Nonsense. Untie them.’

‘But they are spies for Nilfgaard!’ protested the black column knight from the family of Paperbrock. ‘Especially that one, the rascal, who barks like a dog in town. He says that he is a poet, the bastard!’

‘And he didn’t lie.’ smiled the knight in the gilded armor. ‘This is the bard Dandelion. I know him. Removed his bindings. And the other one too.’

‘Are you certain, Count?’

‘It was an order, Knight Paperbrock.’

‘And you didn’t think that I might come in useful, right?’ Dandelion muttered to Geralt, rubbing his numb wrist where they had been bound. ‘So now you know. My reputation precedes me, everywhere I am known and honoured.’

Geralt made no comment as he was busy massaging his own wrists, sore knees and elbows.

‘I beg you to forgive the zeal of these lads.’ Said the knight, with the title of Count. ‘They see Nilfgaardian spies everywhere. Every patrol brings a few of those suspected of being spies. That is, those who stand out among the refugees. And you, noble Dandelion, stand out. How did you get over the Chotla, among the refugees?’

‘We were on our way to Maribor from Dillingen,’ Dandelion invented, ‘when we got into this mess, I and my friend, also... a poet. Surely you know him, he is called Giraldus.’

‘Of course I do, of course, I’ve read your poems, Sir Giraldus.’ boasted the Count. ‘It’s an honour. My name is Daniel Etcheverry, Count of Garramone. On my honour, Master Dandelion, much has changed since you visited the court of king Foltest.’

‘Undoubtedly, a lot.’

‘Who would have thought,’ the Count frowned, ‘that this would happen. Verden held by Emhyr, Brugge basically conquered, Sodden is again on fire... and we fall back, constantly fall back... I’m sorry, I meant: we perform a tactical manoeuvre. Nilfgaard burns and loots all around, they are already on their way to banks of the Ina and they besiege the fortresses of Razwan and Mayena. And yet the army continues with these tactical maneuvers.’

‘When I saw your lilies at the Chotla,’ said Dandelion, ‘I was convinced it was an offensive.’

‘Just a counterattack.’ Daniel Etcheverry corrected him. ‘A surveying fight. We crossed and destroyed some Nilfgaardian patrols and Scoia’tael commandos that were spreading fires. What you see here is all that remains of the fortress of Ameria, when we conquered it back. And the fortresses Carcano and Vidort have been burned to the foundations... The whole south is awash in blood, fire and smoke... Oh, I’m boring you, gentlemen. You already know what’s happening in Brugge and Sodden, you followed the refugees through there. And my lads took you for spies! As an apology please accept an invitation to lunch. Some of the gentlemen of the nobility will be happy to meet you, Sir Poets.’

‘It is a true honour to us.’ Geralt bowed, stiffly. ‘But time flies. We need to get under way.’

‘But, please do not feel uneasy.’ Daniel Etcheverry smiled. ‘It is a simple soldier’s meal. Venison, hazel grouse, fruits, truffles ...’

‘To decline,’ Dandelion swallowed and measured the witcher with a significant glance, ‘would be a grave insult. Let us go, my lord. This is your tent, the blue and gold?’

‘No. That tent is the commander’s. Blue and gold are the colours of his homeland.’

‘How is that?’ Dandelion was amazed. ‘I was sure this army was under your charge, Count.’

‘This is a separate branch of the Termerian army. I am the liaison officer of king Foltest, there are nobles here with me who are also fighting under the sign of Temeria. But the foundations of his army are subjects from other kingdoms. You see the banner before the command tent?’

‘Lions.’ Geralt stopped. ‘Golden lions on a blue field. That ... That is the emblem of ...’

‘Cintra.’ confirmed the Count. ‘These are exiles from the kingdom of Cintra, now occupied by Nilfgaard. Marshal Vissegerd leads them.’

Geralt turned to the Count and opened his mouth to say that an urgent matter would force them to nevertheless refuse the lunch invitation. He did not make it. He saw a group of officers approaching them, headed by a strong, thick, gray-haired knight in a blue cloak and gold chain armor.

‘Here, Sir Poets, is the Marshal Vissegerd in person.’ Daniel Etcheverry said. ‘Allow me the honour of introducing ...’

‘There is no need.’ Marshal Vissegerd interrupted hoarsely, his eyes drilling into Geralt. ‘We have already been introduced. In Cintra, at the court of Queen Calanthe. At the engagement of Princess Pavetta. It was fifteen years ago, but I have a good memory. And you, bastard witcher, do you remember me?’

‘I remember.’ Geralt said and obediently let the soldiers bind his hands.

\* \* \*

Daniel Etcheverry, Count of Garramone, tried to intercede for Geralt and Dandelion, when the soldier had settled them on chairs in the Marshal's tent. When the soldiers left at Vissegerd's order, the Count resumed his efforts.

'This is the poet and troubadour Dandelion, Sir Marshal,' he explained. 'I know him. He is known throughout the whole world. It is not appropriate to do this to him. On my honour, I guarantee that he is not a nilfgaardian spy.'

'Do not swear so hastily, Count,' said Vissegerd, not taking his eyes off the bound men. 'Perhaps he is a poet, but he was captured in the company of this miscreant witcher, I would not vouch for him. It seems to me that you still don't realize what bird you have caught in your snares.'

'The witcher?'

'Of course, Geralt, who is called the White Wolf. The same rogue who laid claim to the right of Cirilla, Pavetta's daughter, granddaughter of Calanthe, the same Ciri of who there is so much talk of now. You are too young to remember those times, when the scandal was all that was talked about at the courts. But I was an eye witness to those events.'

'And what binds him to the princess Cirilla?'

'That dog,' the Marshal pointed at Geralt, 'contributed to the marriage of Pavetta, daughter of Queen Calanthe, to Duny, an unknown stranger from the south. From this shameful union was born Cirilla. Even before her birth she was promised to that bastard witcher as payment for his help in conducting the marriage. Have you heard of the Law of Surprise?'

'Not at all. But keep talking, Marshal.'

'The witcher,' Vissegerd again pointed his finger at Geralt, 'after the death of Pavetta, wanted to take the girl, but Calanthe wouldn't allow it and threw him out. But he waited for the right time. When the war started with Nilfgaard and Cintra fell, he took advantage of the confusion and turmoil and kidnapped Ciri. He kept the girl hidden, because he knew that we were seeking her. And he eventually grew bored of her and sold her to Emhyr.'

'These are all lies and slander,' Dandelion bellowed. 'In all that there is not one word of truth!'

'Shut up or I'll gag you. Combine the facts, Count. The witcher had Cirilla, now Emhyr Emreis has her. And the witcher is arrested mixed in with the vanguard of the Nilfgaardian patrol. What does it mean?'

Daniel Etcheverry shrugged.

'What does it mean?' Vissegerd repeated, leaning on Geralt. 'What, miscreant? Speak up! How long have you been spies for Nilfgaard?'

'I'm not a spy for anyone.'

'I will tear strips from you!'

'Do it.'

‘Mister Dandelion,’ the Count of Garramone said suddenly. ‘It would be better for you if you explained. The sooner the better.’

‘That’s what I’ve been waiting to do,’ the poet exploded, ‘but the lord Marshal threatened to gag me! We are innocent; it’s all blatant fabrication and hideous slander. Cirilla was kidnapped from Thanedd Island and Geralt was seriously wounded in her defence. Anyone can confirm this. Any wizard who was on Thanedd. And the Redanian Chancellor, Count Sigismund Dijkstra ...’

Dandelion stopped suddenly, remembering that Dijkstra was completely unsuitable as a defence witness in this case, and invoking the wizards of Thanedd to improve their position was not a good idea either.

‘It is also an absurdity,’ he continued talking loudly and quickly, ‘accusing Geralt of kidnapping Ciri from Cintra. Geralt found the girl after the massacre of the city, wandering and hid her from others, Nilfgaard agents that were looking for her. I myself was captured by these agents and subjected to torture, to confess where he had hidden Ciri! I did not say a word and these agents are now dead, they did not know with whom they had started with.’

‘Your bravery,’ said the Count ‘was futile. Emhyr finally has Cirilla. As everyone knows he intends to marry her and make her the Empress of Nilfgaard. For the time being he is hailing her as the Queen of Cintra and the surrounding area, which causes us many problems.’

‘Emhyr,’ declared the poet, ‘could have sat on the throne of Cintra whenever he wanted. Ciri, whether she takes it however, has the right to the throne.’

‘The right?’ Vissegerd roared, splashing Geralt with saliva. ‘Shit, she has no right! Let Emhyr marry her if he wishes. Let her give him children and he can give her grants and titles, according to his whim. Queen of Cintra and the Skellige Islands, why not? Duchess of Brugge? The Countess of Sodden? Go ahead, we bow at the waist! And why, I humbly ask, not the Queen of the Sun and Moon? Her cursed and tainted blood has no right to the throne! Cursed blood, the whole female line of this family is cursed, vile creatures, beginning with Riannon! Ciri’s great-grandmother, Adalia played the harlot with her cousin as her mother Muriel, fornicated with everyone! From this blood only incestuous whores are born.’

‘Speak softly, Marshal.’ Dandelion said cheekily. ‘Before your tent hangs a banner with golden lions, and you are about to hail Ciri’s grandmother, Calanthe, the Lioness of Cintra, for which most of your troops spilt blood for at Marnadal and Sodden as an amoral and adulterous bitch. And then I wouldn’t be so sure of the loyalty of your army.’

Vissegerd covered the distance between him and Dandelion in two steps and grabbed him by the front of his shirt and lifted him from the chair. The face of the Marshal which was a moment ago calm was now flushed a heraldic red. Geralt started to strongly worry about the health of his friend, when suddenly an Adjutant rushed in and excitedly started announcing that urgent and important news had been brought back by a patrol. Vissegerd released Dandelion, knocked over the chair and left.

‘Uff ...’ groaned the poet, shaking his head and neck. ‘That was close, he would have strangled me ... Can you loosen my bonds, Count?’

‘No Sir Dandelion, I can not.’

‘Are you going to give belief to such nonsense? That we are spies?’

‘My belief has nothing to do with it. You will remain bound.’

‘Pity,’ coughed Dandelion. ‘What demon possessed the Marshal? He suddenly fell upon me like a hawk.’

Daniel Etcheverry gave a crooked smile.

‘When you mention the loyalty of his troops, Sir Poet, you unwittingly touched on a sore point.’

‘What? What point?’

‘The soldier wept when they heard the news of Ciri’s death. And then there was another story. It turned out that the granddaughter of Calanthe was alive. That she was in Nilfgaard and enjoyed the favour of Emperor Emhyr. There were mass desertions. These people had left home and family, had fled to Sodden and Brugge, to Temeria, because they wanted to fight for Cintra, the blood of Calanthe. They wanted to fight for the liberation of their country, sought to expel the invaders from Cintra, to make sure the descendant of Calanthe regained the throne. And what happens? Calanthe’s blood returns to the throne of Cintra in honour and glory ...’

‘As a puppet in the hands of Emhyr who kidnapped her.’

‘Emhyr wants to marry her. He wants her to sit beside him on the imperial throne, to confirm the titles and vassalage. Is this how the puppet acts? Cirilla was seen at the imperial court by ambassadors from Kovir. They claim that she was not abducted by force. Cirilla, the only heir to the throne of Cintra, came to the throne of Nilfgaard as an ally. Such is the news that has spread among the soldiers.’

‘Circulated by agents of Nilfgaard.’

‘I know,’ nodded the Count. ‘But the soldiers do not. When you cling to a deserter, you are punished by hanging, but I understand. They want to fight for their own country, for their own homes. For themselves, not for Temeria. Under their own banner. They can see here in the camp, the golden lion bows down before the lilies of Temeria. Vissegerd had eight thousand soldiers, including five thousand native Cintrians, the rest were Temerian units and volunteer knights from Brugge and Sodden. At this time the army has six thousand men. Those who have deserted have been solely Cintrians. Vissegerd’s army was decimated without a fight. Do you understand what it means to him?’

‘He loses prestige and position.’

‘Of course. A few hundred desert and the king Foltest removes the baton. Already, it is difficult to call this army Cintran. Vissegerd thrashes about, wanting to stop the desertions, thus he is spreading the rumours of the uncertain origin of Princess Cirilla and her ancestors.’

‘What of yourself, Count,’ Geralt could not help it. ‘You listen with clear distaste.’

‘You have noticed?’ Daniel Etcheverry smile slightly. ‘Vissegerd knows about my lineage ... In short I am a relative to Ciri, Muriel Countess of Garramone, called the Fair, was Cirilla’s great-grandmother and also my great-grandmother. During family battles various legends of her romantic conquests were circulated, yet when some young upstart proclaims my ancestor was a whore, it fills me with disgust. But I do not react. Because I am a soldier. Do you understand my lords?’

‘Yes.’ said Geralt.

‘No.’ said Dandelion.

‘Vissegerd is the commander of this unit which is part of the Temerian army. And Cirilla in the hands of Emhyr, is a threat to the unit and the army, and to my king and country. I have no intention of denying rumours surrounding Vissegerd’s slander and undermining the authority of his command. I’m going to support him in proving that Cirilla

is a bastard and has no rights to the throne. I will not resist the Marshal, or his decisions and orders. On the contrary, I will support him.'

The witcher twisted his lips into a smile. 'You see Dandelion? The Count never for a moment took us for spies, otherwise we wouldn't have been granted such a thorough explanation. The Count knows we are innocent. But he will not lift a finger when Vissegerd issues a verdict on us.'

'Does this mean ... Does this mean ...'

The Count looked away.

'Vissegerd,' he said quietly, 'is furious. You had bad luck falling into his hands. Especially you, Sir Witcher. I will try Mister Dandelion ...'

He was interrupted by the entrance of Vissegerd, still red and angry as a bull. The Marshal approached the table, slammed his baton on it and deposited a map atop it, then turned to Geralt and drilled him with his eyes. The witcher did not lower his eyes.

'A wounded Nilfgaardian, was caught by the patrol,' drawled Vissegerd, 'he managed to remove his bandages and bled out on the road rather than contribute to the defeat of his people. We wanted to use him, but he slipped between our fingers and left us with nothing but blood. A good lesson. It is unfortunate that witchers do not teach such things to the children of kings who they are educating.'

Geralt remained silent, but bowed his head.

'What, freak? Freak of nature. Creature of Hell. What did you teach Cirilla? What education did you give her? Everyone has seen it and knows it! That bastard lives, expanding the Nilfgaardian throne like its nothing! And when Emhyr takes her to bed, she will be willing, whore!'

'Displaying yourself in anger,' said Dandelion, 'is not worthy of a knight. Sir Marshal, are you blaming everything on a child who was forcibly abducted in violence by Emhyr?'

'Even a child can resist violence! Knights have ways, even kings. If she was really of royal blood, she would have found a way. Scissors, a piece of broken glass, even an awl! The whore could have slit her wrists with her own teeth! Hung herself with a stocking!'

'I will hear no more, Vissegerd.' Geralt said quietly. 'I will hear no more.'

The Marshal audibly gritted his teeth and bent.

'You will hear no more.' He said in a voice trembling with rage. 'This is fine because I have nothing more to say. Just one thing. Then, in Cintra, fifteen years ago, you talked a lot about destiny. I thought then that it was nonsense. But it was your destiny, witcher. Since that night, your fate was sealed, inscribed in black runes among the stars. Ciri, Pavetta's daughter is your destiny. And your death. For Cirilla, Pavetta's daughter, you'll hang!'



*The “7<sup>th</sup> Daerlan” brigade was available to the operation as a separate branch of the Fourth Army Cavalry. We had just received support in the form of three companies of light cavalry, from Verden, which I gave to the Vreemde Battle Group. The rest of the brigade was involved in the Aedirn campaign, which I divided into Battle Groups: “Sieuers” and “Morteisen”, each consisting of four squadrons.*

*We left the assembly point at Drieschot in the evening with the Fourth on the fifth of August. The order was for the Group was to reach the borders of Vidort, Carcano and Armeria, to capture the crossings of the Ina, destroying any enemy we encountered, but avoiding large points of resistance. Starting fires, especially at night, would illuminate the path of the Fourth Army, creating panic among the civilian population and blocking all roads behind the lines of the enemy with fugitives. Pretend to encircle and push the retreating enemy troops towards the direction of the actual boiler. Eliminating selected groups of civilians and prisoners to awaken panic, fear and further break the morale of the enemy. The tasks described here were carried out by the brigade with great soldier's sacrifice.*

Elan Trahe, *For Emperor and homeland: The glorious trail of fire of the 7<sup>th</sup> Daerlan Cavalry Brigade*

## CHAPTER FIVE

Milva did not manage to reach or save the horses. She witnessed the theft, but she was a witness who could not do anything. First, she was seized in a frenzied, panicked crowd, then the way was barred by rushing wagons and then she plunged into a flock of woolly sheep, which she waded through like a snow drift. She eventually jumped into the mud and reeds on the shore of the Chotla, which saved her from the swords of the Nilfgaardians who were mercilessly everyone, giving no quarter even to women or children. Milva threw herself into the water and escaped to the other side, partly wading, partly by swimming on her back among the corpses being washed away.

She continued her chase. She remembered the direction the peasants went in, who stole Roach, Pegasus, the chestnut stallion and her own black. And on the saddle of the black was her priceless bow. *Nothing can be done*, she thought as she started to run in her water-soaked boots, *the others will just have to fend for themselves for now. I, damn it, I have to recover my bow and my horse!*

She first recovered Pegasus. The Poet's gelding was ignoring the kicks to the ribs and the cries of the peasant who was riding him. He would not gallop and walked among a birch grove sluggishly, lazy and slow. The peasant was left far behind the rest of the horse thieves. When he heard and saw Milva approaching from behind, he jumped off the horse without thinking directly into the bushes, while holding his pants with both hands. Milva did not pursue him, overcoming her strong desire to kill. She jumped into the saddle, ringing the lute strings strapped to the saddle. Familiar with the horse, she was able to force the gelding to a gallop. Or rather a sluggish run, which Pegasus considered a gallop.

But even this pseudo-gallop was enough to catch the horse thieves, since their escape was slowed by a more unusual horse: Roach, the witcher's bay mare, which Geralt had promised more than once to replace with a donkey, mule or even a goat. Milva overtook the thieves when the unskilful rider pulling on Roach's reins fell to the ground and the rest of the peasants jumped from their saddles, trying to tame the frisky, kicking mare. They were so busy that they did not notice when Milva came up on Pegasus and kicked one in the face, breaking his nose. When he fell back, crying and begging for divine help, she recognized him. It was Clogs. He apparently had no luck with the people he encountered. And especially Milva.

Milva, unfortunately also ran out of luck. Specifically speaking, luck was not to blame, but her own arrogance and belief she could beat up a couple of peasants as much as she wished. But when she dismounted from the saddle, she was suddenly punched in the eye and not knowing how ended up on the ground. She drew her knife, determined to spill

some guts, but was hit over the head with a thick stick, which broke, covering her eyes with bark and rotten wood. Stunned and blinded, she managed to grab the knee of the peasant who still held the remains of the stick; however, suddenly the peasant fell down screaming. The other shouted and covered his head with both hands. Milva wiped her eyes and saw that he was being covered in blows from a whip from a rider on a grey horse. She rose and hit the peasant in the neck. Wheezing the thief's legs buckled. Milva used this as an advantage to vent her rage in a kick. The peasant curled up, clutching his hands to his crotch and screamed until leaves rained down from the surrounding birches.

The rider on the grey horse, managed to drive the other man and Clogs, who was still bleeding from his nose, into the forest with blows from his whip. He turned his horse back towards the howling man, but pulled it up short. For Milva had already caught up to her black horse and in her hand held her bow with an arrow already on the string. The string was only at half tension, but the tip of the arrow was pointed directly at the rider's chest. For a moment the rider and the girl stared at each other. Then the rider, with slow movements, drew from his belt an arrow with long feathered fletching and threw it at Milva's feet.

'I knew,' he said calmly, 'I would get the chance to give you back your arrow, elf.'

'I'm not an elf, Nilfgaardian.'

'I'm not a Nilfgaardian. So put down the bow. If I wished you any evil, I would have let those peasants beat you.'

'The devil knows who you are,' she said, 'but thank you for the help. And my arrow. And for the evil bastard I kicked.'

The horse thief, who had been kicked was curled in a ball and began to sob, with his face buried in the leaves. The rider did not look at him. He watched Milva.

'Catch the horses,' he said. 'We need to move away from the river quickly, the army is spread through the forest on both banks.'

'We?' Milva frowned, lowering the bow. 'Together? Since when are we friends? Or companions?'

'I'll explain,' he said turning his horse and grabbing the reins of the chestnut stallion, 'if you give me time.'

'That's the thing we don't have. The witcher and the rest...'

'I know. But we will not be able to save them if we are killed or captured. Grab the horses and follow me into the forest. Hurry!'

\* \* \*

*He is called Cahir, Milva recalled, casting a look at her strange companion who was sitting on a fallen tree. The strange Nilfgaardian who says he isn't a Nilfgaardian. Cahir.*

'We thought that you had been killed,' she said, 'the chestnut caught up to us without a rider.'

‘I had a small adventure,’ he answered dryly. ‘Three bandits, hairy as werewolves, jumped out at me in an ambush. The horse ran away. The bandits didn’t manage to, but they were on foot. Before I managed to find a new mount, I was far behind you. I only caught up this morning before you entered the camp. I crossed the river and waited for you on this bank, because I knew you were heading east.’

One of the horses hidden in the alders stamped its hoof. It was growing dark. Mosquitoes began to buzz around their ears.

‘The woods are quiet.’ Cahir said. ‘The army is gone. The battle must be over.’

‘The massacre, you mean.’

‘Our cavalry...’ he stammered, clearing his throat. ‘The imperial cavalry struck the camp, and then from the south your army attacked. Probably Temerian.’

‘If the fighting is over then we must go back there. We need to look for the witcher, Dandelion and the others.’

‘It will be wiser to wait until nightfall.’

‘This is a horrible place,’ she said softly, squeezing her bow. ‘Grim and chilling. Not even a breeze moves through here, but something keeps making noises in the bushes... The witcher talked about ghouls being attracted to battlefields... And the peasants spoke of vampires...’

‘You are not alone.’ He soothed his companion. ‘A lonely man has more reason to fear.’

‘Certainly.’ She understood his meaning. ‘You have been following us for almost two weeks, alone. Behind are you people and all around is your army... Although you say that you are not Nilfgaardian, you did belong with them once. And the devil take me if I understand... Instead of going back to your people, you follow after the witcher. Why?’

‘It is a long story.’

\* \* \*

When the tall Scoia’tael bent over him, tied to a post as he was, Struycken closed his eyes in horror. It was said that there are no ugly elves, they are all born beautiful. Perhaps the legendary leader of the Scoia’tael was born beautiful too. But now his face was cut diagonally with an ugly scar that disfigured his forehead, eyebrow, nose and cheek, of his elven beauty, nothing was left.

The elf sat down on a cracked tree trunk lying on its side.

‘My name is Isengrim Faoiltiarna,’ he said, leaning over the prisoner again. ‘For four years I have fought with humans, for three years I have run my own command. I buried a fallen brother in a struggle, four cousins and more than forty comrades. In my fight for your Emperor I have been an ally who has repeatedly proved myself by submitting intelligence to your Secret Service and helping your agents eliminate inconvenient people.’

Faoiltiarna paused and waved his gloved hand. The Scoia'tael beside him picked up a small box made of birch bark. A sweet scent rose from the box.

'I thought and still think Nilfgaard is my ally,' the scarred Scoia'tael said, 'so I at first did not believe it when my informant warned me that they were preparing to ambush me. That when I was to meet alone with the Nilfgaardian emissary, I would be captured. I did not believe my ears, but being cautious by nature, I arrived at the meeting a little early and not alone. You can imagine how great my surprise and disappointment was when it turned out that at the secret meeting place, instead of an emissary, waiting for me was six thugs equipped with fishing nets, ropes, a leather hood with a gag and a shirt with belts and buckles attached to it. Equipment, I would say, that is commonly used by your Secret Service agents. The Secret Service of Nilfgaard wanted to capture me, Faoiltiarna, alive, take me somewhere, gagged and fastened to the ears in a straightjacket. A puzzling matter, I would say. Requiring an explanation. I was pleased that at least one of the thugs survived, was captured and will be willing to give me an explanation.'

Struycken gritted his teeth and turned his head so as not to look at the scarred face of the elf. He preferred to look at the box made of birch bark, around which the wasps buzzed.

'Now, then,' Faoiltiarna continued, wiping the sweat from his brow with a handkerchief, 'talk, Mister. To facilitate the discussion I will clarify a few things. In this box is maple syrup. If our conversation does not proceed in the spirit of mutual understanding and far-reaching sincerity, said maple syrup will be generously smeared onto your head. With particular emphasis on the eyes and ears. Then we will put you on an anthill, oh, look, that's exactly where those nice and laborious insects scamper. Let me assure you that the method has already proven itself perfectly for a few *Dh'oine* and an *'givare* who showed me stubbornness and lack of sincerity.'

'I'm in the imperial service!' yelled the spy, turning pale. 'I am an officer in the imperial Secret Service, subordinate to Vattiera de Rideaux, Viscount of Eiddon! My name is Jan Struycken! I protest...'

'A fatal meeting of circumstances,' interrupted the elf, 'you see the local forest ants have heard of maple syrup, they haven't ever heard of Lord de Rideaux. Let us begin. I will not ask who gave the order to kidnap me, because it is obvious. My first question is then: Where were you to take me?'

The Nilfgaardian spy struggled in the ropes; he shook his head, because it seemed to him that the ants were already crawling on his cheeks. He remained silent, however.

'A pity,' Faoiltiarna muttered, giving a sign to the elf holding the box. 'Smear him.'

'I was to transport you to Verden, to the castle Nastrog!' Struycken roared. 'At the command of Lord de Rideaux!'

'Thank you. What was waiting for me in Nastrog?'

'An interrogation...'

'What questions were you to ask?'

'About what happened in Thanedd! I beg you, untie me! I will tell you everything!'

'Of course you're going to tell me everything,' drawled the elf. 'Especially since the beginning is behind us and the beginning is always the hardest. Continue.'

'I had orders to force you to confess where you are hiding Rience, Vilgefortz and Cahir Mawr Dyffryn aep

Ceallach!’

‘Amusing. You set a trap to ask me about Rience and Vilgefortz? What can I know about them? Where can you join them? And the matter of Cahir is even more amusing. I sent him back to you, just as you wished. In fetters. Has the shipment not arrived yet?’

‘The detachment was killed at the meeting place... Cahir was not among those killed...’

‘Oh, and Vattier de Rideaux became suspicious? But instead of sending another emissary to the towns to one of my commandos to ask for clarification, he decided to ambush me. He orders me dragged to Nastrog for questioning. About the events of Thanedd.’

The spy remained silent.

‘Did you not understand?’ The elf leaned over him with his horrible face. ‘That was a question. What is it?’

‘I do not know... I do not know, I swear...’

Faoiltiarna waved his hand. Struycken screamed, writhed and cursed the Great Sun, swearing his ignorance, he shook his head and spat out the thick syrup they cast into his face. Only when he had been carried by four Scoia’tael to the anthill did he talk. He tried to banish the idea that the consequences could be worse than the ants.

‘Sir... If anyone hears about this, I’m dead... But I’ll tell you... I saw secret orders. I overheard... I will tell you everything...’

‘That is obvious,’ the elf nodded. ‘The record on the anthill is one hour and forty minutes and belongs to a certain official of king Demavend’s special forces. But he also spoke in the end. Come on, begin. Fast, neat and to the point.’

‘The Emperor is convinced that those at Thanedd betrayed him. The traitor Vilgefortz Roggeveen, sorcerer. And his assistant, called Rience. And above all, Cahir Mawr Dyffryn aep Ceallach. Vattier... Lord Vattier is not sure that you have not been dipping your fingers into this betrayal, even unknowingly... So I was ordered to capture and secretly transport you to Nastrog... Sir Faoiltiarna, twenty years I have worked in the Secret Service... Vattier de Rideaux is my third commander...’

‘Briefly, please. And stop shaking. If you are sincere with me, you will still have the chance to serve a few more commanders.’

‘It was the deepest state secret, but I learned who Vilgefortz and Cahir caught on the island. I faced the fact that they had succeeded. Because they took to Loc Grim... What’s her name... Yes, the princess of Cintra. We thought it was a success and Rience and Cahir would be made Barons, and the sorcerer an Earl at least... But instead the Emperor called Kalous. I mean Lord Skellen and Lord Vattier and ordered the capture of Cahir... and Rience and Vilgefortz... Everyone who might know something about the events on Thanedd had to be subjected to torture... And you too... It was not hard to imagine... Well, there had to have been treason. They had brought to Loc Grim a false princess...’

The spy took a deep breath and his mouth flooded with maple syrup.

‘Untie him,’ Faoiltiarna ordered the Squirrels, ‘And wash your face.’

The order was carried out immediately. After a while, the organizer of the failed ambush was standing with bowed

head before the Scoia'tael leader. Faoiltiarna regarded him with indifference.

'Wipe the syrup from your ears carefully,' he said at last. 'and listen to what I am about to tell you. Exercise your memory, as benefits a spy with many years of practice. I will give you proof of my loyalty to the Emperor, I'll give you a full account of the matter that are of interest to you. But you will repeat everything to Vattier de Rideaux, word for word.'

The spy nodded eagerly.

'In mid Blathe, that is, by your reckoning the beginning of June,' began the elf, 'The sorceress Enid an Gleanna, also known as Francesca Findabair, established contact with me. At her command there soon arrived to my commando unit a certain Rience, reportedly a factotum of Vilgefortz of Roggeveen, also a sorcerer. In the deepest secrecy a plan of action was developed, aimed at eliminating a number of wizards at the Congress on the island of Thanedd. The plan was presented to me as an action that had the full support of the Emperor Emhyr, Vattier de Rideaux and Stefan Skellen, otherwise I would not have agreed to cooperate with the *Dh'oine*, sorcerers or not, because I have seen too many provocations in my life. The involvement of the empire in this affair was confirmed at Cape Bremervoord by the arrival of the vessel that brought Cahir, the son of Ceallach, equipped with special powers of attorney and orders. According to these orders I was to appoint a small group of my commandos which was subject only to Cahir. The group was tasked with abducting from the island... a certain person.'

'We sailed to Thanedd,' Faoiltiarna took a moment, 'on the ship that Cahir arrived on. Rience had amulets which he used to cover the ship in magic mist. We sailed the boat into caverns beneath the island. From there we came to the basement under Garstang.'

'Already in the basement, we knew that something was wrong, Rience received some telepathic communication from Vilgefortz. We knew that when we began our march we would be entering into an on-going struggle. We were ready. And this was a good thing, because right after we left the basement, all hell broke loose.'

The elf twisted his heavily scarred face, as if the memories pained him.

'After some initial success, things began to unravel. We could not eliminate all of the king's witches and suffered big losses. Some of the magicians on our side were killed, others wanting to save their own skin, teleported away. At some point Vilgefortz disappeared, the Rience disappeared and soon after them Enid an Gleanna. The last disappearance I took as the definitive signal to retreat. I did not want to issue the order until the return of Cahir and his group, who had at the beginning of the action gone to perform his mission. Since they had not returned, we started searching for them.'

Faoiltiarna looked into his eyes of the Nilfgaardian spy.

'Not a single member of the group was left alive; they had all been killed in a brutal manner. I found Cahir on the steps leading to Tor Lara, the tower which exploded during the fight and was reduced to ruins. He was wounded and unconscious, it was clear that he had not fulfilled the mission entrusted to him. In the surrounding area there was no sign of the object of his mission, and below in Loxia and Aretuza had been occupied by king's men. I knew there was no way that Cahir could fall into their hands, because it would have been proof of Nilfgaard's participation in the action. I took him and ran to the basement, to the caverns. We boarded the ship and set sail. Of all of the commandos there were no more than twelve left and they were mostly wounded.'

'The wind favoured us. We disembarked west of Hirundum and hid in the woods. Cahir tore at his bandages, shouting something about a crazy lady with green eyes, about Ciri the lion of Cintra, about a witcher who had destroyed his group and about a sorcerer who flew like a bird towards the Tower of Gulls. He asked for a horse and ordered us back to the island, claiming it was the Emperor's orders, which, in this situation, I had to consider the ravings of a madman. In Aedirn, as we already knew, the war was already raging and I thought it best to put together a new squad and resume the fighting against the *Dh'oine*.'

'Cahir was still with us when I found the contact box which contained your secret orders. I was surprised. Cahir,

although it was clear that his mission had failed, nothing indicated that he was guilty of treason. However, I did not think too much of it, I thought it was your affair and you ought to solve it yourselves. Cahir, when he was tied up, offered no resistance, he was calm and resigned. I sent him in a wooden coffin and with the help of a *hav'caaren* friend, had him taken to the place indicated in the orders. I admit I had no desire to weaken my squad in an escort for him. I do not know who murdered your people at the meeting place. And only I knew the location. So if this version of events does not correspond entirely with the death of your unit, then look for traitors at home, because apart from you and me, only I knew the time and the place.'

Faoiltiarna stood up.

'That's all. All of the information I have provided is true. Even in the dungeons of Nastrog you would not have gotten more. Lies and fabrication, which I probably would have provided to your torturer, would have proved to be harmful to you, rather than help. I do not know anything more, in particular, I do not know the whereabouts of Vilgefertz and Rience, I also don't know whether to rightly suspect them of treason. And to tell you the truth, I know nothing about the princess of Cintra, neither true nor false. I have told you everything I know. I hope that Lord de Rideaux and Stefan Skellen no longer wish to ambush me. *Dh'oine* have long tried to capture or kill me, so I have developed the habit of killing all who try. In the future, I will not wait to see if any of the agents are sent by chance on the orders of Vattier or Skellen. I am not going to have the time or the inclination. Have I made myself clear?'

Struycken nodded, swallowing.

'So take your horse, spy and get out of my woods.'

\* \* \*

'You endured the torment in that coffin they carried you in,' Milva murmured. 'I don't understand. Why didn't you go to a town and hide, why follow after the witcher? He hates you... The two times he saved your life...'

'Three times.'

'Twice I was there. Though you are not the sorcerer who broke the witcher's bones at Thanedd, I don't think it is safe for you to get close to his sword. What is between you I don't understand, but you saved me and I look at you kindly... So I tell you, Cahir, the witcher is looking for those who kidnapped Ciri and took her to Nilfgaard, he grinds his teeth so much that sparks fly. And when he spits, the saliva hisses.'

'Ciri,' he repeated. 'Beautiful name.'

'You didn't know it?'

'No. For me it has always been said Cirilla or young lion of Cintra... And when she was with me... Because she was once... She didn't say a word. Although I saved her life.'

'It'd take the devil to understand this,' she said. 'Your destiny, Cahir, is intricate and complex. Not for my head.'

'And what is your name?' he asked suddenly.

‘Milva... Maria Barring. But they call me, Milva.’

‘The witcher is moving in the wrong direction, Milva,’ he said after a moment. ‘Ciri is not in Nilfgaard. It was not Nilfgaard who kidnapped her. If she was kidnapped.’

‘How is that?’

‘It’s a long story.’

\* \* \*

‘By the Great Sun,’ Fringilla standing in the threshold, tilted her head in surprise and looked at her friend. ‘What have you done with your hair, Assire?’

‘I have washed it,’ Assire var Anahid replied dryly. ‘And curled it. Come in, please, sit down. Get out of the chair, Merlin. Shoo!’

The sorceress sat in the place the black cat has reluctantly vacated, still staring at her friend’s hair.

‘Stop staring at me,’ Assire’s hand touched the fluffy shiny curls. ‘I decided to change a bit. Anyway, I followed your example.’

‘I,’ Fringilla Vigo laughed, ‘have always been considered unruly and rebellious. But when they see you at the academy or the court...’

‘I do not go to court,’ said Assire. ‘And the academy will have to get used to it. This is the thirteenth century; it is high time we break superstition that attention to our external appearance shows frivolity and weakness of mind.’

‘The nails too,’ Fringilla narrowed her green eyes, which did not miss anything. ‘I do not recognise you, my dear.’

‘A simple spell,’ the sorceress answered coldly, ‘should be enough to prove I’m not a Doppler. Cast the spell, if you must. And then let’s move on to discuss the reason I invited you.’

Fringilla Vigo stroked the cat that rubbed against her leg, purring and stretching, pretending it was a gesture of affection, not a veiled suggestion that the black-haired sorceress was in it’s chair.

‘Is it true,’ she said, without raising her head, ‘that Seneschal Ceallach aep Gryffyd visited you, right?’

‘Yes,’ Assire confirmed. ‘Ceallach visited me, in despair, asking me for help for intercession, with his son, whom Emperor Emhyr has ordered captured, tortured and executed. To whom is a desperate father to turn to, if not a relative? Mawr, Ceallach’s wife, the mother of Cahir, is my niece, my sister’s youngest daughter. Despite this, I promised nothing. Because I cannot do anything in this case. Recently, circumstances have arisen that do not allow me to pull attention to myself. Let me explain it to you. But first, let me hear the information I asked you to collect.’



Fringilla secretly breathed a sigh of relief. She was afraid that her friend wanted to get involved in the business of Cahir, the son of Ceallach, a matter that smelled of the scaffold. And if she had been asked for help, she would not be able to refuse.

‘About mid-July,’ she began, ‘the entire court of Loc Grim had the opportunity to admire a fifteen year old girl, who was allegedly the princess of Cintra, which, during the audience, Emhyr portrayed as the queen and treated her so graciously, that rumours spread about the imminent marriage.’

‘I heard,’ Assire stroke the cat, which had become discouraged that Fringilla would not move, considered the possibility of getting into another chair, ‘that there is still talk about this undoubtedly political marriage.’

‘But in lower voices and less often. Because the Cintran princess has been taken to Darn Rowan. Darn Rowan, as you know, is usually known for housing prisoners. Rarely women candidates for empress.’

Assire made no comment. She waited patiently; looking at her recently filed and painted nails.

‘Undoubtedly, you remember,’ Fringilla Vigo continued, ‘how three years ago, Emhyr called us all and ordered us to establish the whereabouts of a person. In the area of the Northern Kingdoms. Undoubtedly, you remember how mad he was when we did not succeed. Albrich, who explained that it was impossible to probe so far, let alone pass the screens. And now listen. A week after the famous Loc Grim audience when celebrating the victory of Aldersberg, Emhyr suddenly noticed Albrich and me and honoured us with a conversation. The meaning of his speech, without trivializing too much goes as follows: “You are freeloaders, indolent and lazy. Your fairground tricks cost me a fortune and I get no benefit from them. The task that I set for your pitiful academy was completed by a simple astrologer in four days.”’

Assire var Anahid snorted with contempt, still stroking the cat.

‘I found out easily,’ Fringilla continued, ‘that the astrologer was none other than the infamous Xarthisius.’

‘So the person that was sought, this Cintran, is to be the candidate for empress. And Xarthisius found her. Then what? Was he appointed Secretary of State? Head of the Department of Impossible Tasks?’

‘No. They threw him in the dungeon a week later.’

‘I’m afraid I don’t understand what this has to do with Cahir, son of Ceallach.’

‘Patience. Let me do this in order, It is necessary.’

‘Sorry. I’m listening.’

‘Do you remember what Emhyr gave us three years ago when we began to look?’

‘A lock of hair.’

‘Right.’ Fringilla reached into her purse. ‘Precisely this hair. The light hair of a girl of six years. I kept a few. And it had paid off because, the person who cares for the Cintran princess isolated at Darn Rowan is Stella Congreve, Countess of Liddertal. Stella some time ago contracted some debts of gratitude to me, so it was no problem gaining possession of a second lock of hair. This one. It is somewhat darker, but hair darkens with age. Nevertheless, the locks belong to two completely different people. I have examined them and there is no doubt about it.’

‘I imagined a revelation of this kind,’ Assire admitted, ‘as soon as I heard that the Cintran had been isolated in Darn Rowan. The astrologer either failed to find the correct subject or was pulled into a conspiracy to provide a fake person to Emhyr. The conspiracy that will cost the head of Cahir aep Ceallach. Thank you, Fringilla. Everything is clear.’

‘Not everything,’ the black-haired sorceress shook her head. ‘First, it was Xarthisius who found the Cintran, it was he who brought her to Loc Grim. The astrologer began to read horoscopes after he realized that he had brought a false princess to Emhyr and began an intensive search for the truth. And the crazy old man ended up in the dungeons for a stupid mistake in his art or for fraud. All I have been able to establish, is that he was able to determine the whereabouts of the wanted person to within a hundred mile radius. And this was an desert, an uninhabited desert somewhere beyond the mountains of Tir Tochair behind the Velda river. Stefan Skellen, who was sent there, found nothing but scorpions and vultures.’

‘I would not have expected anything else from Xarthisius. But this will not have any influence on the issue of Cahir. Emhyr is angry, but he does not send anyone to torture and death for no reason. As you yourself have said, someone arranged for the fake princess to be delivered to Loc Grim. Someone has found a double. So there is a conspiracy and Cahir has been drawn into it. I will not rule out that it was unconsciously. That he was used.’

‘If he had, they would have done so until the end. He would have been the one to bring the double to Emhyr. But Cahir has disappeared without a trace. Why? After all his disappearance had to awaken suspicion. Could he have expected Emhyr would spot the fraud at first sight? Because he would realize. Would realize because he was...’

‘A lock of hair,’ interrupted Assire. ‘A lock of hair from a six year old girl. Fringilla, Emhyr has not been looking for this girl for three years, but much longer. It seems that Cahir has been pulled into something terrible, something that began when he was still riding around on a stick pretending it was a horse. Humm... Leave me this lock of hair. I would like to do some tests.’

Fringilla shook her head slowly, her green eyes narrowing.

‘I’ll leave it. But be cautious, Assire. Do not get into something terrible. Because this will draw attention to you. At the beginning of the conversation you mentioned that you could not afford it. You promised clarify the reasons.’

Assire var Anahid rose and went to the window, she stared out at the setting sun glistening on the roofs and towers of Nilfgaard, the capital of the Empire, called the City of Golden Towers.

‘You said once, and I remember,’ she said without turning around, ‘that magic should not be divided by borders. That the good of magic should be the greatest good, which should be above all kinds of divisions. Something like that would require... a secret organisation... something like a convent or a lodge...’

‘I’m ready,’ Fringilla answered the unspoken question of the Nilfgaardian sorceress. ‘I am determined and ready to proceed. Thank you for the trust and honour. When and where is the meeting of this lodge, my secretive and mysterious friend?’

Assire var Anahid the Nilfgaardian sorceress turned around. On her lips was a shadow of a smile.

‘Soon,’ she said. ‘Now I will explain everything. But before I do... I’ll give you the address of my seamstress, Fringilla.’

\* \* \*

‘Not a single fire,’ Milva whispered staring at the dark shore of the river, whose surface glistening in the moonlight. ‘Not a soul there either. The camp held two hundred refugees. Did no one save their neck?’

‘If the imperials won, they would have taken everyone into slavery,’ Cahir replied, also in a whisper. ‘If your side won, they would have taken the refugees away from this place.’

They moved closer to the shore, to the overgrown marsh reeds. Milva stepped on something and jumped back, stifling a cry at the sight of a hand emerging from the mud covered in leeches.

‘It’s just a corpse,’ Cahir muttered grabbing her arm, ‘Ours. A Daerlan.’

‘Who?’

‘The Seventh Daerlan Cavalry brigade. White scorpion on his sleeve...’

‘Gods,’ she shuddered violently, clutching her bow in her sweaty fist. ‘Did you hear that voice? What was it?’

‘A wolf.’

‘Or a ghoul... Or some other damned soul. There must be a lot of dead bodies in the camp... The plague, I will not go to the other shore at night!’

‘We’ll wait until dawn... Milva? What is that strange...’

‘Regis...’ The archer suppressed a cry, smelling the smell of wormwood, sage, coriander and anise. ‘Regis is that you?’

‘It is I,’ the surgeon quietly appeared out of the darkness. ‘I was worried about you. You are not alone, I can see.’

‘You see well,’ Milva let go of Cahir’s arm, who had already reached for his sword. ‘I am not alone but the same cannot be said about yourself. Regis, where is the witcher? Dandelion? And the rest? Do you know what happened to them?’

‘I know. Do you have the horses?’

‘We have them. Among the reeds...’

‘Then we head south, following the course of the Chotla. Without delay. Before midnight we must be in Armeria.’

‘What about the witcher and the poet? Do they live?’

‘They live. But they are in trouble.’

‘What trouble?’

‘It is a long story.’

\* \* \*

Dandelion groaned, trying to turn around and put himself in a more comfortable position. However, it was an impossible task for someone who was lying in a pile of sawdust and shavings and was bound with ropes like a ham about to be smoked.

‘We were not handed immediately,’ he gasped. ‘There is hope...’

‘Calm down,’ the witcher lay quietly, watching the moon visible through a hole in the roof of the woodshed. ‘Do you know why Vissegerd didn’t hang us right away? Because we are to be executed publicly at dawn, when the entire army has gathered. For propaganda.’

Dandelion was silent. Geralt heard him sniff regretfully.

‘You still have a chance to escape,’ he said to appease him. ‘Vissegerd wants to carry out his private vendetta against me, but he has nothing against you. Your Count friend will get you out of prison, you’ll see.’

‘Bullshit,’ replied the bard, to the astonishment of the witcher, calmly and quite reasonably. ‘Bullshit, bullshit, bullshit. Do not treat me like a child. First, for propaganda purposes, hanging two is better than hanging one. Secondly, I witness a personal vendetta, he will not leave me alive. No, brother, we’ll swing together.’

‘Stop, Dandelion. Stay quietly and think of a plan.’

‘What plan, dammit?’

‘Anything.’

The speech of the poet prevented the witcher from concentrating. He needs something. He expected at any moment the woodshed would be invaded by Temerian military intelligence, who would certainly be working for Vissegerd. The Secret Service would certainly like to ask him about the various details of the events at Garstang on island of Thanedd. Geralt knew almost no details, but he knew that before the agents would believe him, he would become very, very sick. His only hope was on Vissegerd, blinded by the desire for revenge, had not notified the agents of his capture. The Secret Service would be able to remove the prisoners for the claws of the angry Marshal and take them back to their headquarters. More precisely, they could take back to their headquarters what was left of the prisoners after the first interrogation.

At that moment the poet thought of a plan.

‘Geralt! We can act like we know something important. That we are really spies or something like that. Then...’

‘Have mercy, Dandelion.’

‘We can also try and bribe the guards. I have money hidden. Doubloon, sewn into the lining of my shoe. For a rainy day... Call the guards...’

‘And then they take everything and you still swing.’

The poet recoiled in disgust, but then relented. From the camp they could hear cries, the stamping of horses and worse, the smell of the soldier’s pea soup, a bowl of which at the moment Geralt would give all the steak and truffles in the world. The guards standing next to the shed chatted idly, laughing and occasionally cleared their throats and spat for long periods. The guard were professional soldiers, it was possible for them to communicate using compound sentences with pronouns exclusively filthy and disgusting.

‘Geralt?’

‘What?’

‘I wonder what happened to Milva... And Zoltan, Percival and Regis... Did you see?’

‘No. I have not ruled out that during the fighting they were cut down or trampled by horses. There in the camp, lay their bodies.’

‘I don’t believe that,’ said Dandelion, stubbornly and with hope in his voice. ‘I do not believe that people as sly as Zoltan, Percival... Or Milva...’

‘Stop deluding yourself. Even if they survived, they cannot help us.’

‘Why?’

‘For three reasons. First, because they have their own problems. Second, because we lie bound in a shed which is located in the center of a camp of an army of several thousand people.’

‘And the third reason? You mentioned three.’

‘Third,’ he replied wearily, ‘the limit of miracles for this month has already been exhausted when the women of Kernow found their missing husbands.’

\* \* \*

‘There,’ the surgeon said, pointing out the glowing dots of campfires. ‘There is the fort of America, the current troop camp for the Temerian army concentrated in Mayena.’

‘The witcher and Dandelion are imprisoned there?’ Milva stood in her stirrups. ‘Ha, it is so dark... There will be crowds of armed people around and guards. We will not be able to approach undetected.’

‘You will not have to,’ Regis said, dismounting from Pegasus. The gelding snorted, irritated by the herbal aroma floating from his rider. ‘You will not have to sneak.’ He repeated. ‘I can handle this myself. You go with the horses towards the brightest star of the Seven Goats. Wait at the river where the Chotla empties into the Ina. When I manage to free the witcher, we’ll head in that direction. There we will meet.’

‘He is highly arrogant,’ Cahir whispered to Milva after dismounting from their horses found them close to each other. ‘Alone, without any help he is going into trouble, did you hear? Who is he?’

‘I truly, do not know,’ whispered Milva. ‘But I believe what he says. Yesterday with his bare hands, he pulled a horseshoe out of red hot coals, before my eyes...’

‘A wizard?’

‘No,’ Regis said from behind Pegasus, giving evidence of exceptionally sensitive hearing. ‘Is it that important? I do not ask for your personal details.’

‘I am Cahir Mawr Dyffryn aep Ceallach.’

‘Thank you and I am full of admiration,’ the surgeon’s voice held a hint of mockery. ‘as that Nilfgaardian name was pronounced with almost no accent.’

‘I’m not...’

‘Enough!’ Milva cut him off. ‘There is no time to argue and dawdle. Regis, the witcher is waiting for a rescue.’

‘Not before midnight,’ the surgeon said coldly, looking at the moon. ‘So we have time to talk. Who is this man, Milva?’

‘This man,’ the archer said, getting angry, ‘helped me out of trouble. This man will tell the witcher when he meets with him, that we are going the wrong way. Ciri is not in Nilfgaard.’

‘Indeed, a revelation.’ The surgeon’s voice softened. ‘And what is your source, esteemed Cahir, son of Ceallach?’

‘That is a long story.’

\* \* \*

Dandelion had been silent a long time when one of the soldiers set to guard them broke off his conversation in mid curse, slurring, a second one groaning. Geralt knew that there were three of them, so he listened, but the third soldier issued no sound.

He waited with bated breath. The sound that caught his ear was not the opening of a creaking door, but the sound of snoring. The guards had fallen asleep on duty.

He exhaled and cursed without a sound and was ready to immerse himself in thoughts of Yennefer when the witcher medallion around his neck quivered suddenly and a powerful smell struck his nostrils of wormwood, basil, coriander, save and anise. And God knows what else.

‘Regis?’ he whispered in disbelief, unsuccessfully trying to raise his head from the floor.

‘Regis,’ Dandelion whispered back, moving and rustling. ‘No one else stinks so... Where are you? I cannot see you...’

‘Quiet.’

The medallion stopped vibrating, Geralt heard a sigh of relief from the poet and immediately after heard the sound of a knife cutting through rope. A moment later, Dandelion groaned with pain caused by the circulation being restored to his limbs, he tried to suppress the groans by biting his fist.

‘Geralt,’ The fuzzy, shaky shadow of the surgeon came near him and immediately cut the ropes. ‘You need to get yourself past the guards. Follow the brightest star of the Seven Goats to the east. Straight to the Ina. Milva is waiting there with horses.’

‘Help me get up...’

He stood up on one leg, then the second, biting his fist. Dandelion’s circulation had had time to return to normal. The witcher, after a moment, was also ready.

‘How do we get out?’ the poet suddenly asked. ‘The guards at the door are snoring, but they...’

‘They won’t’ interrupted Regis in a whisper. ‘But be careful leaving. The moon is full and there is lots of light from the campfires. Although it is night time, there is still a lot of traffic in the camp, but this is good. The patrol has already grown tired of asking for the password. Go. Good luck.’

‘And you?’

‘Do not worry about me. Don’t wait for me or look back.’

‘But...’

‘Dandelion,’ the witcher hissed. ‘He said not to worry about him, didn’t you hear?’

‘Go,’ repeated Regis. ‘Good luck. Goodbye Geralt.’

The witcher turned.

‘Thank you for your help,’ he said. ‘But it is better that we never met again. Do you understand me?’

‘Perfectly. Do not waste time.’

The guard slept in picturesque poses, snoring and muttering. None of them stirred when Geralt and Dandelion slipped through the open door. None of them reacted when the witcher unceremoniously pulled off two heavy homespun cloaks.

‘This is no mere sleep,’ Dandelion whispered.

‘Of course not,’ Geralt, hidden in the darkness of the shed, looked around the square.

‘I understand,’ the poet sighed. ‘Regis is a sorcerer?’

‘No. Not a sorcerer.’

‘He pulled the horseshoe from the fire. He lulled the guards to sleep...’

‘Stop talking and concentrate. We are not safe yet. Put on the cloak and head through the square. If anyone stops us, we pretend we are soldiers.’

‘Okay. If anything happens, I’ll say...’

‘We pretend we are stupid soldiers. Let’s go.’

They cut across the yard, keeping away from the soldiers gathered around the wagons and campfires. People wandered back and forth across the square, two more, did not attract any more attention. No one’s suspicions were aroused, no one hailed nor tried to stop them, They quickly and without hassle made their way towards the palisade.

Everything was going smoothly, a little too smoothly. Geralt became restless, because he instinctively sensed danger and this feeling, as they moved further away from the center of the camp, grew instead of declining. He kept repeating to himself that there was nothing surprising about any of this –in the middle of a busy night two people wouldn’t be noticed, they could only be threatened if someone raised the alarm after finding the guards sleeping at the woodshed. Now, however, they approaching the perimeter where sentries necessarily had to be vigilant. It was while leaving the camp that the witcher remembered that there was in Vissegerd’s command the scourge of desertion and he was sure that the guards were ordered to give careful attention to any who wished to leave the camp.

The moon gave enough light so that Dandelion did not have to grope. The witcher could see in this light as well as in the day, so they managed to avoid two mounted soldiers while waiting in the bushes for the patrol to pass by. Just before them was a dark alder grove lying just on the other side of the ring of posts.

Everything was going smoothly.

Too smoothly.

He had forgotten his knowledge of military procedure.

The low and sinister grove of alders was tempting because it would allow them to hide. But since the world began, soldiers, when they came to perform their guard duties lay down among bushes, so they could sleep in shifts and also see the enemy as well as monitor their own annoying officers in case they passed by during an unexpected inspection.



Geralt and Dandelion had barely approached the alder woods when dark silhouettes appeared in front of them. And a sharpened spears.

‘The password!’

‘Cintra!’ Dandelion blurred without hesitation.

The soldiers laughed in chorus.

‘Oh, men, men,’ said one. ‘You do not have a touch of fantasy. You can’t come up with something more original. Nothing just, “Cintra”. Are you becoming homesick, or what? Okay. The price is the same as yesterday.’

Dandelion clenched his teeth audibly. Geralt had a chance to assess the situation. But the assessment yielded a poor result.

‘Come,’ urged the soldier. ‘You want to leave, pay the toll and we’ll turn a blind eye. Quickly, the patrol will pass soon.’

‘Right,’ the poet changed his accent. ‘I need to sit down and take off my shoe because I have ...’

He did not get a chance to say more. Four soldiers threw him to the ground, two taking each of his legs and pulled off his boot. The one, who asked for the password, ripped the inner lining of the boot. Something jingled to the ground.

‘Gold!’ shouted a commander. ‘Search the other one! And call the patrol!’

No one was listening because all the men were on their knees. Some were digging through leaves searching for the doubloons, others were dragging off Dandelion’s other boot. *Now or never*, thought Geralt, then punch the commander in the jaw as he fell he kicked him in the side of the head. The men gathering gold did not even notice. Dandelion without encouragement jumped to his feet and dashed off through the bushes. Geralt ran after him.

‘Help! Help!’ shouted the captain of the guards who had been knocked down, now supported by his comrades. ‘Paaaaaatrol!’

‘Rogues!; Dandelion shouted as he ran. ‘Thieves! They took my money!’

‘Save your breath, idiot! Can you see the forest? Run!’

‘Alarm! Alaaaaarm!’

They ran. Geralt cursed with rage when he heard cries, whistles and horses hooves. Behind them. And before them. His surprise did not last long. What he took to be the salvation of the forest, was an approaching cavalry, surging like a wave.

‘Stop, Dandelion!’ he shouted, then turning towards the oncoming patrol galloping towards them and whistled loudly with his fingers.

‘Nilfgaard!’ he roared, with all the power of his lungs. ‘Nilfgaard is coming! To the camp! Return to the camp, fools! Raise the alarm! Nilfgaard!’

The rider leading the patrol chasing them, looked forward, he shouted in fright and tried to turn his horse around. But Geralt decided that he had had enough of the Cintra’s lions and Temeria’s lilies. He jumped up and skilfully knocked the soldier from his saddle.

‘Get on, Dandelion! And hold on!’

The poet did not have to be told twice. The horse paused for a moment under the weight of a second rider, but fuelled by two pairs of heels, went into a mad gallop. The swarm of Nilfgaardians approaching them was now a much greater threat than Vissegerd and his army, so they galloped along the ring of guard posts surrounding the camp, trying to get as far possible from the lines that could flare up at any moment when the two armies clashed. The Nilfgaardians, however, were close and saw them. Dandelion yelled, Geralt looked back and saw as the dark wall of Nilfgaardians started to stretch out riders towards them like black tentacles. Without hesitation, they turned the horse towards the camp, overtaking the fleeing guards. Dandelion yelled again, but this time it was unnecessary. The witcher had also seen the cavalry rushing from the side of the camp. Vissegerd’s army, stirred by the alarm, had mounted their horses in a time worthy of admiration. Geralt and Dandelion found themselves trapped.

There was no way out. The witcher changed direction again and forced the horse to gallop with all its might, trying to escape from the swiftly narrowing gap between the rock and the hard place. When it seemed like they would succeed in escape, the night air was suddenly filled with the sound of whistling arrows. Dandelion yelled, this time in pain and dug his fingers into Geralt’s ribs. The witcher felt something warm splatter on his neck.

‘Hold on!’ he caught the poet’s arm and pressed him hard against his back. ‘Hold on, Dandelion!’

‘They’ve killed me!’ the poet yelled, a little too loud for the dead. ‘I’m bleeding! I’m dying!’

‘Hold on!’

The hail of arrows and bolts, which buried the two armies and which had proved so fatal for Dandelion, had also become a his salvation. The armies, coming under fire, had lost their momentum and the gap between them provide some breathing room, enough to get both riders and the horse out of the trap. Geralt mercilessly forced the stallion to galloping further, because although it loomed before them they could still hear the rumble of hooves from behind. The horse grunted, stumbled, but they might have kept running and escaped had Dandelion not groaned and suddenly slipped from the rump of the horse, pulling the witcher from the saddle. Geralt unintentionally pulled on the reins, the horse reared up and they were both tossed to the ground landing in a bush. The poet fell limply and did not get up, just screamed wrenchingly. He had the whole side of his head and his left shoulder covered in blood, shining black in the moonlight.

Behind them, the armies collided with a crash, clang and screams. But despite the return of the battle, the Nilfgaardian pursuers had not forgotten about them. Three horsemen galloped in their direction.

The witcher stood up, a feeling of cold rage welling inside of him. He jumped in front of the pursuers, trying to divert their attention from the unconscious Dandelion. He did not want to sacrifice himself for his friend. He wanted to kill.

The first rider, flew at him with an axe, But he did not expect that he was going up against a witcher. Geralt, without effort, sprang away from the blow, grabbed the saddle in one hand and with the other grabbed the wide belt of the Nilfgaardian. With a strong jerk he pulled him from the saddle and fell on him. Only then realizing he had no weapon. He grabbed the man by the throat, but could not strangle him due to an iron gorget. The nilfgaardian struggled under him then hit him with an iron gauntlet, tearing his cheek. The witcher rolled his whole body and felt a dagger on the belt of the Nilfgaardian and pulled it from its sheath. The fallen man noticed and started screaming. Geralt pushed down the arm with the white scorpion on the sleeve and raised the dagger to strike. The Nilfgaardian screamed.

The witcher stabbed him in the open mouth, all the way to the hilt.

When he rose, he saw the horses without riders, several corpses and a group returning to the battle. The Cintrans from the camp had followed the Nilfgaardian pursers and in the darkness had not seen the poet or the two men fighting on the ground.

‘Dandelion? Where did you get hit? Where is the arrow?’

‘In the ca ... head ... Nailed in the head ...’

‘Don’t talk nonsense! Damn, you were lucky,, It’s only a scratch ...’

‘I’m bleeding ...’

Geralt took off his jacket and tore off a sleeve. The tip of the arrow had scratched Dandelion’s ear, leaving a cut that reached to his temple. The poet, every now and again touched the wound with his shaking hands, and then looked at the blood covering his hands and sleeves. His eyes were lost. The witcher realized that before him was a man who, for the first time had felt real pain and for the first time in his life seen so much of his own blood.

‘Get up,’ he said, quickly tying the sleeve around the troubadour’s head. ‘It’s nothing. Dandelion, it’s just a scratch ... Get up, we need to be on our way ...’

The night battle raging on the prairie was at its height, the clang of iron, the neighing of the horses and the cries all gathered strength. Geralt quickly grabbed two of the Nilfgaardians horses, but they only needed one. Dandelion stood up, but immediately sat down heavily, groaned and sobbed wretchedly. The witcher picked him up, shook him until he came around and helped him climb into the saddle. Then he climbed on the back and spurred the horse. They headed east, where in the brightening sky, shone the brightest star of the constellation of the Seven Goats.

\* \* \*

‘Dawn will be here soon,’ Milva said not looking at the sky but at the glossy surface of the river. ‘The catfish chase the salmon. But there is no sign of the witcher or Dandelion. Shit, I hope that Regis knew what he was doing ...’

‘Do not lose hope,’ Cahir murmured, as he rearranged the saddle on his recovered chestnut stallion.

‘Pah ... I wonder ... Come into contact with Ciri, is like putting your head under an axe ... The girl brings misfortune ... Misery and death.’

‘Stop, Milva.’

‘Pah ... I’m cold ... and I want a drink, but at the edge of the river I saw a rotting corpse. Brr ... I feel sick ... I want

to vomit.'

'Here,' Cahir passed her a canteen. 'Have a drink. I will sit close to you and warm you.'

More catfish hit the shallows, the group coming close to the surface in a shower of silver.

'Who knows,' murmured Milva thoughtfully, pressing close to Cahir's arm, 'what will happen tomorrow? Who will cross this river and who will occupy this territory?'

'What will be, will be. Banish these thoughts.'

'Are you not afraid?'

'I'm scared. And you?'

'I feel sick.'

They were silent for a long time.

'Tell me, Cahir, when did you meet Ciri?'

'For the first time? Three years ago. During the battle of Cintra. While I was leaving the city. I found her, surrounded by fire on all sides. I rode through the fire, through the flames and the smoke, holding her in my arms and she too was like fire.'

'How so?'

'No one can hold fire in their hands.'

'If Ciri is not in Nilfgaard,' she said after a long silence, 'then where?'

'I do not know.'

\* \* \*

Drakenborg, a Redanian castle converted in a concentration camp for elves, and other subversive elements had a grim tradition, developed over three years of operation. One of these traditions was the hangings at dawn. The second tradition was gathering all the condemned together in a great common cell, where they were taken out to the gallows at dawn.

The convicts are grouped into cells from ten to twenty, and every morning two, three or four are hanged. The other wait for their turn. Sometimes for a long while. Sometimes within a week. Those waiting in the cells are called the

Joyful. Because the atmosphere surrounding the cell was always cheerful. First, the captives were given food and heavily diluted sour wine, bearing the camp jargon name: “Dijkstra Riesling”, since it was no secret that the drink was served on the personal orders of the Redanian intelligence chief. Secondly, anyone in the condemned cell could not be dragged off into the notorious underground laundries and the guards were not allowed to mistreat the prisoners.

That night another tradition was being performed. In a cell occupied by six elves, one half-elf, one halfling, two humans and a Nilfgaardian, there was joy. The Dijkstra Riesling was being poured into a tin plate and sipped without hands, in order to have better chances of getting a slight dizziness from the watered down wine. Only one of the elves, a Scoia’tael from Iorveth’s commandos had recently received a heavy beating in the laundry room, he kept his serenity and dignity, and wrote on a wall beam the inscription: “Freedom or death”. There were hundreds of similar inscriptions. The rest of the condemned, also following tradition, sang in chorus the hymn of the Joyful, an anonymous song, composed in Drakenborg, whose words were learned by each of the prisoners in the barracks at night by listening to the sounds coming from the death cell, knowing that someday they would join in the chorus.

*The hanged people dance on the ropes,*

*Rhythmically writhing in spasms,*

*Sing your song,*

*With melancholic emotion,*

*Too amuse the Joyful,*

*Each of the dead remember when their feet left the stool,*

*And their eyes popped out of their sockets.*

The lock screeched and the door groaned. The Joyful interrupted their song. Guards entering at dawn could only mean one thing – the chorus would be slimmed down a couple of voices. The question was: whose?

The guards came in a group. They carried ropes that were to be used to tie the hands of those being led to the gallows. One sniffed, put his club under his arm, unrolled a scroll and cleared his throat.

‘Echel Trogelton!’

‘Traighlethan,’ corrected the elf from Iorveth’s commandos. He looked again at the slogan he had written and rose with effort.

‘Cosmo Baldenyegg!’

The halfling swallowed hard. Nazarian knew he had been imprisoned on charges of sabotage, carried out on behalf of the Secret Service of Nilfgaard. Baldenyegg, however, pleaded not guilty and insisted that he had stolen the two cavalry horses on his own initiative and for profit and had nothing to do with Nilfgaard. They apparently had not believed him.

‘Nazarian!’

Nazarian obediently stood up and gave his hands to the guards to be tied. When they lead the trio away, the other Joyful continued singing.

*Dance on the hanging ropes,*

*Happily writhe in spasms,*

*And the wind carries their songs,*

*The ringing chorus all around...*

The dawn was shining purple and red. It promised to be a beautiful, sunny day.

The song of the Joyful, Nazarian noticed, was incorrect. The hanged men could not dance on the gallows, because they were not hung on gallows but on ordinary poles, dug into the ground. Foot stools were not used, but practical birch stumps, bearing the marks of frequent use. At the end of the day, the anonymous author of the song, who had been execute, could not have known about it when it was composed. Like all the hanged, he learned the details shortly before his death. The executions in Drakenborg were never performed in public. This was punishment, not sadistic revenge. These words were also attributed to Dijkstra.

The elf from Iorveth's command shook of the hands of the guards, climbed onto the stump and allowed them to place the rope around his neck.

'Long live the...'

A guard kicked the stump out from under his feet.

For the halfling, it took two logs one placed on top of another. The alleged saboteur climbed up with no pathetic cries. His short legs kicked vigorously then hung limp from the pole. His head fell limp onto his shoulder.

The guards grabbed Nazarian, and Nazarian suddenly decided.

'I'll speak!' he shouted hoarsely. 'I'll confess! I have important information for Dijkstra!'

'A little late,' said Vascoigne, the deputy commander of Drakenborg for political affairs, who was present at the executions. 'In one of every two of you, the rope awakens the imagination!'

'I'm not making this up!' Nazarian broke loose from the arms of the executioners. 'I have information!'

After less than an hour, Nazarian was sitting in a windowless dungeon and delighted at the beauty of life, a messenger was ready at hand and scratched his crotch with passion, while Vascoigne read and correct the report intended for Dijkstra.

*With humility I announce to Your Grace, a criminal by the name of Nazarian, condemned for the attack on a royal official, has confessed the following: Acting on the orders of a certain Rience, on the new moon of this year in July, along with two partners, the half-elf Schirru and the human Millet, took part in the murder of lawyers Codringher and Fenn in Dorian. The half-elf Schirru, assassinated both lawyers and set fire to their house. The criminal Nazarian, says*

*that Schirru did everything and denies that he killed anyone, probably from fear of the noose. What you may be interested in Your Grace is: before they committed the crime on the lawyers these villains, that is, Nazarian, the half-elf Schirru and the human Millet, were following a witcher, a man named Geralt of Rivia, who met with the lawyer Codrigher in secret. The subject of the meeting, the criminal Nazarian does not know, because before he could question them, they received an order from Rience to murder the two lawyers once he learned of the secret meeting with the witcher.*

*Next the criminal Nazarian testified: His partner Schirru stole documentation from the house which he delivered to Rience at "The Sly Fox" inn in Carreras. What Rience and Schirru talked about, Nazarian does not know, but the next day all of the criminal trio went to Brugge, and there on the fourth day after the new moon committed a kidnapping of a young girl from a red brick house, whose door had brass scissors nailed to it. Rience the forced the young girl to drink a magic elixir and the criminals Schirru and Nazarian with great haste took her to Verden, to the fortress of Nastrog. And now follows the one thing I recommend you read with great attention Your Grace: The miscreants who snatched the girl and delivered to the Nilfgaardian commander of the fortress, assured him that the kidnapped girl's name was Cirilla of Cintra. The commander, so criminal Nazarian confessed, was very excited on hearing the news.*

*The above, written on a message is issued to His Excellency in secret. As protocol demands I have sent along the detailed questioning of the criminal. I ask Your Grace for instructions on what to do with the criminal Nazarian, Whether to burn him with the tongs to remember more details or hang him under the original orders.*

*Yours Respectfully, etc, etc...*

Vascoigne sweepingly signed the report, then stamped it and called the messenger.

The contents of the report were known to Dijkstra the same evening. Philippa Eilhart knew the next day at noon.

\* \* \*

When the horse carrying the witcher and Dandelion emerged from the alders, Milva and Cahir were very nervous. They had recently been hearing the sounds of battle carried along the waters of the Ina.

While helping lower the port from the saddle, Milva saw Geralt tense at the sight of the Nilfgaardian. She did not get to say a word to the witcher, as Dandelion moaned desperately and slid through her hands. They laid him in the sand, putting a coat under his head wound. Milva was about to remove the blood soaked bandages when she felt a hand on her shoulder and smelled the familiar scent of wormwood, anise and other herbs. Regis, as was his custom, appeared out of nowhere and no one knew how.

‘Allow me,’ he said, pulling utensils and medical instruments from his cavernous bag. ‘I’ll take care of him.’

When the surgeon removed the bandages from the wound, Dandelion moaned in pain.

‘Easy,’ Regis said, washing the wound. ‘This is nothing. Just a little blood. Just a little blood... Your blood smells good, poet.’

Just then the witcher behaved in a way that Milva did not expect. He went to the hose and pulled from a sheath under the saddle a long sword.

‘Get away from him,’ he snapped, standing next to the surgeon.

‘The blood smells good,’ Regis repeated without looking at the witcher, ‘I do not smell an infection, which in the case of a wound in the head could be fatal. The arteries and veins have not been affected... Now I need to cut you.’

Dandelion wailed and gasped violently. The sword in the witcher’s hand quivered, the light reflecting from the river flashed across its surface.

‘I will give you a few stitches,’ Regis said, still not paying any attention to the witcher or his sword. ‘Be brave, Dandelion.’

Dandelion was courageous.

‘I’m finished,’ Regis finished his treatment. ‘Between now and the wedding, as they say, you’ll heal. A wound is perfect for a poet, Dandelion. You will walk as a war hero with a big bandage on his head and the heart of the girls who look at you will melt like wax. Yes, truly a poetic wound. Not like an arrow in the belly. The liver destroyed, the kidneys and intestines cut up, faeces spilling out, infection of the peritoneum... Well, you’re done. Geralt, I’m at your disposal.’

He stood up and the witcher placed his sword on his neck. With a movement that was too fast for the eye to follow.

‘Step back,’ Geralt growled at Milva. Regis did not tremble even though the sword was gently resting on the skin of his neck. The archer gasped when she saw how the surgeon’s eyes gleamed in the darkness, with a cat’s light.

‘Well, go on,’ Regis said calmly. ‘Push.’

‘Geralt,’ Dandelion moaned from the floor, fully conscious, ‘Are you crazy? He saved us from the gallows... He healed my head...’

‘He saved us and that girl in the camp.’ Milva gently reminded him.

‘Be silent. You do not know who he is.’

The surgeon did not move. Milva suddenly saw with horror what she should have seen long ago.

Regis did not cast a shadow.

‘True,’ he said slowly. ‘You do not know who I am. And it is time for you to know. My name is Emiel Regis Rohellec Terzieff-Godefroy. I have lived in this world for four hundred and twenty-eight years according to you humans, six hundred and forty-two years according to the calculations of the elves. I am a descendant of the survivors, hapless creatures trapped among you after the disaster, which you call the Conjunction of the Spheres. I am considered, to put it mildly, a monster. A horrible bloodsucker. And now I have stumbled upon a witcher, a professional whose job it is to eliminate those like me. That’s all.’

‘That’s enough,’ Geralt lowered his sword. ‘Get up. Get out of here, Emiel Regis and who knows what else. Goodbye.’



‘Unbelievable,’ Regis taunted. ‘Will you let me go? Me, who is a threat to humans? The witcher should take every opportunity to eliminate such hazards.’

‘Get up. Go away, quickly.’

‘And what faraway place shall I go?’ Regis asked slowly. ‘In the end, you are a witcher. You know about me. When you have dealt with your problem now, when you have settled what you have to do, you will surely return here. You know where I live, where I’m going, what I do. You will track me down to?’

‘I cannot exclude it. If there is a reward. I am a witcher.’

‘I wish you luck.’ Regis tied his bag and unrolled his cloak. ‘Goodbye. Ah, one more thing. How high would the reward be on my head for you to trouble yourself with me? How much am I worth?’

‘Bloody high.’

‘Indulge my vanity. How much exactly?’

‘Fuck off, Regis.’

‘Of course. But before that, my valuation, please.’

‘An ordinary vampire I would look at the equivalent of a good horse and saddle. But you are no ordinary vampire.’

‘How much?’

‘I doubt,’ The witcher’s voice was cold as ice. ‘I doubt anyone could afford it.’

‘I understand and thank you,’ the vampire smiled, this time revealing his teeth. At the sight of them, Milva and Cahir drew back, and Dandelion stifled a scream of terror.

‘Farewell and good luck.’

‘Goodbye, Regis. Same to you.’

Emiel Regis Rohellec Terzieff-Godefroy snapped his cloak, wrapped it around himself and disappeared. Simply disappeared.

‘Now,’ Geralt turned naked sword still in his hand, ‘it’s your turn, Nilfgaardian...’

‘No,’ Milva interrupted angrily. ‘I’ve had enough. Get the horses, and let’s get out of here! Sounds carry down the river, before we know it we’ll have enemies on our neck.’

‘I will not go with him.’

‘Then go alone!’ She shouted angrily, in earnest. ‘In another direction! I have had enough of your moods, witcher! Regis was expelled, even though he saved your lives, but that’s your business. But Cahir saved my life. But if we are your enemies, then go back to Armeria. Your friends are waiting there with a noose!’

‘Don’t shout.’

‘So don’t stand there like a post. Help me get Dandelion on the gelding.’

‘You saved our horses? Roach as well?’

‘He saved them,’ she nodded at Cahir. ‘We’re going.’

\* \* \*

They crossed over the Ina. They rode along the right bank, alongside the river, through shallow backwaters and old river beds overrun with willows, through meadows and wetlands reverberating with the croaking of frogs, the cries of invisible ducks and cicadas. The day broke with a red sun, which shone blindingly off of the water lily covered lakes; they turned towards the spot where one of the many branches of the Ina flowed into the Yaruga. The now rode through the dark gloomy forests, where the trees grew directly from the duckweed from the green marshes.

Milva rode at the head, next to the witcher, all the while telling him in a low voice of her story of Cahir. Geralt was silent as a mute; he never once looked back, never once laid eyes on the Nilfgaardian, whose was bringing up the rear, helping the troubadour. Dandelion moaned and cursed, complaining of a headache, but held up bravely and did not inhibit the procession. The recovery of Pegasus and the lute strapped to his saddle had significantly improved his mood.

At around noon they came back to a sunny meadow behind which they could see the wide floodplain of the Great Yaruga. They crossed the old riverbed, across sandbars and shoals. And they came to an island, a dry place between the swamps and thickets surrounded by numerous branches of the river. The island was full of bushes and covered in reeds, trees also grew there, bare, dry and covered in white droppings of cormorants.

Milva was the first to see the boat among the reeds which must have been brought there by the current. She spotted a clearing among the willows, suitable for a pasture for the horses.

They stopped and the witcher decided it was about time to talk to the Nilfgaardian. In private.

\* \* \*

‘I gave you your life at Thanedd. I felt sorry for you, kid. That was the biggest mistake of my life. This morning I let a higher vampire get away from my sword, who surely has on his conscience many human lives. I should have killed him. I am only interested in one thing: to get at the skins of those who have hurt Ciri. I vowed to myself that those who have hurt her will pay for it with their blood.’

Cahir remained silent.

‘Your revelation, which Milva told me about, does not change anything. They only show one thing: At Thanedd you had not managed to kidnap Ciri, although you tried hard. So now you trail behind me, hoping that I will lead you to her again. So you can put your claws in her and take her back to your Emperor and hope that he forgives you and doesn’t send you to the gallows.’

Cahir remained silent. Geralt felt bad. Very bad.

‘Because of you she would wake screaming in the night. To her childish eyes you became a nightmare. And yet, you were only a tool, just a poor lackey of your emperor. I don’t know what you have done to become a nightmare to her. The worst thing is, I do not understand why, despite everything I can not kill you. I do not understand what stops me.’

‘It may be,’ Cahir said quietly, ‘that against all appearances, we have something in common, you and me?’

‘I wonder what’

‘Like you, I want to save Ciri. Like you, I do not care if this is odd and surprises people. Like you, I have no intention of telling anyone my reasons.’

‘Is that all?’

‘No.’

‘I’m listening.’

‘Ciri,’ the Nilfgaardian started slowly, ‘is on horseback riding through a dusty village, with six young people. Among these people is a girl with short-cut hair. Ciri dances in a shed on a table and is happy ...’

‘Milva told you my dreams.’

‘No. She did not tell me anything. You do not believe me?’

‘No.’

Cahir bowed his head and a scuffed his heel in the sand.

‘I forgot,’ he said, ‘that you cannot believe me, you don’t have to trust me. I understand that. But you dreamed, like me, this dream. A dream that you have not told anyone. Because I doubt that you would want to tell anyone.’

\* \* \*

You could say that Servadio was simply lucky. He came to Loredo with no intention of spying on anyone in particular. But the village was not called the Bandit's Lair for no reason. Loredo lay along the bandit trail, brigands and thieves from all along the upper Velda area, met here to sell or exchange their spoils, get supplies, rest and play in the company of bandits. The village had been burned several times, but a few of the permanent inhabitants and numerous newcomers continued to rebuild it. They lived off of the bandits, and also lived comfortably. So the spies and informers like Servadio always had the possibility of obtaining some information in Loredo that was worth a few florens from the Prefect.

Now Servadio was counting on more than a few. Because entering the village, were the Rats.

Giselher led, flanked by Spark and Kayleigh. Behind them rose Mistle and this new girl, called Falka, Reef and Asse closed the procession, leading spare horses, likely stolen and had to be sold here. They were tired and dusty, but they kept straight in their saddles, responding enthusiastically to the greetings of comrades and acquaintances that were staying in Loredo. They sprang from their horses, were offered beer, and immediately proceeded to negotiate with noisy traders and buyers of stolen goods. All but Mistle and the new gray-haired girl, wearing a sword strapped across her back. These two went among the stalls that as usual, filled the square. Loredo had its market days, when the goods from the bandits were particularly rich and diverse. Today was such a day.

Servadio carefully followed the girls. To make money, he had to gain information and to gain information he had to listen.

The girls examined the colourful scarves, corals, as well as embroidered blouses, Saddle bags, and ordinate trappings for horses. They looked at the goods, but did not buy anything. Almost the whole time, Mistle held the hand of the gray-haired girl.

The spy cautiously moved closer, pretending to examine straps and belts at a saddlers stall. The girls talked, but quietly, he could not catch any of the word, but was afraid to move any closer. If might note him and become suspicious.

One of the stalls was selling cotton candy. The young girls approached it. Mistle bought two stick wrapped in snowy sweetness and gave one to the gray-haired girl. She delicately nibbled. The white flacks stuck to her lips. Mistle wiped them off with gentle movements and careful treatment. The gray-haired ones emerald eyes widened, she slowly licked her lips, smiled and shook her head mockingly. Servadio felt a chill, a cold stream of sweat ran down his neck between his shoulder blades. He recalled the rumours circulation about the two bandits.

He was intended to withdraw in secret, it was clear that he would not be able to hear or learn anything. The girls were not talking about anything important, while not far away, where the elders of the gang gathered, Giselher, Kayleigh and the others argued noisily, bargained, shouted, again and again putting their cups under the tap of the keg. With them, Servadio was more likely to learn something important. Any of the Rats could shed a word, or even a sentence, that could betray future plans of the gang, their routes or destinations. If he could hear something and transmit the news in time to the soldiers of the Prefect or Nilfgaardian agents, who were keenly interested in the Rats, the reward would be practically in his pocket. And if on the basis of the information the Prefect managed to organise a successful ambush, Servadio could count on a substantial influx of cash. *I'll buy my wife a coat*, he thought feverishly, *I can finally buy the children some shoes and toys ... And I ...*

The girls were walking along the stalls, licking and nibbling sticks of cotton candy. Servadio suddenly realized that they were being watched. And having fingers pointed at them. He knew that the pointing fingers belonged to thieves and cattle rustlers of the Pinto gang.

The thieves yelled several obscene remarks and laughed defiantly. Mistle narrowed her eyes and put her hand on shoulder of the gray-haired girl.

'Come on sister!' bellowed one of the thieves with a moustache that looked like a bunch of tow. 'Come closer and give us a kiss!'

Servadio saw the gray-haired one trembling and saw Mistle tighten her fingers on her shoulder. The thieves laughed in chorus. Mistle turned slowly; some of them stopped laughing immediately. But the one with the moustache was too drunk or completely devoid of sense.

‘Do any of you wretched sluts need a man?’ He walked closer performing disgusting and unambiguous gestures, ‘Believe me, the best thing to do is to have a good fuck and in a flash those perversion are gone. Hey! I’m talking to you ...’

He never managed to touch them. The girl with the gray hair struck like a snake on the attack, her sword had been drawn and struck before the cotton candy had hit the floor. The thief with the moustache staggered about, blood spurting from the cut in his neck in a long stream.

The girl reached out again caught up in the two-step dance, struck again, a wave of blood splattered the stalls, the body fell to the floor, the sand around him turned red immediately. Someone screamed. The second thief bent down and drew a knife from his boot, but at the same time was felled by Giseller with the blunt shaft of a lance.

‘One corpse is enough!’ the leader of the Rats shouted. ‘This man alone is to blame, he did not know who he messed with! Back off, Falka!’

The gray haired one finally lowered her sword. Giseller raised a purse and shook it.

‘According to the laws of our brotherhood, I will pay for the dead. Honestly, by weight, A thaler for each pound of his disgusting body. And that is the end of the row! Am I right, comrades? Hey, Pinto, what do you say?’

Spark, Kayleigh, Asse and Reef stood behind their leader. Their faces were like stone and their hands were on the hilts of their swords.

‘Honestly,’ said one of the bandits of the Pinto, a short man with bowed legs wearing a leather jacket. ‘You speak truly, Giseller. End of row.’

Servadio swallowed hard, trying to melt into the crowd surrounding the incident. Suddenly he felt no desire to walk around near the Rats or near the girl with the ash coloured hair, called Falka. He suddenly realized that the reward offered by the Prefect was not as high as he thought.

Falka quietly slid the sword into its sheath while looking around. Servadio was amazed when he saw her tiny face suddenly change.

‘My cotton candy,’ cried the girl, looking at the candy lying in the sand. ‘I dropped my cotton candy ...’

Mistle hugged her.

‘I’ll buy you another.’

\* \* \*

The Witcher was sitting on the sand among the reeds, sullen, angry and pensive. He watched the cormorants sitting withered in a tree.

Cahir, after the talk, disappeared into the bushes and did not come back. Milva and Dandelion were looking for something to eat. Inside the boat they had found under the seats a copper saucepan and a basket of vegetables. They made a trap out of wicker found in the boat and waded around the shore with sticks beating the seaweed, trying to propel the fish into the trap. The poet was feeling better already and walked with his head bandaged heroically, proud as a peacock.

The Witcher was thoughtful and angry.

Dandelion and Milva pulled the wicker trap from the water and started to curse, because instead of carp, they had caught little fish among the weeds.

The Witcher stood.

‘Come here you two! Leave the casket and come here. I have something to say.’

‘Go home,’ he began bluntly when they came over wet and reeking of fish. ‘To the north, towards Mahakam. I will continue alone.’

‘What?’

‘Our paths diverge, Dandelion. Enough of these games. Go home and write songs. Milva will lead you through the woods ... What is it?’

‘Nothing.’ Milva brushed her hair from her shoulders. ‘Nothing. Speak, witcher. I want to know what else you have to say.’

‘I have nothing else to say. I’m going south, to the other side of the Yaruga. Through Nilfgaardian territory. It is dangerous and a long way. And I cannot wait. So I’m going alone.’

‘Having disposed of cumbersome baggage,’ Dandelion nodded. ‘The ball and chain hindering your march. In other words, me.’

‘And me,’ Milva added, looking away.

‘Listen,’ said Geralt, much calmer now. ‘This is a personal matter. It does not concern you. I do not want to risk your necks for something that only concerns me.’

‘This concerns only you,’ Dandelion repeated slowly. ‘Nobody is needed or desired. Our company bothers you and slows down the march. You do not expect help from anyone and have no intentions of worrying about anyone. In addition, you like solitude. Have I forgotten to mention something?’

‘Yes,’ Geralt said angrily. ‘You forgot to replace your empty head with one that contains a brain. If that arrow had gone to the right, you idiot, crows would now be eating your eyes. You’re a poet; you have imagination, try to imagine that image. I repeat, go back north, I’m going to other way. Alone.’

‘I’m going,’ Milva rose resiliently. ‘Do you think that would ask you? To the devil with you, Witcher. Come on, Dandelion, let’s go find some food. I’m hungry and listening to this drivel has made me feel sick.’

Geralt turned his head. He watched a green-eyed cormorant drying its wings on a tree branch covered in guano. Suddenly he smelt the sharp scent of herbs and sword furiously.

‘You abuse my patience, Regis.’

The vampire, who appeared from out of nowhere, was unmoved and came and sat next to the witcher.

‘I have to change the poet’s dressings.’ He said calmly.

‘Then go to him. But stay away from me.’

Regis sighed, with no intention of leaving.

‘I heard your conversation just now with Dandelion and the archer.’ He said without mockery in his voice. ‘I must admit you have a real talent with winning people over. While the whole world stands against you, you pass up your allies and companions who are willing to help.’

‘The world stands on its head. A vampire is teaching me how to deal with people. What do you know about people, Regis? The only thing you know is the taste of blood. Damn it, why did I have to start talking to you?’

‘The world stands on its head,’ confessed the vampire, quite seriously. ‘You’ve started. So you may therefore want to listen to my advice?’

‘No. I do not. I do not need your advice.’

‘True, I’d almost forgotten. You do not need advice, you do not need allies or companions. The objective of your journey is after all a personal and private objective, the nature of which requires you to complete it alone, personally. The risks, danger, troubles and struggles with doubt should only affect you and no one else. Because they are, in the end, elements of your penance, your redemption, of the guilt that you are trying to alleviate. A certain, as they say, baptism of fire. Through the fire, that burns, but also purifies. Solo, alone. Because if you accept someone’s support, their help, then they take upon themselves a bit of the baptism of fire, that pain, that penance and it would lessen it for you. So you deprive them of participating in that part of the atonement that is exclusively your atonement. It is only you who has to pay off this debt and you do not want to pay this debt at the same time with other creditors. Do I understand the logic?’

‘Your presence irritates me vampire. Leave me alone with my atonement. And with my debts.’

‘As you wish,’ Regis stood. ‘Sit, think. But I’ll give you advice anyway. The need for atonement, a baptism of fire, guilt, these are things to which you can claim an exclusive right. Life is different from banking; it allows debts to be repaid by the debt of others.’

‘Go, please.’

‘As you wish.’

The vampire left and joined Dandelion and Milva. While changing the bandages, the trio discussed what there was to eat. Milva looked in to wicker basket at the small fish.

‘There is no need to meditate,’ she said. ‘We can stuff these little fish onto sticks and roast them over a fire.’

‘No.’ Dandelion said shaking his bandaged head. ‘Not a good idea. The fish are too small, there aren’t enough of them. I suggest we prepare them in a soup.’

‘Fish soup?’

‘Sure. We have a bunch of these little things, we have salt.’ Dandelion counted them off on his fingers to further illustrate his point. ‘We have found onions, carrots, parsley and celery, and the cauldron. After summing all this up, we get soup.’

‘We could use some spices.’

‘Oh,’ Regis smiled reaching into his bag. ‘This will not be a problem. I have basil, paprika, pepper, bay leaves, sage...’

‘Enough, enough,’ Dandelion stopped him. ‘Just no mandrake in the soup it isn’t required. To work. You clean the fish, Milva.’

‘You clean them! Do you think just because there is a female in the company, she will toil in the kitchen! I will bring water and start a fire. And you can clean these loaches yourself.’

‘These are not loaches,’ Regis said. ‘They are chub, roach and bream.’

‘Ha,’ Dandelion could not resist. ‘I see you know about fish.’

‘I know many things,’ the vampire acknowledged modestly. ‘I have studied here and there.’

‘If you are such an expert,’ Milva again blew on the fire, and then got up. ‘You can expertly clean these fish. I’ll go a fetch some water.’

‘Can you carry a full cauldron? Geralt, help her.’

‘I can handle it,’ Milva growled irritably. ‘I can do without his help. He deals with personal issues, I wouldn’t dare disturb him!’

Geralt turned his head, pretending not to hear. Dandelion and the vampire had efficiently cleaned the fish.

‘This will be a thin soup,’ Dandelion said, hanging the cauldron over the fire. ‘We could use some bigger fish.’

‘Would this serve?’ Cahir appeared from among the reeds, holding a three pound pike still waving its tail and its gills opening and closing.



‘Aha! What a beauty! Where did you get it Nilfgaardian?’

‘I’m not Nilfgaardian. I come from Vicovaro and my name is Cahir...’

‘Okay, okay, I know. I asked, where did you get the pike?’

‘I have made a fishing rod. I used frogs as bait. I cast it from the bank and the pike took it immediately.’

‘Everyone’s an expert.’ Dandelion shook his bandaged head. ‘It’s a pity no one suggested steaks, he probably would have caught a cow. But let’s give thanks for what we have. Regis, put all the small fish into the cauldron, with their heads and tails. The pike, however, will need to be prepared well. Can you, Nilf... Cahir?’

‘I can.’

‘Let’s get to work. Damn it, Geralt, how long are you going to sit there pretending to be offended? Peel the vegetables!’

The Witcher got up obediently and moved closer, but sat conspicuously far from Cahir. Before he could complain that he didn’t have a knife, the Nilfgaardian – or the Vicorvarian, gave him his own, drawing a second one from his boot. The Witcher accepted, mumbling his thanks.

Working together went smoothly. The cauldron, full of little fish and vegetables started to boil. The vampire stirred it with a spoon that Milva had carved from wood. Once Cahir had cleaned and divided the pike, Dandelion through the tail and head into the cauldron and stirred thoroughly.

‘Yum, yum, it smells good. When everything is cooked lets strain the remains.’

‘Unless you use your socks,’ Milva raised her eyebrows, while carving another spoon, ‘we don’t have a strainer.’

‘My dear, Milva,’ Regis smiled. ‘Of course we can! What we do not have, we can easily replace with what we have. It is simply a matter of initiative and positive thinking.’

‘To the devil with your learned chatter, vampire.’

‘We can strain it threw my chainmail,’ Cahir said. ‘What remains in the armor we can then discard.’

‘Make sure you wash it first,’ Milva said. ‘Otherwise, I won’t eat this soup.’

The filtration went smoothly.

‘Now throw away the slops, Cahir,’ Dandelion ordered. ‘It smells good, yum, yum. There is no need for more wood, Geralt! What are you doing with that spoon? I doesn’t need more stirring!’

‘Don’t shout. I didn’t know.’

‘Ignorance,’ Regis smiled. ‘Is not an excuse for thoughtless actions. When one doesn’t know or is in doubt, it is good to seek advice...’

‘Shut up, Vampire!’ Geralt stood up and turned his back. Dandelion snorted.

‘Look at him, you’ve offended him again.’

‘Listen to him,’ Milva said, her lip curling, ‘he’s such a charlatan. If he doesn’t know what to do he just talks and sulks. Have you noticed that yet?’

‘Long ago.’ Cahir said quietly.

‘Add pepper.’ Dandelion said licking the spoon and chewing. ‘And salt. Ah, now it is ready. Take it off the fire. Damn, that’s hot! I don’t have gloves...’

‘I have.’ Cahir said.

‘And I,’ Regis said, grabbing the cauldron in his hands, ‘do not need them.’

‘Good,’ the poet wiped the spoon on his pants. ‘Come on, company, sit down. Bon appetite! Geralt, are you waiting for a special invitation? Heralds and a fanfare?’

Everyone sat around the pot that was placed on the sand and for a long time the only sounds were the loud sips interrupted by blowing on spoons. After eating half of the soup they carefully stared catching pieces of pike, and finally drained the cauldron to the bottom.

‘I say,’ gasped Milva. ‘That it was a silly thing to have soup, Dandelion.’

‘Certainly,’ Regis agreed. ‘What do you say, Geralt?’

‘I say – thank you.’ The Witcher stood up with effort, rubbed his knee, which began to bite back with pain. ‘Is that enough? Or do you need a fanfare?’

‘It is always like that with him,’ the troubadour waved his hand. ‘Ignore him. He was just lucky, I was with him when he was quarrelling with Yennefer, a pale beauty with raven hair.’

‘Be more discreet,’ the vampire reminded him. ‘And do not forget, he has problems.’

‘Problems,’ Cahir stifled a belch, ‘must be addressed.’

‘True,’ Dandelion said. ‘But how?’

Milva snorted and stretched out to make herself more comfortable on the warm sand.

‘The vampire is a scholar. He should be able to come up with something.’

‘The key is not knowledge, but the ability to weigh all the pros and cons,’ Regis said calmly. ‘And when one considers the situation, we reach the conclusion that we are dealing with a problem that is unsolvable. This entire project is devoid of opportunities for success. The probability of finding Ciri is zero.’

‘Oh yes,’ Milva ridiculed ‘Isn’t this only a matter of initiative and positive thinking, as with the strainer. If we don’t have something, then we will replace it with something else. So I thought.’

‘Until recently,’ the vampire continued, ‘we thought Ciri was in Nilfgaard. Getting there and rescuing her or stealing her seemed an impossible task. Now, after Cahir’s revelations, we don’t even know where Ciri is. It is difficult to speak of initiative when you have no idea what direction to go.’

‘What shall we do then?’ Milva pouted. ‘The Witcher insists we move south...’

‘For him,’ Regis smiled, ‘the cardinal points have no meaning. He does not care which way we move, so long as he is not sitting doing nothing. This is the purpose of a witcher. The world is full of evil, so they go where their eyes lead them, and annihilate any evil along the way, in this way they serve Order. The rest will follow. In other words, movement is everything, the goal is nothing.’

‘That’s silly,’ said Milva. ‘His goal is Ciri. Is she not important to him?’

‘I joke,’ admitted the vampire, watching Geralt with his back still turned. ‘Without much tact. Sorry. Your right, dear Milva. Our goal is Ciri. And we don’t know where she is, it makes sense to learn that and conveniently manage our activities. The Child Surprise, I notice is bursting with magic and other supernatural predestination. And I know someone who is very familiar with these issues who can certainly help us.’

‘Ha,’ exclaimed Dandelion. ‘Who is it? Where do he find them? Far away?’

‘Closer than the Nilfgaard capital. Strictly speaking, quite close. In Angren. On this side of the Yaruga. I speak of the circle of Druids, who are located in the forests of Caed Dhu.’

‘Let us set off without delay!’

‘Did any of you,’ Geralt finally spoke, upset ‘not consider it appropriate to ask me my opinion?’

‘You?’ Dandelion turned around. ‘But you have no idea what to do. Even the soup that you ate, you owe to us. If not for us, you’d be hungry. And us too, if we waited for you to act. This soup was the work of cooperation. The of the actions of a group working on a common goal. Do you understand, friend?’

‘How is he to understand?’ Milva frowned. ‘He prefers solitude. The Lone Wolf! We can see that he is not a hunter who knows the forests. Wolves never hunt alone! Never! The lone wolf is a silly tale told by town folk. But he does not understand?’

‘I understand, I understand,’ Regis smiled according to his custom, with pursed lips.

‘He just looks so silly,’ Dandelion confirmed. ‘But in time he will finally use his brain. He may even draw a valid conclusion. That the only activity that a man does alone is masturbation.’

Cahir Mawr Dyffryn aep Ceallach remained tactfully silent.

‘Let the plague take you all,’ the Witcher said finally waving a spoon indignantly. ‘May the devil take you, you idiots cooperating in your groups united by a common goal, which none of you understand. And let the devil take me also.’

This time they all followed the example of Cahir, and kept tactfully silent. Dandelion, Maria Barring, called Milva and Emiel Regis Rohellec Terzieff-Godefroy.

‘I’ve found a company!’ Geralt continued shaking his head. ‘Comrades in arms! A team of heroes! There is nothing to do but laugh. One who makes verses with a lute. A foul-mouthed female half wild, half dryad. A four hundred year old vampire. And a fucking Nilfgaardian who insists that he is not Nilfgaardian.’

‘And leading them is a Witcher, sick with remorse, helplessness and an inability to make decisions.’ Regis finished calmly. ‘Indeed, I propose that we travel incognito, to avoid arousing sensation.’

‘And laughter.’ Milva added.

*"The queen said: 'Don't plead for mercy, but beg those whom you harmed with your sorcery. You had the courage to commit evil deeds, be brave now, when justice is near. It is not in my power to pardon your sins.' The witch sniggered like a cat in response, her wicked eyes glimmered. 'My doom is near,' she shouted, 'but yours is not far either; my queen. At the hour of your terrible death you will remember Lara Dorren and her curse. And know that the curse will touch all your descendants over the next ten generations.' Yet, realizing that the queen was fearless at heart, the evil elven witch stopped swearing and threatening with curses, and began whining like a bitch, begging for mercy and help ..."*

The tale of Lara Dorren, as told by humans.

*"...but even pleas and invocations didn't soften the stone hearts of the dh'oine, the cruel and merciless humans. And when Lara grabbed the carriage door, begging for mercy — not for herself, but for her child — the queen ordered a thug to swing his sword, cutting her fingers off. The winter cold set in that night, and on a hill amidst woods, Lara drew her last breath while giving birth to her daughter, whom she protected with what warmth was left in her body. And even though night, winter and blizzard were all around, springtime suddenly came to the hill and feainnewedd flowers bloomed. To this day those flowers are found in only two places: the valley of Dol Blathanna and on the hill where Lara Dorren aep Shiadhal died."*

The tale of Lara Dorren, as told by elves.

## CHAPTER SIX

‘I asked you,’ Ciri growled angrily, lying on her back, ‘not to touch me.’

Mistle withdrew her hand which was tickling the back of Ciri’s neck, stretched out beside her, folded her hands under her shaved head and stared at the sky.

‘You have been acting strange lately, Hawk.’

‘I just don’t want to be touched, that’s all.’

‘It was just a game.’

‘I know,’ Ciri pursed her lips, ‘it’s just a game. All this was to you was a game. But I no longer enjoy this game. Just stop it!’

Mistle lay on her back again and was silent a long time, staring at the white clouds slowly stretching their way through the sky. High above the forest a hawk circled.

‘Your dreams,’ she said finally, ‘it is because of your dreams, right? Almost every night you wake up screaming. What you experienced is coming back to you in your dreams. I know it.’

Ciri did not answer.

‘You have never told me about yourself,’ Mistle again broke the silence. ‘About what happened to you. Neither have you told me where you came from. Or even if you have loved ones...’

Ciri quickly moved her hand to her neck, but this time it was only a ladybug.

‘I had a family,’ she said dully, without looking at her companion. ‘That is, I thought I had one... Those who would find me, even here, at the end of the world if they wanted... Or if they lived. Oh what are you doing, Mistle? Do I have to tell you about myself?’

‘You don’t have to.’

‘That’s good. Because it is probably just a game to you. Like everything else between us.’

‘I don’t understand,’ Mistle turned her head, ‘why you don’t leave, if things with me are so bad.’

‘I don’t want to be alone.’

‘Is that all?’

‘That’s a lot.’

Mistle bit her lip. But before she could say anything, they heard a whistle. Both of them jumped up, shook the needles from their clothes and ran to the horses.

‘Let the fun begin.’ Mistle said jumping into the saddle and drawing her sword. ‘For some time now you have enjoyed this more than the others, Falka. Don’t think that I haven’t noticed.’

Ciri angrily struck the horse with her heels. They galloped down the slope of the ravine in fits and starts, listening to the wild shouts of the rest of the Rats, coming out of the woods from the other side of the road. The jaws of the trap closed.

\* \* \*

The private audience was over. Vattier de Rideaux, Viscount of Eiddon, head of military intelligence for Emhyr var Emreis, left the library, bowing to the Queen of the Valley of Flowers in a way that was shorter than protocol required. The bow was at the same time, extremely cautious and measured – the imperial spy did not take his eyes off of the two ocelots who were laying at the feet of the lady of the elves. The cats blue eyes seemed sluggish and sleepy, but Vattier knew they were not pets, but vigilant guardians, ready to turn quickly into a bloody pulp anyone who dared approach the Queen at a distance that was not allowed under protocol.

Francesca Findabair called Enid an Gleanna, Daisy of the Valley, waited until the door closed behind Vattier and stroked her cats.

‘Already, Ida.’ she said.

Ida Emean aep Sivney, the elven sorceress, a free Aen Seidhe from the Blue Mountains, hidden during the audience by a spell of invisibility, appeared in the corner of the room, adjusting her mahogany hair. The ocelots responded by only slightly opening their eyes a little wider. Like all cats, they could see the invisible, their senses could not be easily fooled by magic.

‘The parade of spies is starting to annoy me.’ Francesca said with a sneer, moving to a more comfortable position in her ebony chair. ‘Henselt of Kaedwen recently sent me a “consul”, Dijkstra came to Dol Blathanna on a “trade mission”. And now Vattier de Rideaux head of imperial intelligence himself! Oh, and previously Stefan Skellen prowled around here, the Grand Imperial Nobody. But I did not grant him a hearing. I am the Queen and Skellen is nothing. Although he has a position, he is nobody.’

‘Stefan Skellen,’ Ida Emean said slowly, ‘was also here to see us, where he had more luck. He spoke with Filavandrel and Vanadain.’

‘And just like Vattier to me, he asked about Vilgefertz, Yennefer, Rience and Cahir Mawr Dyffryn aep Ceallach?’

‘Among other things. You would be amazed, but what interested him was the original version of the prophecy of Ithlinne Aegli aep Aevenien, especially the passages that speak of Aen Hen Ichaer, The Elder Blood. He was also interested in Tor Lara, the Tower of Gulls, and the legendary portal that once connected the Tower of Gulls to Tor Zireael, the Swallow’s Tower. How typical it is for humans, Enid. To expect that we would immediately, on command, explain the mysteries and secrets that we ourselves have tried to unravel for centuries.’

Francesca raised her hand and examined her rings.

‘Interesting,’ she said, ‘and Philippa knows about the strange hobbies of Vattier and Skellen? And Emhyr var Emreis, whom they both serve.’

‘It would be prudent to assume that she does not know.’ Ida Emean looked keenly at the Queen. ‘And to hide it at the meeting in Montecalvo of what we know, both to Philippa and the entire Lodge. It would not throw a good light on us ... We want the Lodge to work. We want them to trust us, the elven mages, not suspected us of double play.’

‘The thing is, we are conducting a double play, Ida. And we are playing with fire. With the White Flame of Nilfgaard ...’

‘The fire burns,’ Ida Emean looked the Queen in the eyes, ‘but it also purifies. We must go through it, Enid. This Lodge must exist, must begin to act. With all of its members. Twelve sorceresses and among them one spoken of in prophecy. Even if it is a game, let’s put our trust in it.’

‘And if this is provocation?’

‘You know better than I the people involved in this.’

Enid an Gleanna reflected.

‘Sile de Tansarville,’ she said at last, ‘is a secretive recluse, she has no political connections. Triss Merigold and Keira Metz have them, but are now both in exile because king Foltest expelled all the sorceresses from Temeria. Margarita Laux-Antille is only interested in her school and nothing else. Of course, at this moment the last three are strongly influenced by Philippa and Philippa is a mystery. Sabrina Glevissig has not surrendered her political influence,

which is in Kaedwen, but will not betray the Lodge. She draws power, which she gives to the Lodge.'

'And this Assire var Anahid? And this second Nilfgaardian, who will be announced at Montecalvo?'

'I know little about them,' Francesca smiled slightly, 'but as soon as I see them, I will know more. As soon as I see, in what and how they are dressed.'

Ida Emean's painted eyes narrowed, but she refrained from asking a question.

'The jade statuette, 'she said after a moment, 'the still uncertain and enigmatic figurine of jade that is mentioned in the Ithlinnespeath. Perhaps it is time to let her speak. And tell us what to expect. Shall I assist you with decompression?'

'No, I'll do it myself. You know how one reacts to decompression. The less witnesses, the less painful a blow to her pride.'

\* \* \*

Francesca Findabair checked again to verify that the entire courtyard was tightly isolated from the rest of the palace by the protective field that hid her from view and drowned out the sounds. She lit three black candles and set them in candlesticks fitted with concave mirror reflectors. The candlesticks were placed in certain places in a circle mosaic on the floor containing the seven signs of Vicca, the elven zodiac and symbols representing Belleteyn, Lammaas and Yule. Within the zodiac circle mosaic was a second, smaller one, dotted with magical symbols surrounding a pentagram. On the three symbols of the smaller circle, Francesca placed small iron tripods and carefully and cautiously mounted three crystals. The cut crystals fitted exactly into the mold atop the tripods, so the arrangement had to be precise, but still Francesca checked everything several times. She preferred not to risk failure.

Nearby hissed a fountain, water gushing from the marble jar held by a marble naiad in four streams falling into the pool, setting into motion the leaves of water-lilies, between which goldfish swam.

Francesca opened the casket, took out a small, jade, soapy to the touch figurine and set it up exactly in the middle of the pentagram. She backed away, looked again at the grimoire lying on the table, took a deep breath, raised her hands and incanted a spell.

The candles blazed brighter, sparkling light was thrown from the crystal facets. The rays focus on the figurine, which immediately changed colour from green and became gold and after a few moments, transparent. The air was charged with magical energy that beat against the protective barrier. One of the candles threw sparks on the pavement; shadows danced on the floor the mosaic which began to come alive, to change shapes. Francesca did not lower her hands and maintained the casting.

The figurine rapidly, pulsing and vibrant, changed its structure and shape, like a cloud of smoke. The light emanating from the crystals through the smoke, revealed on the fringes of light, movement and hardening matter. After another moment, in the center of the circle suddenly appeared a human figure. A black-haired woman lying limp on the floor.

The candles went out in ribbons of smoke, the crystals went dark. Francesca lowered her hands, stretched her fingers and wiped the sweat from her forehead. The dark-haired woman curled up and started screaming.



‘What is your name?’ Francesca asked loudly.

The woman stretched and howled, clutching both of her arms over her lower abdomen.

‘What is your name?’

‘Ye... Yennef... Yennefer! Aaaaaaaah...’

The elf sighed with relief. The woman was still writhing, screaming, moaning and banging her fists on the pavement, trying not to vomit. Francesca waited patiently. With confidence. The woman who had been only moments ago been a jade figurine was suffering. It was to be expected. But her brain was not damaged.

‘Well, Yennefer,’ Francesca said after a while, interrupting the groans. ‘Enough is enough, right?’

Yennefer, with evident effort, raised herself onto her hands and knees and wiped her face and eyes with her forearm, she looked around, lost. Her gaze passed over Francesca as if the elf was not even in the yard; she stopped and came to life only at the sight of the water gushing from the fountain. Yennefer crawled with great difficulty and climbed the edge of the fountain and with a slash, plunged into the pond. She choked and started to splutter and cough, eventually she pushed her way through the water-lilies, reaching the base of the marble naiad and sat down, leaning her back against the statue. The water came up to her breasts.

‘Francesca...’ she stammered, touching the obsidian star around her neck and looking somewhat more aware. ‘You...’

‘What do you remember?’

‘Did you compress me...? Damn, did you compress me?’

‘I compressed you and decompressed you. What do you remember?’

‘Garstang... Elves. Ciri. You. And five hundred weights that suddenly dropped on my head... Now I know what it was. Being compressed into an artifact...’

‘Your memory is functioning. That’s good.’

Yennefer lowered her head and watched the goldfish swimming around her legs.

‘Make sure you change the pond water, Enid,’ she murmured, ‘I just urinated.’

‘A trifle.’ Francesca smiled. ‘Take note, however, whether you can see blood in the water. Sometimes compression destroys the kidneys.’

‘Just the kidneys?’ Yennefer took a cautious breath. ‘I don’t think there is a single healthy organ inside me... At least that’s how I feel. Hell, Enid, What did I do to deserve such treatment...’

‘Get out of the water.’

‘No, I am comfortable here.’

‘I know. Dehydration.’

‘Degradation. Deprivation. Why did you do this?’

‘Come out, Yennefer.’

The sorceress stood up with difficulty, leaning both hands on the marble naiad. She shook off the water-lilies with a sudden jerk and stood naked under the falling water. Rinsing and having drunk, she came out of the pool and sat on the edge and began to wring her wet hair.

‘Where am I?’

‘In Dol Blathanna.’

Yennefer wiped her nose.

‘Is the fight in Thanedd still going on?’

‘No. It has finished. A month and a half ago.’

‘I must have given you great harm.’ Yennefer said, ‘I must have hurt you good, Enid. But you can consider that our account has been levelled. You have been properly avenged, although this was maybe a little too sadistic. You were not content to cut my throat?’

‘Do not talk nonsense.’ The elf pursed her mouth. ‘I compressed you to save your life at Garstang. We will return to this later. Please, take this towel. Here is a sheet. After a bath I will give you a new dress. In the appropriate place, a tub of warm water. You’ve hurt enough of the goldfish.’

\* \* \*

Francesca and Ida Emean drank wine. Yennefer drank large amounts of carrot juice.

‘Let me summarize,’ she said, after hearing Francesca. ‘Nilfgaard conquered Lyria, destroyed half of Aedirn and Kaedwen, and burned Vengerberg. And right now they occupy Brugge and Sodden, while Verden surrendered without a fight. Vilgefortz has disappeared without a trace. Tissaia de Vries committed suicide. You’ve become Queen of the Valley of the Flowers, The Emperor Emhyr rewarded you with the crown and sceptre in exchange for my Ciri, who he has sought for so long and now has to use as he sees fit. I was compressed and packed in a box for a month and a half as a jade statue. And you expect me to thank you for that.’

‘That would be nice.’ Francesca Findabair replied coldly. ‘At Thanedd there was a certain Rience who had made it a point of honour to set himself the task of giving you a slow and cruel death and Vilgefortz promised to make it possible. Rience travelled in search of you throughout Garstang. But he couldn’t find you, because you were already a jade figure

hanging around my neck.'

'I was a figurine for forty-seven days.'

'Yes. I, for my part, when asked, could answer truthfully that Yennefer of Vengerberg was not in Dol Blathanna. Since they were asking about Yennefer of Vengerberg and not a figurine.'

'What has changed, that you finally decided to decompress me?'

'A lot. I'll explain.'

'Before you do, I want to know something else. Geralt was at Thanedd. The witcher. Remember I presented him to you in Aretuza. What happened to him?'

'Calm down. He lives.'

'I am calm. Tell me, Enid.'

'Your witcher,' said Francesca, 'during only one hour did more than many do throughout their whole lives. In short: He broke Dijkstra's leg, cut off the head of Artuad Terranova and brutally killed about ten Scoia'tael. Oh, and not forgetting, awakening an unhealthy desire in Keira Metz.'

'Horrible,' Yennefer exaggeratedly wrinkled her brow. 'But Keira has since come to her senses, right? She does not hold a grudge, I hope. The fact that, once having awakened her desires was undoubtedly caused by lack of time and not wilful neglect. Reassure her about this on my behalf.'

'You will have the opportunity to do so,' said the Daisy of the Valley. 'And soon. But back to the matters for which you are clumsily pretending indifference. Your witcher who was so enthusiastic about the defence of Ciri, acted very foolishly. He threw himself at Vilgefortz. And Vilgefortz destroyed him. That he did not kill him was probably due to a lack of time, not a lack of purpose. So what? Are you still continuing to pretend that this doesn't concern you?'

'No.' Yennefer said with a grimace on her lips, ceasing to express derision. 'No, Enid. It concerns me. Soon a few people will know my shock. I give you my word.'

In the same way she had been affected by the teasing, Francesca was unmoved by the threats.

'Triss Merigold, teleported the half-dead witcher to Brokilon,' she said. 'For all I know, he is still healing with the dryads. He seems to be doing well, but it would be best if he didn't stick his nose out of the forest. Dijkstra's intelligence agents are hunting him. They are hunting, you too.'

'And what have I done to deserve such an honour? For I did not break anything of Dijkstra... Oh, do not say anything, let me guess myself. I disappeared from Thanedd without a trace. No one imagined that I landed in your pocket, small and compressed. Everyone is convinced that I escaped to Nilfgaard with my partner conspirators. All except the actual conspirators, of course, but these are not going to correct the error. The war continues, misinformation is a weapon whose blade must always be sharp. And now, after forty-seven days, it is time to use that weapon. My house in Vengerberg has been burned, I am persecuted. There is nothing I can do, but join some Scoia'tael commandos. Or otherwise join the fight for the freedom of the elves.'

Yennefer took a sip of carrot juice and stared in the eyes of Ida Emean aep Sivney, who was staying quiet and calm.

‘Well, Lady Ida? Lady Aen Seidhe of the free Blue Mountains? Is this what is written for me, my divine destiny? Why are you silent like a boulder?’

‘I, Lady Yennefer,’ replied the redheaded elf, ‘I am silent when I have nothing meaningful to say. It is always better than to spin unwarranted assumptions and mask anxiety with chatter. Get to the point, Enid. Explain to Lady Yennefer what is going on.’

‘I’m all ears.’ Yennefer touched the obsidian star on its velvet ribbon. ‘Speak, Francesca.’

The Daisy of the Valley placed her chin on her interlaced fingers.

‘Today,’ she said, ‘is the second night, since the full moon. In a short while we will teleport to castle Montecalvo, home of Philippa Eilhart. We will take part in a meeting of an organisation, which should interest you. After all, you were always of the opinion that magic is of the highest value, standing above all the divisions, conflicts, political choices, personal interests, resentments and animosity. You will probably enjoy the news; we recently established a framework for such an institution, something like a secret lodge, set up solely to defend the interests of magic, having the task of ensuring that magic will occupy a place in the social hierarchy, where it belongs. I allowed myself to be able to consider two new candidates for this structure, Ida Emean aep Sivney and you.’

‘What an unexpected honour and promotion,’ Yennefer sneered. ‘From nonexistence, straight into the secret, elitist, magical lodge. An institution standing above personal resentments and animosity. But am I a suitable candidate? Will I find in myself the strength of character to get rid of the animosity I feel to the people who took my Ciri, or tortured a man who is not indifferent to me, and myself...’

‘I’m sure,’ interrupted the elf, ‘that you will find in yourself the strength of character, Yennefer. I know you and know you do not lack such a force. You do not lack ambition, which should dispel doubts about the honour of the promotion. If, however, this is what you want, I will tell you bluntly, I recommended you to the lodge because I think you are someone who deserves it and can serve to benefit the cause.’

‘Thank you.’ Yennefer said with a sardonic smile, ‘Thank you Enid. Truly, I feel the swell of ambition, pride and selfishness in me. I’m going to explode at any moment. And that is before I start to wonder why you recommended me for this lodge instead of another elf of Dol Blathanna or the Blue Mountains.’

‘In Montecalvo,’ Francesca replied coldly, ‘you can find out why.’

‘I’d rather not wait.’

‘Tell her.’ Ida Emean murmured.

‘It’s about Ciri,’ Francesca said after a moment’s thought, staring at Yennefer with impenetrable eyes. ‘The Lodge is interested in her. And nobody knows the girl as well as you. The rest you will learn there.’

‘All right.’ Yennefer vigorously scratched her shoulder blade. Her skin was dry from the compression and was still unbearably itchy. ‘Who else is part of this Lodge? Apart from you and Philippa?’

‘Margarita Laux-Antille, Triss Merigold and Keira Metz, Sile de Tansarville of Kovir, Sabrina Glevissig and two Nilfgaardian sorceresses.’

‘Is this the international republic of females?’

‘You could call it that.’

‘They probably still consider me Vilgefortz accomplice. Will they accept me?’

‘They have accepted me. The rest you will have to do yourself. You will be asked to explain your relationship with Ciri. From the beginning, from the events that your witcher was involved in fifteen years ago, when the story took place in Cintra, until the events of the last month and a half. The Lodge will require your absolute honesty and truthfulness, to confirm your loyalty.’

‘Who said anything about confirming? Isn’t it a bit early to talk about loyalty? I don’t even know the statutes and programs for this international ladies...’

‘Yennefer.’ The elf’s slight eyebrows frowned. ‘I recommended you to the Lodge. But I have no intention of forcing anything – especially loyalty. You have a choice.’

‘I imagine not much of one.’

‘Well, you can imagine. But it is still a free choice. For my part, however, I strongly urge you to choose the Lodge. Believe me, this way you can help Ciri in a much more effective way than blindly throwing yourself into the maelstrom of events, which I believe, you have a great desire to do. Ciri is at risk of death. She can only be saved with our solidarity actions. When you hear what is said in Montecalvo, you’ll see that I’m telling the truth... Yennefer, I do not like the glow I see in your eyes. Give me your word that you will not try to flee.’

‘No.’ Yennefer shook her head, covering her obsidian star with her hand. ‘I can not do that, Francesca.’

‘I would sincerely warn you, my dear, that all stationary target portals are blocked. Whoever tries to teleport inside or out without Philippa’s permission lands in a cell lined with dimeritium. You can not open a portal yourself with the components. I do not want to confiscate your star; you need to keep control of your mind. But I warn you! If you try something... I can not allow... The Lodge could not allow you to run wild to save Ciri and seek revenge. I still have your template and the spell algorithm. I will reduce and compress you back into a jade figurine again. If need be, for several months. Or years.’

‘Thanks for the warning. But even with all that I still won’t give my word.’

\* \* \*

Fringilla Vigo made a face, but she was nervous and tense. She repeatedly scolded young Nilfgaardian wizards for succumbing to the uncritical stereotypical opinions and ideas, often refuted itself as trivial, painted by rumour and propaganda image of a typical Sorceress of the North – artificially beautiful, arrogant, vain and spoiled to the limits of perversion and often beyond these limits. Now, however, the closer it came to teleporting to the castle of Montecalvo, the more uncertainty tugged at her, of what she might find at the reunion site of the mysterious Lodge. And what awaited her there. Her runaway imagination conjured beautiful images of women with diamond necklaces to their exposed breast with nipples painted with carmine, with moist lips and eyes shining with swallowed narcotics. In her turbulent mind the secret deliberations of the Lodge meeting turned into a wild orgy with frantic music, aphrodisiacs and slaves of both sexes and elaborate accessories.

The last teleport had left her between two columns of black marble, with dryness in her mouth, the magic winds had left tears in her eyes and her hand clenched tightly her emerald necklace that plunged into her neckline. Next to her Assire var Anahid also appeared to be noticeably nervous. Fringilla, however, had reason to suspect that her friend was confused with her new dress, which was not very typical for her: a simple yet elegant blue colour, complimented by a tiny and modest necklace with alexandrite.

The nervousness passed at once. The large and brightly lit, from magic lanterns, room was cold and quiet. Nowhere could she see a naked black man beating a drum on the table or dancing girls clad only in jewellery nor smelt the odour of hashish or cantharides. The Nilfgaardian sorceresses were immediately welcomed by the lady of the castle, Philippa Eilhart, attentive, friendly and polite. Other sorceresses approached and introduced themselves and Fringilla breathed a sigh of relief. The magicians from the north were beautiful, charming and sparkled with jewellery, but in their eyes, gently emphasized by makeup, there was no hint of either drugs or nymphomania. None had exposed her breasts. On the contrary, two of them had dresses up to their neck – austere, black-clad Sile de Tansarville and young Triss Merigold with beautiful blue eyes and auburn hair. The brunette Sabrina Glevissig and the blond Margarita Laux-Antille and Keira Metz wore necklines down to their cleavage, but not much deeper than Fringilla's own.

Waiting for the other participants of the convent gave them time to talk, during which all had the opportunity to say something about themselves and with tactful statements and comments Philippa Eilhart quickly and deftly broke the ice, although the only ice in the area was piled on a mountain of oysters. Other ice was not palpable. Sile de Tansarville, a researcher, immediately found a lot of common topics with the researcher Assire var Anahid and Fringilla quickly gained a liking to the cheerful Triss Merigold. The conversations were accompanied by the greed absorption of oysters. Only Sabrina Glevissig refused, being a faithful daughter of Kaedwen's forests, she even expressed her contempt for the "slimy filth" and her desire for a piece of cold venison with prunes. Philippa Eilhart, instead of responding to the insult with icy haughtiness, pulled a bell rope and soon inconspicuous and noiseless servants delivered meat. Fringilla was astonished. *Well*, she thought, *different regions, different manners*.

The portal between the columns began to brighten and vibrate. Sabrina Glevissig face was covered in unbounded astonishment. Keira Metz dropped the oyster knife onto the ice. Triss Merigold gasped loudly.

Three sorceresses came through the portal. Three elves. One with hair of dark gold, a russet-haired one and one with raven black hair.

Welcome, Francesca,' Philippa said. Her voice betrayed no emotions, but her eyes immediately narrow with caution. 'Welcome, Yennefer.'

'I had the privilege of filling two seats,' the melodiously golden-haired elf named Francesca said, clearly noting Philippa's astonishment. 'Here are my candidates. You all know Yennefer of Vengerberg. And Lady Ida Emean aep Sivney, Aen Saevherne of the Blue Mountains.'

Ida Emean bowed her head with her red hair slightly, her flowing dress rustled.

'I suppose,' Francesca looked around, 'that we are complete.'

'We are missing only Vilgefortz.' Sabrina Glevissig said softly but with evident anger, while watching Yennefer with piercing eyes.

'And Scoia'tael hidden in the basement.' Keira Metz muttered. Triss froze her with a glare.

Philippa made the introductions. Fringilla stared curiously at Francesca Findabair, Enid an Gleanna, Daisy of the Valley, the famous Queen of Dol Blathanna, ruler of the elves who had recently regained their country. *The rumours of her breath-taking beauty*, Fringilla thought, *are not exaggerated*.

Ida Emean, the red haired elf with deep eyes, was obviously genuinely interested in everything around her, including both Nilfgaardian sorceresses. The free elves of the Blue Mountains did not maintain any relationships with not only humans, but even their own blood relatives living close to humans. And the Aen Saevherne, the Knowing, were very few among the free elves, and were a closer to being legends. Few people, even among the elves, could boast of a close contact with an Aen Saevherne. Ida stood out among the group not only for her hair colour. Among her jewellery was not an ounce of minerals, or a precious stone, she wore only pearls, coral and amber.

The source of the greatest excitement, however, was clearly the third sorceress, Yennefer, raven-haired, dressed in black and white, contrary to Fringilla's first impression, she was not an elf. Her appearance in Montecalvo had been a tremendous surprise, and not pleasant for everyone. Fringilla felt from some of the sorceresses an aura of antipathy and hostility.

When she was introduced to the Nilfgaardian sorceresses, Fringilla stopped on Yennefer's violet eyes. Her eyes were tired and surrounded by dark circles and even makeup could not hide the fact.

'We know each other,' she said, touching an obsidian star at her throat.

The room suddenly fell into a silence full of anticipation.

'We have seen each other before,' Yennefer repeated.

'I do not remember.' Fringilla stared back.

'I am not surprised. I, however, I have a good memory for faces and silhouettes. I saw you on Sodden Hill.'

'And therefore there can be no mistake,' Fringilla Vigo proudly raised her head and ran her eyes over everyone. 'I was on the hill at Sodden.'

Philippa Eilhart anticipated the response.

'I was also there,' she said, 'and I remember too, many things. I do not think, however, that excessive and unnecessary straining of our memory will bring any benefit to us here in this room. What we are going to undertake, would be server better by forgetting, forgiveness and reconciliation. Do you agree with me, Yennefer?'

The black-haired sorceress tossed a spiral curl from her forehead.

'When I finally find out what you intend to undertake here,' she said, 'I'll tell you, Philippa, what I agree with. And what I don't.'

'In that case it would be best if we start without delay. Please ladies take your seats.'

Places at the round table – all except one – had been marked. Fringilla sat beside Assire var Anahid, the right hand chair was free, separating her from Sile de Tansarville beside her was Sabrina Glevissig and Keira Metz. To the left of Assire sat Ida Emean, Francesca Findabair and Yennefer. And exactly opposite of Assire was Philippa Eilhart, who to her right sat Margarita Laux-Antille and to her left Triss Merigold. All of the chairs had armrests carved in the shape of sphinxes.

Philippa started. She repeated her welcome and immediately proceeded with things. Fringilla was given a detailed briefing by Assire about the previous Lodge meeting and did not hear anything in the introduction that was new. She

was not surprised by either the statements made by all the sorceresses, nor the first topic of discussion. But she was slightly embarrassed as the first concern voiced was the war with the Nilfgaardian Empire and especially the recently launched operations in Sodden and Brugge, during which the imperial army had clashed with the army of Temeria. Despite the presumed apolitical character of the convent, some sorceresses could not hide their views. Some were evidently troubled by Nilfgaard's presence on their doorstep. Fringilla experienced mixed feelings. She assumed that such enlightened people should understand that the Empire would bring to the North culture, welfare, order and political stability. But on the other hand she did not know how she would react if her home was being approached by foreign armies.

Philippa Eilhart, however, must have been fed up with discussions on military matters.

'No one can predict the outcome of the war,' she said. 'What's more, this prediction would be devoid of meaning. Let's analyse the latest events with a cool head. First, I do not consider war to be the worst evil. More pressing are the effects of overpopulation, which at this stage of the development of agriculture and industry would mean threat of total famine. Secondly, war is the continuation of the politics of the rulers. How many of those who rule now will live a hundred years? None, of course. How many dynasties endure? There is no way to predict it. Today's territorial disputes, dynastic conflicts, the ambitions and hopes of today will be in a hundred years from now, nothing but ashes and dust to the chronicles. But if we are drawn into these wars, we will also end up as ashes and dust. But if we look beyond the banners, if we close our ears to the cries of battle and patriotic feelings, we will survive. And we need to survive. We must, because we have a responsibility. Not to the kings and their particular, narrow interests of one kingdom. We are responsible for the world. For progress. For the changes that bring this progress. We are responsible for the future.'

'Tissaia de Vries would have had it otherwise,' said Francesca Findabair. 'She was always been about the accountability to ordinary, simple people. Not in the future, but here and now.'

'Tissaia de Vries is dead. Had she lived she would be her among us.'

'Probably,' The Daisy of the Valley smiled. 'But I do not think she would agree with the theory of war as a remedy for famine and overpopulation. Pay attention to the last word, dear colleagues. These discussions we are undertaking in a common language to facilitate understanding. But for me it is a foreign language. And becoming more and more foreign. In my language there is no word for "overpopulation", an Elvish word for this would be a neologism. Tissaia de Vries, bless her memory, always cared about the fate of ordinary people. As for me, it is no less important that the fate of an ordinary elf. I'd agree with the idea of only dealing with the future and considering to as ephemeral. But I regret to say that today determines the tomorrow, and tomorrow will be without a future. For you humans, it may be ridiculous to mourn for an elderberry bush that burned because of the winds of war, after all there is no short supply of elderberries, what does it matter, there will be another. Forgive the botanical metaphor. But please note that what is for you humans, a matter of politics, for us elves, is a matter of physical survival.'

'Politics do not interest me,' Margarita Laux-Antille, the rector of the academy of magic said loudly. 'I simply do not want the girls for whose education I have am in charge of, to be fed slogans about the love of country and used as war leaders. The homeland of these girls is magic, that's what I teach. If someone commits my girls to war, placing them on a new Sodden Hill, then they will lose, regardless of the outcome of the battle. I understand your fears, Enid, be we have to address the future of magic, not radical problems.'

'We have to deal with the future of magic,' Sabrina Glevissig repeated. 'But the future of magic determines the status of the wizards. Our status. Our meaning. The role that we play in society. Trust, respect, credibility, the general belief in our usefulness, it that magic is essential. Standing before us seems to be a simple alternative – either the loss of status and isolation in ivory towers, or service. Service even on the hills of Sodden, even as war leaders...'

'Or as servants and messengers?' Triss Merigold said throwing back her beautiful hair. 'With bowed neck, ready to serve whenever the Emperor moves a finger? Because at the end of the day that is the role that Nilfgaard will give us, if they were to conquer us.'

'If you were to be conquered,' Philippa said with emphasis, 'We would have no alternative. We would have to serve. But serve the magic. Not kings or emperors, not their everyday politics. Not the cause of integration of the races, because it is also subject to current political objectives. Our convent, dear ladies, was not convened so that we will



adapt to this policy or the daily changes on the front lines. Not so that we frantically seek adequate solutions to the situation by changing the colour of our skins like chameleons. The role of Lodge is to be active. And opposed to what I have just spoke of. And we must do it with every means at our disposal.'

'If I understand correctly,' Sile de Tansarville raised her head. 'You are encouraging us to actively influence the course of events? By all means? Even illegally?'

'What kind of laws are you talking about? About those for the weak and defenceless? About those that are written in codes and used by actual lawyers? Only one law binds us. Ours!'

'I understand.' The Sorceress from Kovir smiled. 'So we are then to actively influence the course of events. If we do not like the policy of the rulers, we simply change it. Is this so, Philippa? Would it not be better, for that matter, to throw down those fools with crowns, dethrone them and drive them out? Can we take the power into our own hands?'

'More than once we have sat on the thrones of Rulers. Our mistake was that we did not sit on a throne of magic. We have never given absolute power to magic. It is time we fix that error.'

'You, of course, mean yourself?' Sabrina Glevissig leaned over the table. 'Obviously on the throne of Redania? Her highness Philippa the First? With Dijkstra as prince consort?'

'I do not mean myself. I do not mean the kingdom of Redania. I mean the great kingdom of the North, which will arise from today's Kovir. An Empire whose power is equal to Nilfgaard, thus swaying at this moment the scales of the world and bringing the finally into balance. An Empire, ruled by magic, which we will take the throne by marrying the heir of Kovir with a sorceress. Yes, you hear correctly, my dear colleges, you're looking in the right direction. Yes, here at this table, there is an empty space where will sit a twelfth sorceress. And then she will sit on the throne.'

Sile de Tansarville broke the silence that had settled.

'It is certainly an ambitious project,' she said with a note of sarcasm in her voice. 'Certainly worthy of all who sit here. It fully justifies the existence of this Lodge. After all, it would constitute an affront to us all to be set a less noble task, even teetering on the verge of reality and feasibility. It would be like driving a nail with an astrolabe. No, no, it is better to start with a completely impossible task.'

'Why is it impossible?'

'Have mercy, Philippa,' said Sabrina Glevissig. 'None of the kings will ever marry a sorceress, no country will accept a sorceress on the throne. It has been a custom for centuries. It may not be a smart custom, but it still exists.'

'There are also,' added Margarita, 'technical barriers, I would say. A person who could be put into Kovir's house would have to meet a number of conditions, both by us and by the royal family. These conditions mutually exclude one another and vice versa. Don't you realise Philippa? For us it would need to be a person educated in magic, totally committed to the cause of magic, understanding their role and able to play the part deftly, seamlessly and without suspicion. Without help, without ever standing in shades of grey eminence, against whom the anger from the subjects must always be redirected at the first disturbance. It must be both a person to whom Kovir itself, without any apparent pressure from our side, would choose to have as a wife and heir to the throne.'

'That is true.'

'And who do you think Kovir would choose without pressure? A girl of the royal family, with royal blood in her veins for generations. A young girl, suitable for a young prince. A girl who can give birth, because this is about a dynasty. That sets the bar and excludes you, Philippa and excludes me, it even excludes Keira and Triss, the youngest

among us. It also excludes all adepts from my school, which, after all, are not very interesting because the buds of the petals are still of an unknown colour, it is unthinkable that any one of them could sit with us as at the empty place at this table as the twelfth. In other words, even if the whole of Kovir goes mad and was willing to accept the king's marriage to a sorceress, a sorceress can not be found. So who is to be this Queen of the North?'

'A girl of royal blood,' Philippa replied calmly. 'In whose veins runs the royal blood, the blood of several of the greatest dynasties. Young and able to give birth. A girl with unprecedented capabilities and divinatory magic, one who carries the Elder Blood. A girl who can play with flying colours your role without conductors, directors or grey eminences, because it is her destiny. A girl, whose abilities will be known only to us. Cirilla, daughter of Pavetta of Cintra and granddaughter of the Lioness Calanthe. Elder Blood, White Flame of the North, Destroyer and Rebuilder, whose coming was foretold hundreds of years ago. Ciri of Cintra, the Queen of the North. And from her blood will be born, the Queen of the World.'

\* \* \*

At the sight of the Rats dropping down in ambush, two of the riders escorting the carriage turned away and fled. They did not stand a chance. Giseller, Reef and Iskra cut off their retreat and after a short struggle unceremoniously slit their throats. Kayleigh, Asse and Mistle fell on the remaining two, who were ready to desperately defend the carriage that was drawn by four horses. Ciri felt an overwhelming disappointment and anger. They had left her with none. It looked like she was not going to get to kill.

But there was still one rider, a young man riding a fast horse who was at the front of the carriage. He could have fled, but did not. He turned and drew his sword and galloped straight at Ciri. She stopped her little horse and allowed him to approach. When he struck, rising in his stirrups, she hung from the saddle, nimbly avoiding his blade, she then straightened in her saddle again. The young man was a fast and agile swordsman and struck again. This time she deflected it sideways and fainted towards his face. He instinctively tried to shield his face and his sword slipped over his blade and slashed up under his armpit in a way she had practiced for hours at Kaer Morhen. The Nilfgaardian slipped from his saddle, fell to the floor, then rose to his knees, howling, trying wildly to stem the violent flow of blood pumping from his artery. Ciri watched him for a moment, fascinated as always by the sight of a man who struggled with all his might against death. She waited for him to bleed to death. Then she left without looking back.

The ambush was over. The escort were lying at their feet. Reef and Asse had stopped the carriage, holding up a pair of men holding the reins. The man, who was clinging to the right rein, a young man in coloured livery, fell to the ground, crying and begging for mercy. The coachman threw down his reins and also begged for mercy, clasping his hands as if in prayer. Giseller, Iskra and Mistle approached the carriage, Kayleigh jumped down from his horse and jerked open the door. Ciri pulled her horse up closer and dismounted, still holding in her hand the sword covered in blood.

In the carriage sat a plump matron in robes and a cap, embracing a terribly pale young girl dressed in black, buttoned to the neck with a lace collar. The dress Ciri noticed was fastened with a gem. Very beautiful.

'Those are very pretty roans!' Iskra clapped her hands at the sight of the draft horses. 'As pretty as a picture! We will get a pile of Florens for those!'

'And the carriage.' Kayleigh showed his teeth to the woman and the girl. 'the groom and the coachman will pull it into town. And when the road leads up hills the noble ladies will get out and help.'

'Gentleman robbers!' the matron groaned in terror, clearly more scared of Kayleigh's smile than the blood covered sword in Ciri's hand. 'I appeal to your honour! Do not defile this young girl!'

'Hey, Mistle,' Kayleigh shouted, laughing mockingly. 'They, from what I hear, they are appealing to your honour!'

‘Shut your mouth,’ Giseller grimaced, still in the saddle. ‘No one is amused by your jokes. And you, calm down woman. We are the Rats. We do not fight with women or damage them. Reef, Spark, release the harness! Mistle, seize the horses! And be quick about it!’

‘We are the Rats and we do not fight with women,’ Kayleigh barred his teeth again, staring at the pale face of the girl in the black dress. ‘Sometimes we only amuse ourselves with them, if the desire. And you miss? Do you not have an itch between the legs? Well, there is nothing to be ashamed of. Just nod your head.’

‘A little respect!’ Cried the lady in the cap with a broken voice. ‘How dare you talk like that to the baroness, outlaw?’

Kayleigh laughed and exaggerated a bow.

‘I ask forgiveness. I did not mean to offend. What, am I not allowed to even ask?’

‘Kayleigh!’ called Iskra. ‘Come here! Why are you loitering? Help me release the harness! Falka! Move!’

Ciri did not take her eyes off the coat of arms on the door of the carriage, a silver unicorn on a black background. *A unicorn*, she thought. *I once saw such a unicorn ... When? In another life? Or maybe it was just a dream?*

‘Falka! What’s wrong with you?’

*I am Falka. But I was not always. Not always.*

She pursed her lips together. *I have been unpleasant to Mistle*, she thought. *I have hurt her. I have to apologize in some way.*

She put her foot on the ladder of the carriage, looking at the gem on the dress of the pale girl.

‘Give it.’ She said dryly.

‘How dare you?’ choked the matron. ‘Do you know who you are talking to? She is the noble-born Baroness of Casadei!’

Ciri looked around and made sure no one could hear.

‘Baroness?’ she hissed. ‘A low title. And even if this baby was a countess she would have to bend down to me so far that her ass would be on the ground and her head lower. Give me the brooch! What are you waiting for? Do I have to tear it from you, along with the corset?’

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The silence that ensued at the table following the speech by Philippa Eilhart was shortly replaced by a cacophony. The sorceresses expressed surprise and disbelief, demanding explanations. Some no doubt knew a lot about this foreseen ruler of the North, Cirilla or Ciri another name they were familiar with, but they knew less. Fringilla Vigo knew nothing about the suspicions and speculations, and concentrated mainly on a certain lock of hair. Assire, however, remained silent and commanded her with a look that she stay silent. Philippa Eilhart took the floor again.

‘Most of us saw Ciri on Thanedd, where she was in a trance and her predictions caused considerable commotion. Some of us have even had close contact with her. I speak mostly of you, Yennefer. It is time you spoke.’

When Yennefer told the audience about Ciri, Triss Merigold closely watched her friend. Yennefer spoke calmly and without emotion, but Triss had known her for a long time and very well. She had seen her in many situations, including those that had caused stress, tiredness and depression. It was without a doubt that Yennefer was in this kind of situation. She looked dejected, tired and sick.

The sorceress spoke, but Triss, who knew both the story and the person to which it referred, was devoted to quietly watching all those listening. Especially the two witches from Nilfgaard. Assire var Anahid, had changed much, looking very carefully but it was obvious she still felt insecure about her makeup and fashionable dress. And Fringilla Vigo, the youngest, friendly, with a natural grace and simple elegance, with green eyes and hair as black as Yennefer’s, but less abundant, shorter and combed smooth.

Both Nilfgaardians did not seemed lost among the intricacies of the history of Ciri, although Yennefer’s story was long and rather confusing, beginning with the famous love affair in Cintra of Pavetta and the young man enchanted to be a hedgehog. She spoke about the role of Geralt and the Law of Surprise and the binding of Ciri to the witcher.

Yennefer spoke about Geralt meeting Ciri in Brokilon, about the war, about her disappearance and discovery, of her training in Kaer Morhen. About the Nilfgaardian agent, Rience and how he was chasing the girl. About her study in the temple of Melitele and Ciri’s mysterious abilities.

*They listen with stone faces, thought Triss, looking at Assire and Fringilla. Like sphinxes. But it is clear that they are masking something. Curious, I wonder what it is? Are they surprised because they did not know Emhyr was trying to kidnap her to Nilfgaard? Or is it that they have known everything for a long time, maybe even more than we do? Yennefer will speak in a moment about her arrival at Thanedd with Ciri, about what was said in the prophetic trance, which caused such a fuss. Of the bloody struggle in Garstang, which resulted in Geralt being mutilated and Ciri being kidnapped. Then the pretending will come to an end, thought Triss, the mask will drop. Everyone knows that the affair on Thanedd was Nilfgaard’s doing. And when all eyes are turned to you, Nilfgaardians, there will be no other way, you will have to talk. And then clarify some issues, then I too can find out more. How Yennefer disappeared from Thanedd, why she has suddenly appeared her in Montecalvo, along with Francesca. And who is and what role does Ida Emean, Aen Saevherne from the Blue Mountains play. Why do I have the feeling that Philippa Eilhart is saying less than she knows, but declares her devotion and loyalty to magic, and not Dijkstra, who she constantly exchanges correspondence.*

*And maybe I’ll finally learn who Ciri really is. Cirilla, Queen of the North to them, but to me an ash-haired little girl from Kaer Morhen, who I remember as a younger sister.*

\* \* \*

Fringilla Vigo had heard a bit about witcher, professional individuals who were accustomed to killing monsters and beasts. She attentively listened to Yennefer’s story, listened to the sound of her voice, watching her face. She was not fooled. A strong emotional bond between Yennefer and Ciri was evident. Equally obvious, however, was the relationship between the sorceress and the witcher. Fringilla began to reflect, but raised voices disturbed her thoughts.

She had already guessed that some of those collected here were in opposite camps during the Thanedd rebellion; she

was not surprised, therefore, when the antipathies came to the table in the form of remarks aimed at Yennefer. It looked as if a quarrel was to break out, which was prevented by Philippa Eilhart who unceremoniously banged her open palm onto the top of the table until the cups and goblets rang.

‘Enough!’ she shouted. ‘Shut up, Sabrina! Do not let them provoke you, Francesca! Enough about Thanedd and Garstang. That is history!’

*History, Fringilla thought, with mixed feelings. But history, which they helped to create, albeit from opposite camps. They had expected it. They knew what they were doing and why. And we, the Imperial Sorceresses, we know nothing. In fact, we are like girls on errands, she thought, they know that they are sent, but do not know why. Well, she thought, because of it occurring it has created this Lodge. The devil knows how it will end, but it is to begin.*

‘Continue, Yennefer.’ Philippa said.

‘I have nothing more to say.’ The black-haired sorceress pursed her lips. ‘I repeat, it was Tissaia de Vries who ordered me to bring Ciri to Garstang.’

‘It is easier to blame everything on the dead.’ Sabrina Gleivissig snorted, but Philippa silenced her with a sudden gesture.

‘I did not want to interfere in what was happening in Aretuza,’ said Yennefer, pale and clearly upset. ‘I wanted to take Ciri and escape from Thanedd. But Tissaia convinced me that the appearance of the girl at Garstang would be a shock to many and her brought before them in a trance speaking prophesy would avert the conflict. I cast no blame on her, because I thought the same. The two of us make a mistake. But mine was bigger. If I had left Ciri in Rita’s care ...’

‘What has happened can not be undone.’ Philippa interrupted. ‘Mistakes can happen to anyone. Even Tissaia de Vries. When did Tissaia first see Ciri?’

‘Three days before the convention,’ said Margarita Laux-Antille, ‘in Gors Velen. I met her there too. And as soon as I saw her, I immediately knew she was an extraordinary woman!’

‘Extremely extraordinary,’ said Ida Emean aep Sivney who had so far been silent. ‘Because of her extraordinary legacy because of her blood. Hen Ichaer, Elder Blood. The genetic material of extraordinary abilities for its wielder. Predestined for the great role to be met. Which must be met.’

‘Why must you tell us elven legends, myths and prophecies?’ Sabrina Gleivissig said with a sneer. ‘The whole thing smelt like fairy tales and fantasy from the very beginning! No I have no doubt. Ladies, I suggest, as usually, that we address something serious, rational and real.’

‘I bow my head before the sober rationality, which is a source of great strength and advantage of your race.’ Ida Emean smiled slightly. ‘However, here, among those capable of making use of the power, which is not always subjected to rational analysis and explanation, it seems somewhat inappropriate to disregard elven prophecies. Our race is not so rational and draws its strength from other sources. And yet we have existed for tens of thousands of years.’

‘The genetic material called Elder Blood, of which we speak, turned out to be less resistant.’ Sile de Tansarville noted. ‘Even the elven legends and prophecies, which I do not underestimate, consider the Elder Blood to be total destroyed, extinct. Is that not so, Lady Ida? There is no longer Elder Blood in this world. The last, was in the veins of Lara Dorren aep Shiadhal. We all know the legend of Lara Dorren and Cregennan of Lod.’

‘Not all of us’ Assire car Anahid said, speaking for the first time. ‘I studied your mythology and I do not know this legend.’

‘It is not a legend,’ said Philippa Eilhart. ‘It is a true story. Also among us is someone who knows not only the story of Lara and Cregennan, but also its consequences and these would also be very interesting for us all. We ask you to speak, Francesca.’

‘From what you say,’ the Queen of the Elves said smiling, ‘you know the story about as well as I.’

‘I do not deny it. But I beg you to tell us.’

‘To prove my sincerity and loyalty to the Lodge,’ Enid an Gleanna nodded. ‘I will. I ask you ladies to take a comfortable position, because this story will not be short.’

\* \* \*

‘The story of Lara and Cregennan is a true story but so overgrown with fabulous ornaments it is hardly recognizable. There are huge differences between the human and elven versions of the legend, in both, resonate chauvinism and racial hatred. Therefore, I will cast off the ornaments and confine myself to the dry facts. And yes, Cregennan of Lod was a sorcerer. Lara Dorren aep Shiadhal was an elven sorceress, Aen Saevherne, one of the Knowing mysterious even to us elves, they carried Hen Ichaer, the Elder Blood. The friendship and then the loving bond between them was first greeted with joy by both races, however, soon enemy opponents spoke against the connection of human and elven magic. Among the elves and among the humans were those who considered it treason. There were also problems, obscure now, about person feuds, jealousy and envy. In short: as a result of the intrigue, Cregennan was killed. Lara Dorren, hunted and prosecuted, died of exhaustion in the wilderness, while birthing a daughter. The child was saved miraculously. Then sheltered by Cerro, Queen of Redania ...’

‘Terrified by the curse Lara gave her, because she refused to help and left her in the cold to freeze,’ Keira Metz burst into the narrative. ‘If she didn’t take the child, a terrible disaster would befall her and her family ...’

‘These are the fabulous ornament, of which Francesca gave up.’ Philippa interrupted. ‘Keep to the facts.’

‘The gift of prophecy to the Knowing from the Elder Blood is fact.’ Ida Emean said, looking at Philippa. ‘And the repetition in all versions of the legend, suggests the theme of prophecy provides food for thought.’

‘In the past they did,’ said Francesca. ‘The rumours of Lara’s curse were not silenced and were even remembered seventeen years later, when the girl who Cerro had sheltered, called Riannon, grew into a girl whose beauty overshadowed even the legendary beauty of her mother. The adopted Riannon bore the official title of Redania’s princess and many ruling families were interested in her. When among the many competitors Riannon finally choose Goidemar, the young king of Temeria, the marriage was almost destroyed by gossip about a curse. However, the rumours did not reach their true strength until three years after the wedding of Goidemar and Riannon. During the rebellion of Falka.’

Fringilla who had never heard of either Falka nor of her rebellion, raised her eyebrows. Francesca noticed it.

‘For the kingdom of the North,’ she explained, ‘it was a tragic and bloody event, still vivid in memory, although it took place more than a hundred years ago. In Nilfgaard, which at that time the North had almost no contact, the matter was probably not known, so let me briefly recall some of the facts. Falka was the daughter of Vridank king of Redania. His first marriage fell apart, when his eye caught the beautiful Cerro, the same who later took in Lara’s baby. There are preserved documents that describe the lengthy and intricate grounds for divorce, but it also contains a telling portrait of Vridank’s first wife, a noble of Kovir undoubtedly a half-elf, but with a strong dominance of human characteristics. Her hair was wild, her mouth like a lizards and her eyes were crazy and fanatic. In short: Ugly, her sent her back to Kovir

with a daughter, Falka. And soon forgot about both of them.'

'Falka,' Enid an Gleanna said after a while, 'reminded him after twenty-five years, stirring up a rebellion and murdering with her own hands, her father, Cerro and her two half-brothers. The armed rebellion broke out at the beginning against Kovir, Temeria and the nobility, as a firstborn daughters fight for her heritage. But it soon evolved into a peasant war of enormous scope. Both parties participated in gruesome atrocities. Falka passed into legend as a bloodthirsty demon, although it is likely that she simply was unable to control the situation and still new slogans were printed onto the insurgents banners. Death to kings, death to wizards, death to priests, nobles, the rich and lords, soon death to everything that is alive, because there was no way to contain the rebels drunk with blood. The rebellion began to spread to other countries ...'

'Nilfgaardian historians have written about it,' Sabrina Glevissig interrupted with distinct irony. 'As Lady Assire and Lady Vigo have undoubtedly read. Shorten it, Francesca. Skip to Riannon and the triplets of Houtborg.'

'All right. Riannon, the daughter of Lara Dorren who was raised by Cerro the now wife of Goidemar the king of Temeria, was accidentally captured by the rebel Falka and imprisoned in the castle of Houtborg. At the time of her capture she was pregnant. The castle defended itself long after the suppression of the rebellion and the loss of Falka, but Goidemar finally took it by storm and freed his wife. Along with her came three children, two girls and a boy. Riannon had gone mad. Goidemar, full of rage, subjected the other prisoners to torture and from the snippets of testimony heard through their howls, he arranged a clear picture of the events.'

'Falka, who took after the beauty of her elven grandmother rather than her mother, generously bestowed her charms to all the nobles, knights, captains and sergeants, ensuring their loyalty and fidelity. Finally she became pregnant and gave birth to a child, just at the same time that Riannon, imprisoned in Houtborg, gave birth to twins. Falka ordered to give her baby to Riannon. She reportedly said that only queens were worthy of the honour of being a wet-nurse to her bastards, and the same fate awaited all the crowned females of her new order that she, Falka, would build after her victory.'

'The problem was nobody, including Riannon, knew which of the three children, was Falka's. It was alleged with a high degree of probability that it was one of the girls, apparently because Riannon gave birth to a boy and a girl. Again, supposedly, despite the boastful declaration of Falka's her child was being nursed by an ordinary peasant wet nurse. Riannon when finally cured of her madness remembered almost nothing. Yes, giving birth. Yes, at sometime they brought triplets to her bed to show her. But nothing more.'

'At that time wizards were summoned to examine the three of them and determine who was who. Goidemar was so furious that once they had discovered Falka's bastard he had intentions of killing it publicly. We could not let this happen. After suppressing the uprising unspeakable savagery had been committed against the captured rebels, it was time to make it end. The execution of a child less than two years old, can you imagine? It was then that the legend arose! It was already beginning to circulate, a rumour that Falka was born as a result of the curse of Lara Dorren, which was of course, nonsense: Falka was born before Lara had ever met Cregennan. But nobody wanted to count the years. Pamphlets and nonsense documents had been written and published in secret, even at the Academy in Oxenfurt. But I'll go back to the tests that Goidemar asked us...'

'Us?' Yennefer raised her head. 'Who is us?'

'Tissaia de Vries, Augusta Wagner, Leticia Charonneau and Hen Gedyndeith,' Francesca said calmly. 'Additionally, I joined this group. I was a young sorceress, but a pure blood elf. And my father... my biological father, for I was given up... He was a Knower. I knew about the gene of the Elder Blood.'

'And this gene was found in Riannon, when you examined her and the king before you examined the children.' Sile de Tansarville said. 'And in two of the children which allowed you to reveal the gene lacking in Falka's bastard. How did you save the child from the wrath of the king?'

'Very simply,' the elf smiled. 'We pretended we did not know. We told the king that the case was not easy, we were still investigating, but that such investigations take time... A lot of time. Goidemar, deep down, had a good and noble

heart, he calmed down quickly and didn't urge us and soon the triplets had grown and ran about the palace, giving rise to joy to the royal couple and the whole court. Amavet, Fiona and Adela were alike as three sparrows. They were watched closely, constantly arising suspicions. Fiona poured the contents of a pot out of a window straight onto the head of a Constable, he called out that she was the evil bastard and so lost his office. Sometime later, Amavet smeared the stairs with grease and a lady of the court slipped in it, yelling something about cursed blood and was forced to say goodbye to the court. The low born were greeted with the whip and ostracized, so everyone soon learned to hold their tongue. Even a baron from a very old family, who Adela shot in the ass with a bow, was limited to...

'We will not expand on the antics of the children,' Philippa Eilhart cut in. 'When did you finally tell Goidemar the truth?'

'He was never told. He did not ask for it and that suited us.'

'But which of the children was the bastard of Falka? Did you know?'

'Of course, Adela.'

'Not Fiona?'

'No, Adela. She died of the plague. Devil's bastard, cursed blood, demonic daughter of Falka, during an outbreak, despite the protests of the king, was helping the priests in the hospital and saved the sick children of the castle, when she contracted it and died. She was seventeen. A year later her brother Amavet became entangled in an affair with the Countess Anna Kameny and was murdered by thugs hired by the Count. That same year, Riannon died, desperate and overwhelmed by the death of her children whom she loved. It was then that Goidemar called us again. The last of the three triplets, Princess Fiona had caught the interest of Coram, king of Cintra. He wanted a wife for his son, also called Coram, but knew of the rumours and would not marry his son if possible to Falka's bastard. We assured them with our authority that Fiona was the legitimate daughter of the royal family. I do not know if they believed us, however, they young prince found her to his tastes and the daughter of Riannon, ancestor of Ciri, became the queen on Cintra.'

'Bringing to the famous dynasty of Coram the gene that were following.'

'Fiona,' Enid an Gleanna said calmly, 'was not a carrier of the Elder Blood gene. Which we have called the Lara gene.'

'How is that?'

'The carrier of the Lara gene was Amavet and our experiment continued. Because Anna Kameny, whose husband had killed her lover, still in mourning gave birth to twins. A boy and a girl. The father was undoubtedly Amavet, because the girl was a carrier of the gene. She was named Muriel.'

'Muriel, the Rogue Beauty?' Sile de Tansarville was amazed.

'That was much later.' Francesca smiled. 'To begin with it was Muriel the Fair. Actually, she was a cute and sweet child. When she was fourteen there was talk about her as Muriel Velvet Eyes. More than one man had drowned in those eyes. Eventually she married Robert Earl of Garramone.'

'And the boy?'

'Crispin. He was not a carrier so we were not interested in him. I believe he died in a war, he only had weapons and fighting on his mind.'



‘Wait.’ Sabrina said with a rapid motion of her hair. ‘Muriel the Rogue Beauty’s daughter was Adalia called the Fay...’

‘That’s right.’ confirmed Francesca. ‘An interesting person, Adalia. A strong Source, perfect material for a sorceress. Unfortunately she did not want to be a sorceress. She preferred to be a queen.’

‘And the gene?’ asked Assire var Anahid. ‘She carried it?’

‘Interesting enough, no.’

‘So I thought.’ Assire nodded. ‘The Lara gene can only be transmitted continuously through the female line. If the carrier is male, the gene is lost after the second or third generation.’

‘But then activates again.’ Philippa Eilhart said. ‘Adalia, who was lacking the gene, was at the end of the day the mother of Calanthe and Calanthe was the grandmother of Ciri who is a carrier of the Lara gene.’

‘The first since Riannon.’ Sile de Tansarville spoke suddenly. ‘You made a mistake, Francesca. There are two genes. One, the right one, was latent and you overlooked it in Fiona, deceived by the clear and strong gene in Amavet. But the one in Amavet was not the gene, but the activator. Lady Assire is right. The activator is transferred through the male line and in the case of Adalia, manifested so little that you didn’t see it. Adalia was the first daughter of the Rogue, the following children almost certainly had no trace of the activator. The latent gene in Fiona was probably in her male descendants up to the third generation. But it has not disappeared and I know why.’

‘Bloody hell.’ Yennefer hissed through her teeth.

‘I’m lost,’ said Sabrina Glevissig, ‘in the jungle of all this genetic genealogy.’

Francesca drew a platter of fruit closer to her, stretched out her hand and muttered a spell.

‘I apologize for this fairground show of telekinesis,’ she smiled, and ordered a red apple to rise from the table. ‘But with the help of this levitating fruit it will be easier for me to clarify everything. This red apple is the gene for Lara, the Elder Blood. The green apple represents the latent gene. The pomegranate is a pseudo gene, the activator. Let us begin. This is Riannon, the red apple. Her son, Amavet, the pomegranate. Amavet’s daughter, Muriel the Rogue Beauty and her daughter Adalia are pomegranates also, the last in the decline. And here is the second line with Fiona, Riannon’s daughter as the green apple. Her son, Corbett, king of Cintra, green. The son of Corbett and Elen of Kaedwen, Dagon, green. Have you notice, in the two successive generations of males descendants only, the gene is lost, it is too weak. But now, there is a connection with the pomegranate and the green apple, Adalia, Princess of Maribor and Dagon, king of Cintra. And the daughter of these two is Calanthe. A red apple. A resurgent of the strong Lara gene.’

‘The gene from Fiona,’ Margarita Laux-Antille nodded, ‘met with the activator of Amavet’s through marital incest. No one took notice of the kinship? None of the royal heralds and chroniclers paid any attention to the open incest?’

‘It was not so open. Anna Kameny did not broadcast that her twins were bastards, because her husband’s family would have then stripped her and the children of their coat of arms, titles and possessions. Of course various rumours stubbornly hovered around and not only among the commoners. Calanthe, tainted by incest, had to find a husband in far off Ebbing, where the rumours had not arrived.’

‘Add to your Pyramid, two red apples, Enid,’ said Margarita. ‘Now, according to the accurate observation of Lady Assire, the resurrected Lara gene goes smoothly through the female line.’

‘Yes. This is Pavetta, the daughter of Calanthe. And Pavetta’s daughter, Cirilla. The only one at this time who is heiress to the Elder Blood, the Lara gene carrier.’

‘The only one?’ Sile de Tansarville asked sharply. ‘You are very sure of yourself, Enid.’

‘What do you mean?’

Sile rose suddenly, extended her fingers covered with rings in the direction of the fruit platter and levitated the rest of the fruit, destroying and transforming Francesca’s whole scheme into a multi-coloured mess.

‘This is what I mean,’ she said coldly, pointed to the chaos of the fruit. ‘For these are the possible genetic combinations. And we know only what we see here. That is, nothing. Your mistake has been avenged, Francesca, by producing an avalanche of mistakes. The gene appeared by chance, after a hundred years, during which events may have occurred, of which we have no knowledge. Events kept secret, hidden, covered up. Children of premarital, extramarital, secret adoption, even swapped. Incest. Crossbreeding, the blood of forgotten ancestors which then revives in later generations. To conclude: a hundred years ago you had the gene in your hand and it escaped you. Mistake, Enid, mistake, mistake! Too much spontaneity, too many accidents. Too little control, too little interference with chance.’

‘We were not,’ Enid an Gleanna, pursed her lips, ‘dealing with rabbits, which can be locked in a cage and their parks chosen for them.’

Fringilla, following the gaze of Triss Merigold, saw Yennefer’s hands clench suddenly the carved arms of her chair.

\* \* \*

*This is what now unites Yennefer and Francesca, Triss thought feverishly, still avoiding eye contact. The calculation. Because, what they did had something to do with parks and breeding rabbits. Yes, their plans for Ciri and Kovir’s king, although seemingly unlikely, are completely real. They have already done this. They place who they want on the thrones, they create links and dynasties as they wished, as it is more convenient for them. The used charms, potions and aphrodisiacs. The kings and queens enter into foreign marriages, often morganatic, against any plan, intentions and treaties. And then those who want children and should not are administered secret measures to prevent pregnancy. Those who did not want to have children, but it was necessary to do so are instead or the promised cured were given placebos, water with licorice. Hence, all these incredible connections. Calanthe, Pavetta ... Ciri. Yennefer was involved in it. And now regrets it. And she is right. Heck, if Geralt finds out about it ...*

\* \* \*

*Sphinxes, thought Fringilla Vigo. Sphinxes carved into the arms of the seats. Yes, it should be the sign and emblem of the Lodge. Knowledge, secrecy, silence. They are sphinxes. They can easily reach what they want. It is a piece of cake to them, marry Kovir with Ciri. They have the power. They have the knowledge. They have the means. The diamond necklace on Sabrina Glevissig’s neck is perhaps worth almost as much as the entire balance of payments for the forested and rocky Kaedwen. Easily they can achieve what they plan. But here is one obstacle ...*

\* \* \*

*Aha, thought Triss Merigold, we finally begin to talk about what we started to. The sobering fact that Ciri is in Nilfgaard under Emhyr var Emreis's power. Far from the plans that are being established here ...*

‘There is no question,’ said Philippa, ‘that Emhyr has hunted Cirilla for a long time. Everyone thought that it was for a political marriage with Cintra and the seizure of a fief, which is the legal legacy of the girl. But we can not exclude the possibility that this was not about politics, but the Elder Blood gene, which Emhyr wants to introduce into the imperial line. If Emhyr knows that we want to fulfil the prophecy he may wish for the future Queen of the World to be born in Nilfgaard.’

‘A correction,’ Sabrina Glevissig interjected. ‘This is not what Emhyr wants, but Nilfgaard’s sorcerers. Only they could track down the gene and Emhyr has realized its importance. The present Nilfgaardian ladies here probably want to confirm and clarify their role in the plot.’

‘It amazes me,’ Fringilla said firmly, ‘the tendency of women to find intrigue in distant Nilfgaard, while the indicators suggest looking for conspirators and traitors closer to home.’

‘An observation as straightforward as it is accurate.’ Sile de Tansarville silenced Sabrina with a serious look, who was preparing to respond. ‘All the evidence suggests that the information about the Elder Blood leaked to Nilfgaard was by us, all the conditions show this. Have you forgotten about Vilgefortz, ladies?’

‘I have not.’ Sabrina’s eyes burned for a moment with the fire of hatred. ‘I have not forgotten!’

‘The time will come for him,’ Keira Metz teeth flashed ominously. ‘But for now, this is not about him, but about Ciri and the Elder Blood which is so important to us, who is held by Emhyr var Emreis, Emperor of Nilfgaard.’

‘The Emperor,’ Assire said quietly, looking at Fringilla, ‘has nothing in his hands. The girl being held in Rowan is not a carrier of any extraordinary gene. She is normal to commonplace. Beyond all doubt she is not Cirilla of Cintra. This is not the girl, whom the emperor sought. Those who carry the gene, have it available even in their hair. I examined her hairs and I found something I did not understand. Now I get it.’

‘So Ciri is not in Nilfgaard.’ Yennefer said quietly. ‘She is not there.’

‘She is not there.’ Philippa Eilhart confirmed seriously. ‘Emhyr was cheated, someone slipped him a doppelganger. I heard about this yesterday. However, I am glad Assire’s confession confirms this. It confirms that our Lodge is already operational.’

\* \* \*

Yennefer had difficulties in mastering the tremors of her hands and lips. *Keep calm* she told herself, *calm*, she repeated, *calm, do not expose yourself, an opportunity awaits you. Listen, listen and gather information. Sphinx. Be a Sphinx.*

‘This means that the culprit is Vilgefortz.’ Sabrina banged her fist on the table. ‘Not Emhyr but Vilgefortz, trickster, elegant scoundrel. He tricked Emhyr and us!’

Yennefer took calming breaths. Assire var Anahid, who clearly felt uncomfortable in her tight dress, had just said something about a young nobleman from Nilfgaard. Yennefer knew who she meant and unconsciously clenched her fists. A black knight with wings on his helmet, the nightmare of Ciri's ravings...

She felt the eyes of Francesca and Philippa on her. Triss, however, whose gaze she was trying to attract, avoided her eyes. *Damn*, thought Yennefer, with effort keeping an indifferent expression on her face. *What damn snare entangles this girl? Damn, how can I look in the witcher's eyes...*

'There will therefore be a great opportunity,' Keira Metz cried excitedly 'to regain Ciri and also rip the skin from Vilgefortz, then set fire to the floor under the rogue's ass!'

'Burning the ground will be preceded by discovering Vilgefortz hideout,' Sile de Tansarville scoffed, who had never had much sympathy for Yennefer. 'And so far none have succeeded. Even some of the ladies sitting at this table have spared their invaluable time and talents in the search.'

'We have already found two of Vilgefortz many hiding places.' Philippa Eilhart replied coolly. 'Dijkstra is extensively looking for more and I would not spurn his efforts. Sometimes where magic fails turn to spies and informers for success.'

\* \* \*

One of the officers who accompanied Dijkstra took one look at the dungeon, fell abruptly, leaned on the wall and was as white as paper and gave the impression that at any moment he was going to faint. Dijkstra noted in his memory that the officer be transferred to a desk job. But upon looking in the cell, he immediately changed his mind. His stomach jumped up to his throat. He could not, however, show weakness in front of his subordinates. Without haste he pulled out a perfumed handkerchief and put it against his nose and mouth, and bent over the naked bodies lying on the stone floor.

'The abdomen and uterus are sliced open.' He diagnosed, striving for peace and a cold tone. 'Very expertly, a surgeon's hand. The girl has had the foetus removed. When this was done, she was alive. But it was not done here. Are all of them in a similar state? Lennep, I'm talking to you.'

'No...' the agent shook, dropping his gaze from the corpse. 'Others had their necks broken with a garrotte. They were not pregnant... But an autopsy will be done...'

'How many were found in total?'

'In addition to this one here, four. None could be identified.'

'Not true,' Dijkstra denied from behind the handkerchief. 'I've already managed to identify this one here. This is Jolie, she is the youngest daughter of Count Lanier. She disappeared without a trace a year ago. I'll take a look at the others.'

'Fire has deformed some of them.' Lennep said. 'It will difficult to learn... But, Sir, besides that... We found...'

'Speak and stop stuttering.'

‘In that pit,’ the agent pointed to a hole that opened in the floor, ‘there are bones... Lots of bones. We have not had time to remove and examine them, but judging by the bones of the head, they are all young girls. If we ask the magician they may be able to recognize them... I could then notify the parents who are still searching for their missing daughters...’

‘Under no circumstances,’ Dijkstra turned sharply, ‘are you to breathe a word to anyone about what was found here. No one. And especially not magicians. After what I have seen here, I have lost trust in them. Lennep, have the upper levels been thoroughly investigated? Did you not find anything that could help us in our investigation?’

‘Nothing, Sir.’ Lennep bowed his head. ‘As soon as the report reached us, we raced to the castle, driving the horses hard. But we arrived too late. Everything was burned. The fire had a terrible force. It must have been magic. But here in the dungeon, The spell did not reach. I don’t know why...’

‘I know. The fire was not lit by Vilgefortz but by his handyman Rience or another sorcerer. Vilgefortz would not make such a mistake; we would have left us with nothing but black soot on the walls. Yes, he knows that fire purifies... It obliterates all traces.’

‘Well, it is obliterated,’ Lennep muttered. ‘There isn’t even any evidence that Vilgefortz was here at all...’

‘Then fabricate the evidence.’ Dijkstra removed the handkerchief from his face. ‘Do I have to teach you how? I know Vilgefortz was here. In the basement apart from the bodies, is there nothing left? What is behind those iron doors?’

‘Allow me, Sir.’ The agent picked up a torch. ‘I’ll show you.’

There was no doubt that the magic fire that should have turned everything in the basement to ash, started right there in the spacious room behind the iron doors. The error in the spell had disrupted the plan to a significant extent, but the fire had still been strong and violent. The fire had charred the shelves occupying one wall and melted glassware turned everything into a stinking mass. All that had remained intact in the room was a table and two chairs, one wooden, one steel, strangely shaped, embedded in the ground. Strangely shaped, but leaving no doubt as to their purpose.

‘It is constructed,’ Lennep swallowed, indicating the chairs and the brackets attached to them, ‘to keep... legs... open. Very open.’

‘Son of a bitch,’ Dijkstra growled through clenched teeth. ‘Damned, son of a bitch...’

‘In the channel below the wooden chair,’ continued the agent, ‘there are traces of blood, faeces and urine. The steel chair is brand new, probably never used. I don’t know what to think...’

‘I do,’ said Dijkstra. ‘The steel chair was prepared for someone special. Someone Vilgefortz suspected had special abilities.’

\* \* \*

‘I do not underestimate Dijkstra and his secret service,’ said Sile de Tansarville. ‘I know that finding Vilgefortz is a matter of time. Aside from the personal motive of revenge, that seems to fascinate some of the ladies, I would note that it is not certain that Vilgefortz has Ciri.’

‘If Vilgefortz does not have her, then who does? I was on the island, none of us, if I understand correctly, teleported. Dijkstra does not have her nor any of the kings, we know this. And in the ruins of the Tower of Gulls her body was not found.’

‘Tor Lara,’ Ida Emean said slowly, ‘once concealed a very powerful portal. Can we exclude that the girl left Thanedd through this portal?’

Yennefer closed her eyes and dug her nails into the head of the sphinxes fastened to the armrests of her chair. *Keep calm*, she thought, *keep calm*. She felt the eyes of Margarita on her, but did not raise her head.

‘If Ciri entered the portal of Tor Lara,’ the rector of Aretuza’s voice changed a little, ‘I fear we can forget our plans and projects. I am afraid that we will never see Ciri again. The portal in the Tower of Gulls was destroyed.’

‘What are we talking about?’ Sabrina burst out. ‘Because in order to enter the teleporter tower, to even view it, you have to use magic at the fourth level. And in order to activate the portal would take the abilities of an arch mage! I don’t know if Vilgefortz could do this, let alone a fifteen year old girl. How can you assume something like that? Who do you think this girl is? What is so special about her?’

\* \* \*

‘Does it matter,’ Stefan Skellen, called Kalous, coroner to the Emperor Emhyr var Emreis, stretched, ‘what is so special about her, Mister Bonhart? Or if there is indeed anything special about her? I am interest to see. I’ll pay you a hundred florens. If you so desire, check to see what it is, after killing her or before, as you prefer. The price will not go up one way or the other, even if you do find something, I tell you solemnly and faithfully.’

‘What if I bring her alive?’

‘No.’

The man called Bonhart, massive in size, but lean and bony like a skeleton, twisted his grey moustache. The other hand rested on his sword at all times, as if to hide from Skellen the relief on the pommel.

‘Should I bring you her head?’

‘No.’ Kalous grimaced. ‘What would I do with her head? Have it preserved in honey?’

‘As proof.’

‘I trust your word. You are famous, Bonhart. Also reliable.’

‘Thanks for the recognition.’ The bounty hunter smiled. Skellen had twenty armed men around the inn, but he still felt a cold shiver down his back at the sight of that smile. ‘It should always be so, but I seldom encounter it. The lords and barons of Varnhagen have me bring them the heads of all the Rats otherwise they do not pay. If you do not need

Falka's head then you won't mind if I add it to the others?'

'To further a second reward? What about professional ethics?'

'I, Sir Skellen,' Bonhart narrowed his eyes, 'I do not get paid for killing, but for the service I provide to customer. And I provide that service to both you and Varnhagen.'

'Logical.' Kalous agreed. 'Do whatever you want. When should I expect you to call on me for the reward?'

'Soon.'

'Does that mean...?'

'The Rats are headed along the bandit's trail, thinking to winter in the mountains. I'll cut them off on the road. Twenty days, no longer.'

'You are confident of their route?'

'They were at Fen Aspra, they plundered a convoy of two merchants there. They travelled past Tyffi. They spent one night in Druigh to dance at the Harvest festival. They at last came to Loredo. There, in Loredo, Falka killed a man. They still talk about it there, with chattering teeth. That is why I asked what you have against this Falka.'

'Maybe the same as you,' Stefan Skellen joked. 'No, sorry. You, after all, do not accept money for killing, but for services rendered. You are a true craftsman, Bonhart, an honest professional. A professional like any other? You work for contracts? Do they pay enough for you to live? Huh?'

The bounty hunter stared at him for a long time. In the end the smile disappeared from Kalous's lips.

'Certainly,' he said, 'you have to live. Some make a living by what they know. Others do what they must. At the end of the day, life smiles on a lucky few, unless you're a whore. They pay me for a craft that I love truly and sincerely.'

\* \* \*

Yennefer greeted with relief, joy and hope the break for a snack and the wetting of dry throats, proposed by Philippa. It became immediately clear that her hopes were going to be dashed. Margarita m clearly wished to speak with her, Philippa quickly pulled her to the other end of the hall. Triss Merigold, who approached her was accompanied by Francesca. The elf monitored the conversation without embarrassment. But Yennefer saw the anxiety in Triss's eyes and she was sure had the conversation had no witnesses it would have been full of useless pleas for help. Triss no doubt had committed her whole soul to the Lodge already. And no doubt sense that Yennefer's loyalty was still uncertain.

Triss tried to comfort her, to ensure her that Geralt was safe and was recovering in Brokilon with the dryads who were helping him back to health. As always, talk of Geralt made her blush. *He must have accommodated her*; Yennefer thought without malice. *She hasn't known anyone like him before. She will not soon forget about him That's good.*

She accepted the revelations with a shrug of indifference. Not thrilled by the fact that neither Triss nor Francesca believed her indifference. She wanted to be alone, she wanted to make them understand.

Understand.

She moved to the far end of the buffet and dedicated herself to the oysters. She ate carefully, still feeling pain, the effects of the compression. She was afraid to drink wine, she wasn't sure who she would react.

'Yennefer?'

She turned around slowly. Fringilla Vigo smiled slightly, looking at the small knife she clenched in her fist.

'I see and feel,' she said, 'that you would rather thrust that knife into me than the oysters. Is there still enmity?'

'The Lodge,' Yennefer replied coolly, 'requires mutual loyalty. Friendship is not mandatory.'

'It is not and nor should it be,' the Nilfgaardian sorceress looked around the room. 'Friendship is the result of a long process, or it is spontaneous.'

'The same is true of enmity.' Yennefer opened one of the oysters and swallowed the contents along with the sea water. 'Sometimes you see someone for a split second, just before they blind you, and you do not like them.'

'Oh, the issue of enmity is much more complicated.' Fringilla squinted. 'Let's say someone you do not recognise at top of a hill, smashes to pieces your friend, right before your eyes. You do not know her, can not see her, but you do not like her.'

'It happens sometimes.' Yennefer shrugged. 'Fate plays with us in many ways.'

'Fate,' Fringilla said quietly, 'is a very unpredictable and mischievous child. Friends sometimes turn their backs and the enemies become friends. You can, for example, talk to them alone. Nobody tries to disturb or interrupt you, nor hear you. Everybody says that these two enemies can speak with each other. They talk about nothing important. They just turn to banalities, throwing jabs from time to time.'

'No doubt,' Yennefer nodded, 'so everyone thinks. And they have it absolutely right.'

'It will then be convenient,' Fringilla did not dismiss her, 'that we are in such a circumstance as to raise a question, both important and unique.'

'And what question did you have in mind?'

'The question of the escape you are planning.'

Yennefer, in the process of opening another oyster, almost sliced her finger. She looked around furtively, then looked at the Nilfgaardian from behind lowered eyelashes. Fringilla Vigo smiled slightly.

'Be so kind as to lend me your knife. For the oysters. Your oysters are delicious. In the south, they are not easy to



get. Especially now, in these conditions with the war blockade ... The blockades are a terrible thing. Agreed?’

Yennefer coughed softly.

‘I noticed,’ Fringilla swallowed an oyster, then reached for another one, ‘Yes, Philippa is watching us. Assire too. Assire is probably afraid for my loyalty to the Lodge. My loyalty threatened. She is considering whether I might succumb to compassion. Hmm ... Your imprisoned ... Perhaps the threat of death? Or maybe she is simply being used as a card in a game of gamblers? Believe me, I would not last here. I would run away immediately. Please, take the knife. I’ve had enough oysters, I have to watch my waistline.’

‘A blockade, as you say,’ Yennefer whispered, staring into the green eyes of the enchantress from Nilfgaard, ‘is a terrible thing. Disgusting even. You are not allowed to do what you want to do. But a blockade can be overcome if you have ... the right means. I do not have them.’

‘You are counting on me to give them to you?’ the Nilfgaardian enchantress studied the oyster in her hand. ‘Oh, this is not an option. I am loyal to the Lodge and the Lodge, it is obvious does not want you hurrying away to try and save you loved ones. In addition, I am your enemy, how could you forget about that, Yennefer?’

‘Certainly. How could I?’

‘A friend,’ Fringilla said quietly, ‘would warn that even with the components for a teleport spell, you’d fail to break the blockade unnoticed. This operation requires time and is obvious. Almost better would be an unobtrusive, natural attractor. I repeat, almost. Teleportation with an improvised attractor is certainly, as you well know, very risky. A friend, would try to dissuade another friend from doing this. But you’re not a friend.’

Fringilla tipped the shell in her hand and poured a little sea water on the table.

‘Now let us finish this banal conversation,’ she said. ‘The Lodge requires loyalty. Friendship, fortunately, is not mandatory.’

\* \* \*

‘She has teleported,’ Francesca Findabair said coldly without emotion, once the turmoil caused by the disappearance of Yennefer had calmed down. ‘There is no reason to break your heads, ladies. We can not do anything now. It was my mistake. I suspected that the star of obsidian masked the casting of spells ...’

‘How did she do it, damn it?’ Philippa screamed. ‘A spell can be masked, it is not difficult. But by what miracle could she open a portal? Montecalvo has a blockage!’

‘I have never liked her,’ Sile de Tansarville shrugged. ‘Never did I approve of her lifestyle. But I never questioned her abilities.’

‘She will tell everything!’ Sabrina Glevissig shouted. ‘Everything about the Lodge! She will go right ...’

‘Nonsense,’ Triss Merigold interrupted, looking at Francesca and Ida Emean. ‘Yennefer will not betray us. Nothing says that Yennefer fled in order to betray us.’

‘Triss is right,’ Margarita Laux-Antille supported, ‘I know why she ran away, who she wants to save. I saw them both, her and Ciri, together. I understand everything.’

‘And I don’t understand anything!’ Sabrina screamed out loud again.

Assire var Anahid leaned towards her friend.

‘I will not ask why you did it,’ she whispered. ‘I will not ask you how you did it. I will ask: where?’

Fringilla Vigo smiled slightly, her fingers stroking the sphinx’s head carved on the arm of her chair.

‘How should I know,’ she whispered, ‘from which coastline the oysters originated?’

***Ithlina**, in reality Ithlinne Aegli, daughter of Aevenien, the legendary elven healer, astrologist and diviner, famous for her predictions, divinations and prophesies of which the most famous remains Aen Ithlinnespeath, known as Ithlinne's Prophecy. Indexed and transcribed many times in various forms, the prophecy enjoyed considerable popularity during a number of different periods; the comments, clues and explanations concerning it conveniently adapted themselves to the events of the time, reinforcing the general conviction of the existence of the great gift of second sight of Ithlina*

*In particular, it is believed that Ithlina predicted the Nordling Wars (1239–1268), the Great Plagues (1268, 1272 and 1294), the bloody war of the Two Unicorns (1309–1318) and the Haak Invasion (1350). It was equally believed that she predicted the climate changes observed beginning at the end of the 13th century (The White Frost), which popular superstitions always associated with the end of the world and the prophetic arrival The Destroyer (sic). This fragment of Ithlina's prophecy was the trigger of the infamous Witch Hunts (1272–1276) and caused the deaths of numerous women and unfortunate girls, who were mistaken for the incarnation of The Destroyer. Today, Ithlina is considered as a legendary figure by a number of researchers, and her “prophesies” as contemporary apocrypha cobbled together from bits and pieces, an ingenious literary fraud.*

Effenberg and Talbot, *Encyclopaedia Maxima Mundi*, Volume IX

## CHAPTER SEVEN

The children, who surrounded the wandering storyteller called Pogwizd, expressed their protest by raising an indescribable uproar. Finally, Connor, son of the blacksmith and the largest, strongest and boldest who had brought the storyteller a bowl of cabbage soup and some potatoes seasoned with bacon, was made the spokesperson and expressed the common opinion.

‘How is this so?’ he yelled. ‘How is this so, grandfather? How can this be the end for today? Is it proper to end a story like that? Half way through the story? We want to know what happened! We do not want to wait until you come back to the village, because it may be six months or a year away! Say on!’

‘The sun has set,’ said the old man. ‘It is your bed time, sparrows. What will your parents say when they catch you yawning tomorrow while you work? I know what they’ll say: Again the old storyteller has been telling you his stories, putting romances into the heads of kids and not letting them sleep. When he reappears he will get nothing, no soup or potatoes or bacon, we’ll drive this old man out of town because his stories only bring trouble ...’

‘They will not say that!’ the children cried in chorus. ‘Tell us more, please!’

‘Hmmm,’ said the old man, looking at the sun disappearing behind the treetops on the edge of the Yaruga River. ‘So be it. But let us come to an agreement: Let one of you go to your house and bring me some buttermilk to wet my throat with. The rest of you will decide the fate of what you will hear, because I cannot tell them all, we would be here until tomorrow. So, you decide: who do we hear about now and who next time.’

The boys raised a shout again, one above the other.

‘Silence!’ Pogwizd cried, waving his staff. ‘I said to decide, not screech like nightingales, ret-tret, ret-tret, ret-tret! So

what? What am I to tell?’

‘Of Yennefer,’ cried Nimue, the youngest of the listeners, who because of her height was called Thumbelina, was stroking a cat that had fallen asleep on her lap. ‘Tell us about the Sorceress. How she escaped the convent at Bald Peak in a magical way to save Ciri. I’d love to hear it. When I grow up, I want to become a Sorceress.’

‘Certainly!’ the miller’s son, Bronik yelled. ‘Better wipe your nose, Thumbelina because sorceresses don’t teach people with snot! And you, old man, don’t tell us about Yennefer, but about Ciri and the Rats, how they were going to steal ...’

‘Quiet,’ said Connor, gloomy and thoughtful. ‘You are a flock of idiots. If we are to hear anything today, then it must be in order. Tell us, grandfather, about the witcher and his companions and how they left the Yaruga.’

‘I want to hear about Yennefer!’ Nimue squeaked.

‘Me too,’ said Orla, her older sister. ‘Of the love between her and the witcher. How they loved one another. But where it ends happily, grandfather. Not where it ends in death.’

‘Shut up, fool, who is interested in love stories? It’s war we want, fighting!’

‘About the witcher’s sword!’

‘About Ciri and the Rats!’

‘Hold up!’ Connor threatened them with his fist. ‘Or I’ll grab a stick and tan you all, bastards! I said in order. Grandfather Pogwizd will tell us about the witcher and how he wandered with Dandelion, Milva ...’

‘Yes!’ Nimue squeaked again. ‘About Milva. I want to hear about Milva! Because if the sorceresses do not want me, I’ll become an archer!’

‘Then we have chosen,’ said Connor. ‘And at the same time, grandfather has decided to take a nap; his gray head already nods ... Hey, grandfather! Do not sleep! Tell us of the Witcher Geralt, from the point where the company was leaving the Yaruga.’

‘But first,’ interjected Bronik, ‘Tell us about all the others, grandfather, let us not be bothered by our curiosity. What happened to them? Briefly about Yennefer and Ciri. We can’t wait until you visit our village again. Please.’

‘Yennefer,’ grandfather Pogwizd chuckled, ‘cast a spell and escaped from the castle on Bald Peak and splashed straight into the sea. She found herself in the rough waves of the ocean, between sharp rocks, but she was not afraid, for it was a cinch for a magician to not drown. She arrived on the Skellige Islands and found allies there. Because you see, her anger was great at the wizard Vilgefortz. She was convinced that he had kidnapped Ciri and she was determined to track him down, have her revenge and rescue Ciri. And that’s all I will tell you for now.’

‘What about Ciri?’

‘Ciri was with the Rats, hiding under the name of Falka. She took to the bandit’s life because, although nobody knew it then, in that girl was wickedness and cruelty, all that is wrong, which is hidden in each person, had emerged from her and gradually took advantage over the good. Oh, it was a big mistake made by the witchers of Kaer Morhen, who taught her to kill! She, however, could not imagine that by killing, the Grim Reaper himself was on her heels. Because

the terrible Bonhart was on her trail. It was written that they would meet, Ciri and Bonhart. But that is a story for another time. Now you shall hear the story about the Witcher.'

The children were silent and sat in circle around the old man. They listened. Darkness fell. Hemp, raspberry and mallow that grew not far from the huts were transformed suddenly into an incredibly dark forest. What rustled inside? Was it a mouse or a terrible elf with eyes of fire? Or maybe a striga or a witch, who wants to eat the children? Is that the ox in the barn that is kicking or is it the beating hooves of war horses of the cruel invaders from a hundred years ago crossing the Yaruga? Was that a nightjar flying over the thatched rooftops or was it a bloodthirsty vampire? Or was it a beautiful enchantress flying on a magical spell towards a distant sea?

'The Witcher Geralt,' began the storyteller, 'along with his new company set off for Angren, through swamps and forests. There were once dense forests that grew everywhere in the world, ho, ho, but now there are no such forests, except for Brokilon... The companions travelled east up the Yaruga, towards the holy places of the Black Forest. At first they were doing well, but later, ho, ho... I'll tell you what happened next...'

What followed was a tale of bygone and forgotten times. The children listened.

\* \* \*

The Witcher was sitting on a stump at the top of a cliff, from which unfolded a view of the meadows and reed beds on the banks of the Yaruga. The sun was setting. Cranes ascended from the wetlands, screeching and flying in a wedge.

*Everything is fucked up*, thought the Witcher, looking at the ruins of a woodcutter's hut and the little bit of smoke rising from a fire that Milva made. *Everything has gone to hell. And everything was going so well, even with this strange company. We had a target, close, real, concrete. East through Angren to Caed Dhu. We were doing so well. But then it went to hell. Bad luck or fate?*

The cranes blew a trumpeting call.

\* \* \*

Emiel Regis Rohellec Terzieff-Godefroy rode at the head of the procession mounted on a Nilfgaardian bay captured by the Witcher in Armeria. The stallion, although at first it was bothered by the vampire and his herbal scent, soon became accustomed and caused little trouble unlike Roach who kicked like he was being bitten by horseflies. Behind Regis and Geralt rode Dandelion on Pegasus with his head bandaged like a war hero. Along the way the poet had composed a heroic song, in which military rhymes and melodies resonated and was reminiscent of their recent adventures. The shape of the work clearly suggested that during these adventures, the author of the song and performer had shown himself to be the bravest of the brave. The procession was capped off by Milva and Cahir Mawr Dyffryn aep Ceallach.

Cahir was riding his recovered horse and led by the bridle a gray horse loaded with their modest equipment.

At last they left the riverside wetlands and found themselves on dry lands covered with hills from which they could see to the south the Great Yaruga as a shiny ribbon and to the north in the distance, the Mahakam Mountains. The weather was beautiful, the sun warmed them and the mosquitoes ceased to poke and buzz around their ears. Boots and legs dried. On the sunny slopes blackberry bushes were dark with fruit, the horses nibbled at the grass, the brooks that

ran down to meet with the Yaruga were crystal clear and full of trout. As night fell, it was possible to light a fire and sleep warm and dry. In a word, it was wonderful, and moods should have improved immediately. But they did not. And the reason why was proved at one of the first camps.

\* \* \*

‘Wait a moment, Geralt,’ the poet began, looking around. ‘Don’t be in such a rush to get back to camp. We want to talk to you in private, here, me and Milva. It’s ... Well, about Regis.’

‘Aha,’ The Witcher lay down his arm full of brushwood. ‘You’re starting to be afraid? It is about time.’

‘Shut up,’ Dandelion raised his eyebrows. ‘We have accepted him as a companion; he has offered his support to help find Ciri. He pulled my own neck out of the noose, I will not forget that. But, don’t be surprised that we have concerns, damn it. Are you surprised? All your life you have persecuted and killed those like him.’

‘I have not killed him. Nor do I have any intentions too. Is this declaration sufficient for you? If not, though sorrow fills my heart, I am unable to cure your fear. It’s paradoxical but the only one among us who can cure you is Regis.’

‘I told you to shut up,’ the troubadour said angrily. ‘You are not talking to Yennefer, save us you twisted eloquence. Just answer directly to a simple question.’

‘Ask them. Without twisted eloquence.’

‘Regis is a vampire. It’s no secret what vampires feed on. What will happen when he gets really hungry? Yes, yes, we saw that he ate fish soup and since then he has eaten with us, as normally as any of us. But... But will he be able to control his desire? Geralt, do I have to pry it out of you?’

‘He controlled his lust for blood when he was tending to your head wound. When we were tied up, he did not even lick his fingers. And then, during the full moon, when we were drunk on mandrake liquor and slept in his hut, he had a unique opportunity. Did you check and see if you have teeth marks on your neck?’

‘Do not mock,’ Milva snorted. ‘You know more about vampires than us. You can mock, Dandelion, but you must answer me. I grew up in the mountains, I didn’t go to schools, and I’m in the dark. It is not my fault and not right to mock. I ashamed to admit it, but I am a little bit afraid of... Regis.’

‘And not without reason,’ he nodded. ‘He is one of the so-called higher vampires. Extremely dangerous. If he was our enemy, I’d be afraid as well. But, the plague, for reasons unknown to me, he is our companion. He leads us to Caed Dhu, to the druids who can help me obtain information about Ciri. I’m desperate and so therefore I cannot give up this chance. And so I accept the friendship of a vampire.’

‘Is that the only reason?’

‘No,’ he said with a slight reluctance, but finally opted for honesty. ‘Not just that. He... He behaves honourably. In the camp by the Chotla, at the judgement of the girl, he did not hesitate to act. Although he knew that it would expose him.’

‘He pulled a red-hot horseshoe out of the fire,’ Dandelion recalled. ‘He held it in his hands for a few moments and did not even wince. None of us could repeat that act, not even with baked potatoes.’

‘He is impervious to fire.’

‘What else can he do?’

‘He can become invisible whenever he wants. He can hypnotize you with his eyes, inducing a deep sleep; he did it to the guard in Vissegerd’s camp. He can take the form and fly like a bat. I think that these things can only be performed at night and only during a full moon. But I could be wrong. I’ve already been surprised a few times, and he might have something else up his sleeve. I suspect that he is unusual even among vampires. For years he has quite convincingly posed as a human. Dogs and horses can perceive his true nature but can be tricked by the smell of herbs that he always carries. But my medallion didn’t react to him, and it should have. I repeat he cannot be measured by the standard measure. You will have to ask him about the rest of it. He is our companion; there should be no misunderstanding between us or mutual mistrust and fear. Let us return to camp. Help me with the wood.’

‘Geralt?’

‘I’m listening, Dandelion.’

‘If... Well, I was wondering, theoretically... If...’

‘I honestly don’t know,’ he replied sincerely. ‘I don’t know if I could kill him. I would rather not have to try.’

\* \* \*

Dandelion took the witcher’s advice to heart and decided to clarify the ambiguities and dispel the doubts. He did so as soon as they set out on their journey. He did so with his characteristic tact.

‘Milva!’ he cried out suddenly while riding, squinting at the vampire. ‘You should move ahead with your bow and see if your arrows can take down a deer or a stag. I’ve had enough, by the plague, of eating blackberries and mushrooms, and fish and clams from the river. I could eat real meat for a change. What do you say, Regis?’

‘What?’ the vampire said raising his head from the neck of his horse.

‘Meat!’ repeated the poet emphatically. ‘I’m encouraging Milva to hunt something. Do you eat fresh meat?’

‘I eat it.’

‘And blood, do you drink fresh blood?’

‘Blood?’ Regis swallowed. ‘No. In the case of blood, no. But if you fancy it, do not hesitate.’

Geralt, Milva and Cahir observed the exchange in silence, as heavy as a tomb.

‘I know what you are doing, Dandelion,’ Regis said slowly. ‘And let me reassure you. I’m a vampire, yes. But I do not drink blood.’

The silence was as heavy as lead. But Dandelion being Dandelion did not remain silent.

‘Maybe you misunderstood me,’ he said with apparently blithely. ‘I do not refer...’

‘I do not drink blood,’ Regis interrupted. ‘For a long time now. I lost the habit.’

‘How is it that you lost the habit?’

‘The usual way.’

‘I really don’t understand...’

‘Sorry, it is a personal matter.’

‘But...’

‘Dandelion,’ the Witcher could not stand it anymore and turned in his saddle. ‘Regis has just told you to fuck off. He just put it politely. Be courteous and finally close your mouth.’

\* \* \*

However, the seeds of uncertainty and insecurity had been planted. When they stopped for the night, the atmosphere was still heavy and tense and was not even lightened by Milva who had caught a fat, river goose, weighing nearly eight pounds. They covered it in mud, roasted and ate it, chewing on the bones and not leaving even the smallest crumb. Their hunger was sated but the anxiety remained. The conversation curdled despite Dandelion’s titanic efforts. The talk of the poet became a monologue, which even he finally noticed and shut up. Only the sound of the horses chewing hay disturbed the silence that surrounded the fire like a cemetery.

Despite the late hour, no one seemed inclined to go to sleep. Milva heated water in a pot hung over the fire and used the steam to straighten the fletching on her arrows that were wrinkled. Cahir was repairing a broken boot buckle. Geralt was carving a stick. And Regis ran his eyes over each of them in order.

‘Well, well,’ He said finally. ‘I see that this is inevitable. It seems that I should have explained some things to you a long time ago...’

‘Nobody is forcing you,’ Geralt threw a long and carefully carved piece of wood into the fire and raised his head. ‘I do not need your explanations. I’m the old-fashioned type, when someone extends their hand to me; I accept them as a companion and that means more to me than a contract signed in the presence of a notary.’



‘I too am old-fashioned.’ Cahir said, still bent over his boot.

‘I do not know there was a new fashion,’ Milva said dryly, placing another arrow in the steam the rose from the pot.

‘Do not worry about Dandelion’s chatter,’ added the witcher. ‘He doesn’t. You do not need to confide or to explain. We also don’t need to confide in you.’

‘I suppose, however,’ the vampire smiled slightly, ‘you will hear what I need to say without being forced. I feel the need to be sincere with the people to whom I have extended my hand and accepted as companions.’

This time no one spoke.

‘I’ll begin by saying,’ he said after a moment’s hesitation, ‘that the fears surrounding my vampire nature are completely unfounded. I will not throw myself onto anybody at night and sink my teeth into their neck while they sleep. And it is not only my companions to whom I have a relationship with, it is all others. I do not drink blood. Never. I weaned myself off of it when it became a problem for me. A serious problem, that was not easy to solve.’

‘The problem,’ he took a moment, ‘emerged and took on all the characteristics on a truly bad textbook, early in my younger years, I loved ... hmmm ... to party in good company, moreover, I was not different in this respect from most of my peers. You know how it is when you’re young. But among you there is a system of prohibitions and restrictions – parental authority, guardians, superiors and elders, and finally, custom. Among us there is not. Young people have complete freedom and were using it. I created my own behavioural patterns, stupid, of course, truly youthful stupidity. “You don’t drink? What kind of vampire are you? He does not drink? Do not invite him, he’ll spoil the fun!” I did not want to spoil the fun and the possible loss of social acceptance frightened me. So I partied. Revelry and playfulness, libation and drunkenness, every full moon we flew to a village and we drank until full. The quality was disgusting, the worst kind of ... liquid. We did not care who we drank from as long as they was ... haemoglobin ... without blood there was no fun! A vampire did not have boldness if he wouldn’t drink.’

Regis was silent, engulfed in thought. Nobody said anything. Geralt felt terrible that he wanted a drink.

‘Each time I became more savage,’ the vampire continued. ‘And as time went on I was getting worse. Sometimes when we went on a spree we did not return to the crypt for three nights. A ridiculous amount of liquid one time ... made me lose control, which did not hamper the party. But friends, being friends. Some friends tried to caution moderation so I insulted them. Others urged me from the crypt to go carousing, as well as offering ... objects. They laughed at my expense.’

Milva, who was still occupied in fixing the deformed arrows, muttered angrily. Cahir finished fixing his boots and gave the impression that he was sleeping.

‘Later,’ Regis went on, ‘I started developing alarming symptoms. The fun and companionship started to play a secondary role. I noticed that I could do without them. What became important to me was the just the blood.’

‘Did you feel too bad to look in the Mirror?’ Dandelion asked.

‘I don’t reflect in mirrors.’ Regis said calmly.

He was silent for a while.

‘I met a certain ... vampire. It could have been – and probably was – something serious. I stopped losing control. But not for long. She left me and I began to drink even more. Disappointment and grief, as you know, is a great alibi. I was

looking for justification for my behaviour, and it was the perfect excuse. Everyone seemed to understand. Even I thought I understood. And I matched the theory to practice. Am I boring you? I won't be much longer. I began at last to do things intolerable, totally unacceptable such as no vampire does. I started to fly while intoxicated. One night the boys sent me to a village after blood and I passed a girl who had gone to the well for water and struck a wall and was knocked unconscious ... The peasants almost killed me, luckily they did not know how. They pierced me with stakes, cut off my head, sprinkled holy water on me and buried me. Can you imagine how I felt when I woke up?"

'I can imagine,' Milva said looking at an arrow. Everyone looked at her strangely. The Archer cleared her throat and turned her head. Regis smiled slightly.

'I am finishing,' he said. 'In the grave I had enough time to reflect on things ...'

'Enough?' Geralt asked. 'How much?'

Regis looked at him.

'Professional curiosity? Approximately fifty years. When I had regenerated, I decided to get myself together. It was not easy but I managed too. Since then, I do not drink.'

'Nothing?' Dandelion said with curiosity, 'Nothing? Never? But if ...'

'Dandelion,' Geralt raised his eyebrows slightly. 'Control yourself. And think, in silence.'

'Sorry,' grunted the poet.

'Don't apologize,' the vampire said in a conciliatory tone, 'And you Geralt, don't rebuke him. I understand the curiosity. I or it is better to say, me and my myth, embody all the human fears. It is difficult to ask a man to cut through his fears. Fear plays a part in the human psyche that is no less important than other emotional states. A psyche devoid of fear is a cripple psyche.'

'Imagine,' Dandelion said, recovering his composure, 'that I woke up without fear. Would I be a cripple?'

Geralt for a moment thought that Regis would show his teeth and cure Dandelion of his putative disability, but he was wrong. The vampire had no inclination for theatrical gestures.

'I have spoken of fears rooted in the consciousness and the subconscious,' he said quietly. 'Do not be bothered by the metaphor, but the crow is not afraid of the coat and hat hanging on a stick, when it settles on it in apprehension. But when the wind stirs the fear, the crow will react by fleeing.'

'The behaviour of the crow explains the struggle for life.' Cahir pointed out from the darkness.

'The crow is smart,' Milva snorted. 'It is not afraid of a straw man, but real men, because men throw stones and shoot arrows.'

'Self-preservation,' said Geralt, 'is inherent in all living things, crows and people. Thank you for the explanation, Regis, we accept them completely. But don't go digging into the depths of the human subconscious. Milva is right. The reasons why people panic at the sight of a vampire, are not irrational, but the result of a desire to survive.'

‘We hear the words of a specialist,’ the vampire said bowing slightly in his direction. ‘A professional, with a professional’s pride, who will not take money to fight with imaginary fears. The self-respecting Witcher is only hired to fight the evil that is real and a direct threat. A professional who will explain to us why a vampire is a greater evil than a dragon or a wolf. At the end of the day, the latter also have fangs.’

‘Maybe it is because the latter two use their fangs out of hunger and self-defence, never for the sake of fun when they want to breaking the ice with friends or overcoming shyness towards the opposite sex?’

‘People do not know about it,’ Regis stopped him, ‘you have known for a long time and the rest of the company only just found out. The remaining majority are deeply convinced that vampires do not play with, but feed on blood, only the blood of humans. Blood is a life giving fluid; its loss is associated with the weakening of the body and vitality. Consider the following – a creature who sheds our blood is our mortal enemy. A creature that feeds on our blood to live is monster that is doubly evil. It increases its own vitality at the expense of our own and if their species flourish, we will die. Finally, such a creature is disgusting, because even though we know the value of life-giving blood, it is repugnant to us. Would any of you drink blood? I doubt it. And some people become dizzy and faint just at the sight of blood. In some communities for a few days a month, women are considered unclear and isolated ...’

‘I think among the barbarians,’ Cahir interrupted, ‘And fainting at the sight of blood, is probably only among you Nordlings.’

‘We have strayed,’ the Witcher raised his head, ‘we are deviating from the straight path into the thicket of dubious philosophy. Do you think, Regis that people would react differently if they knew that you were treating them, not as prey, but as a pub? Where do you see irrational fears? Vampire suck blood from humans, that fact cannot be undermined. Humans who are treated by vampires like demijohns of vodka, lose strength. A man, so to speak, drained also loses vitality. And generally dies. Sorry, but the fear of death cannot be packaged into the same sack as losing blood. Menstrual or other.’

‘You talk so cleverly in circles that my head is spinning,’ Milva snorted. ‘And yet with all this wisdom you still revolve around to what is under a woman’s skirt. Fucking philosophers.’

‘Let us leave for a moment the symbolism of blood,’ said Regis. ‘Because the myths actually have some justification in facts. Let’s focus on myths, grounded in fact that they don’t have, and yet are widespread. After all, everyone knows that being bitten by a vampire, if you survive, makes you become a vampire. True?’

‘True,’ Dandelion said. ‘There was a ballad ...’

‘Do you know basic arithmetic?’

‘I studied all seven of the liberal arts. And I received a degree summa cum laude.’

‘In your world, after the Conjunction of the Spheres there were about two thousand two hundred higher vampires. The total abstainers, such as I am now, far outweigh the number of those who drink to excess – as I once did. So on average every vampire drinks at every full moon, because the full moon to us is a celebration, which we used to drink ... Let’s bring this to a human calendar and accept that there are twelve full moons in the year that leaves us with a theoretical figure of fourteen thousand people bitten each year. Since the Conjunction, again counting by your reckoning of time, it has been about fifteen hundred years. From the result of simple multiplication it shows that at present there should theoretically exist in your world twenty-one million six hundred vampires. However the increase in vampires would have to increase geometric rather than arithmetic ...’

‘Enough,’ Dandelion sighed. ‘I have no abacus, but I can imagine the number. Or rather, I cannot imagine. This means that the contagion of vampirism is nonsense and fantasy.’

‘Thank you,’ Regis bowed. ‘Moving onto the next myth, which states – the vampire is a human being who died, but not quite. In the grave it does not rot, nor turn to dust. It lies in the grave fresh and ruddy, ready climb out and go out biting. Where does this myth come from, if not from your subconscious and irrational aversion to the venerable dead? You remember your dead and honour their memory, you dream of immortality, in your myths and legends every now and again someone is raised from the dead. But if you late venerable grandfather suddenly left his tomb and asked you for a beer, a panic would arise. And no wonder. The body, in which life has ceased to exist, is subjected to decay, rotting and smells. The immortal spirit, an indispensable element of you myths, abandons the stinking carrion in disgust and flies away. It is clean and you can safely worship it. But imagine a disgusting spirit that doesn’t fly away, does not leave the corpse. It is disgusting and unnatural! The living dead are for you disgusting anomalies. Some moron even coined the term “undead” which we so eagerly bestow.’

‘People,’ Geralt smiled slightly, ‘as a race are primitive and superstitious. It is difficult for them to understand and properly term a being that rises, even though their head had been cut off and had been buried underground for fifty years.’

‘They cannot?’ the mockery did not affect the vampire. ‘People can regenerate hair, skin, nails, but they are unable to accept the fact that there are races that are in this respect far superior. This inability does not stem from being primitive. On the contrary, it comes from the self-centeredness and conviction of their own perfection. Something that is more perfect than you must be a disgusting aberration. And disgusting aberrations shall be handed down as myths. For sociological purposes.’

‘I understand shit all of this,’ Milva said calmly, brushing aside hair from her forehead with the shaft of an arrow. ‘But what I do understand is that you talk about fairy tales and fables, even some that I know. Even though I’m just a silly girl from the forest. But what amazes me most about you Regis, is that you don’t have any fear of the sun. In fairy tales when a vampire is hit by the sun light they turn to ashes. Is this also just a fable?’

‘As most do,’ confirmed Regis, ‘you believe that a vampire is only dangerous at night, and when the first rays of the sun touch him he turns to ash. The basis of this myth, which was probably already being told by your ancestors around the camp fires, lies in the sun, or rather, your love for the heat and the daily rhythm that daytime activities require. For you the night is cold, dark, evil, menacing and full of dangers; however the sunrise means a new victory in the struggle for survival, a new day, the continuation of existence. Sunlight brings clarity and warmth, the sun’s rays give life and must bring destruction to your monstrous enemies. Vampires crumble to ash, trolls are turned to stone, the werewolf loses its wolf form and the goblin runs to its cave covering its eyes. The nocturnal beasts return to their lairs and stop threatening you. Until sunset, the world belongs to you. I repeat and emphasize – the myth was created by the ancient camp fires. Today it is indeed a mere myth, because in your homes you have heating and light – you’ve mastered the night. We, higher vampires, have also wandered away from our traditional crypts. We have mastered the day. The analogy is complete. Are you satisfied with the explanation, Milva?’

‘Not much,’ The Archer retrieved another arrow. ‘But I think I understand. I am learning. Sociology, myths, werewolves. They teach this in schools with a cane. With you it is more delightful. My head hurts, but at least my ass doesn’t.’

‘One thing is not in doubt and is easy to see’ said Dandelion. ‘The rays of the sun do not turn you to ash, Regis, the sun’s heat affects you about as much as that horseshoe. The one you pulled from the fire with your bare hand. Going back to your analogy, however, for us humans, the day will always be the natural time of activity and the night the natural time to sleep. This is our physical makeup, for example, in the day we see better than at night. The exception is Geralt, who see just as well in both of them, but he is a mutant. For vampires is it also a case of mutation?’

‘You could say that,’ accepted Regis. ‘Although I believe that mutation spread over a sufficiently long period ceases being a mutation and becomes evolution. But what you said about the physical structure is relevant. Adapting to the sunlight for us was an unpleasant necessity. To survive we had to become similar in that respect to people. Mimicry, I would say. It did have its consequences. We used the metaphor – I’m going to bed sick.’

‘What?’

‘There are grounds to think that sunlight is deadly in the long run. There are theories that in about five thousand

years, counting modestly, this world will only be inhabited by nocturnal creatures.'

'I'm glad, that I will not live to see it,' Cahir sighed, and then yawned heavily. 'I don't know about you, but these conversations about daily activities remind me that I need to sleep.'

'Me too,' the Witcher stretched. 'The murderous sun will be rising in a few hours. But before then we need sleep ... Regis, in the context of school and learning, dispel yet another myth about vampires. Because I bet that you still have some.'

'Yes,' the vampire nodded. 'Just one. Last but equally important. It is a myth which you have dictated your sexual phobias.'

Cahir snorted softly.

'I have left this myth until the end,' Regis measured him with his eyes, 'and I myself, would tactfully not have touched on it had Geralt not challenged me, so I won't spare you. In Humans the strongest cause of anxiety is sexual. The virgin fainting in the embrace of the bloodsucking vampire, or the youngster exposed to the insolent mouth of the vampire, wandering over their naked body. As you can imagine. Oral rape. The vampire paralyzes its victim with fear and forces her to perform oral sex. Or rather a hideous parody of oral sex. And as this sex excludes procreation, it is detestable.'

'Speak for yourself.' The Witcher muttered.

'An act that does not lead to procreation but to pleasure and death,' continued Regis. 'You have made into an evil myth. Many men and women secretly want something similar, and yet are reluctant to provide their partner with anything but the generally accepted sexual stereotype. So we do it for you in this vampire mythology and thus it grows into a fascinating symbol of evil.'

'Did I not tell you?' Milva cried at the same moment that Regis had finished explaining to Dandelion. 'It's always the same! They begin with wisdom and always end up between a girl's legs!'

\* \* \*

The cries of the cranes gradually disappeared into the distance.

*The next day, the Witcher recalled, in a much improved mood we set out on the trail. And then, quite unexpectedly the war caught us again.*

\* \* \*

They travel through deep forests and uninhabitable regions without strategic importance, unattractive to invaders. Although Nilfgaard was near, separated only by the Yaruga River, they did not anticipate meeting enemy forces. The greater was their surprise.

The war here, appeared less spectacular than in Brugge and Sodden, where at night the horizon glowed with fire and during the day black plumes of smoke covered the sky. Here in Angren, it was not so spectacular. It was worse. Suddenly they saw a flock of crows, croaking and wildly circling above the forest and they soon came upon the corpses. Although stripped of their clothes it was impossible to identify the bodies which bore clear signs of very violent deaths. These people had been killed in battle. And not only that. Most of the corpses were lying in the bushes, but some were gruesomely mutilated, hung by the arms or legs on tree branches, or their charred forms had been fixed to stakes. All of them stank. All of Angren suddenly began to smell with the stench of foul and hideous barbarity.

It did not take long until they had to hide in the thickets and brush because to the right and left, ahead and behind the earth resounded with the beating hooves of cavalry horses, and more and more troops passed their hiding place, raising clouds of dust.

\* \* \*

‘Again,’ Dandelion shook his head. ‘Again, we do not know who is fighting whom and why. Again, we do not know who is behind us and who is ahead of us, or who is in the direction we are going. Who is on the offensive, and who is in retreat. Let the plague take it all! I don’t remember if I told you this already, but I say that war is always reminiscent of a brothel on fire...’

‘You’ve told us,’ interrupted Geralt, ‘a few hundred times.’

‘Why are they fighting here?’ the Poet spat. ‘Over the junipers and strawberries? Because this country does not have anything else!’

‘Among the dead lying in the bushes,’ said Milva, ‘were elves. Scoia’tael commandos travel through here, they have always done so. The trails here lead from Dol Blathanna and the Blue Mountains and stretch through to Temeria. Someone is trying to block the trails, I think.’

‘It is not impossible,’ Regis admitted, ‘that the Temerian army is hunting for Squirrels here. But I think there are too many soldiers around here. I suspect that the Nilfgaardians have finally crossed the Yaruga.’

‘That’s what I suspect,’ the Witcher grimaced slightly, looking at Cahir’s stony face. ‘The corpses we saw this morning, showed signs of the Nilfgaardian method of warfare.’

‘Some others are no better.’ Milva growled, coming to the young Nilfgaardians defence. ‘And do not look askance at Cahir, for both of you share the same fate. To him, death if he falls under the feet of the Black ones, and you have recently just escaped a Temerian noose. It is therefore vain to dwell on which army is in front of us or behind, it doesn’t matter what colours they wear. They are now all our enemies.’

‘You are right.’

\* \* \*

‘Interesting,’ Dandelion said the next day while they were in the bushes waiting for more riders to pass. ‘The army

gallops through the woods and the earth rumbles, but down there near the Yaruga I can hear axes. Woodcutters cut down the forest as if nothing has happened. Do you hear?’

‘This may not be woodcutters,’ Cahir pondered. ‘May be it is also the army? Some sappers?’

‘No it’s woodcutters,’ Regis said. ‘Clearly, nothing can stop the exploitation of Angren’s gold.’

‘What gold?’

‘Look at the trees,’ the vampire once again assumed the tone of the superior all-knowing sage of the uneducated children. A tone that he used quite often, which annoyed Geralt.

‘These trees,’ Regis repeated, ‘cedars, oaks and Angren pines. They are extremely valuable material. On the banks you can see the woodcutter’s camps; from there the logs are transported downstream. Everywhere they are felling trees and axes clatter day and night. The war, which we see and hear, starts to make sense. Nilfgaard, as you know, has conquered the mouth of the Yaruga, Cintra, Verden and Upper Sodden. At this time, it is also likely Brugge and part of Lower Sodden. This means that that wood is being floated down from Angren to the imperial sawmills and shipyards. The Northern Kingdoms are trying to stop the transport, on the other hand the Nilfgaardians are interested in ensuring the logging and transport continues undisturbed. ‘

‘And we, as usual, are out of luck,’ Dandelion nodded. ‘Because we need to get to Caed Dhu, and the path leads straight through Angren, the focus of the timber wars. Damn, is there another way?’

\* \* \*

*The same question, recalled the Witcher, staring at the sun setting over the Yaruga, I asked Regis once the thud of hooves ceased in the distance and we were finally able to continue on our way.*

\* \* \*

‘Another way to Caed Dhu?’ the vampire looked thoughtful. ‘To avoid the armies, but also not go through the hills? Yes, there is a way. It is not very comfortable or safe. And it is longer. But I guarantee you that we will not find any armies there.’

‘Speak.’

‘We turn south and try and cross the depression in the meandering Yaruga. To Ysgith. Do you know about Ysgith, Witcher?’

‘I know.’

‘Have you ever gone through there?’

‘Yes.’

‘There is serenity in your voice,’ the vampire cleared his throat, ‘that seems to indicate that you accept the idea. Well, there are five of us, including a Witcher, a warrior and an archer. Experience, two swords and a bow. Not enough to face a Nilfgaardian patrol, but it should suffice for Ysgith.’

*Ysgith*, thought the Witcher. *Thirty square miles of swamps and marshes, dotted with lakes and eyelets.* Where on the shores of the lakes, strange trees grow. Some have trunks covered with scales at the base which are bulbous and thin as they go upwards, towards a flat and dense crown. Others are small and crooked, twisted piles sitting on octopus-like roots and from their bare limbs hang beards of moss and lichen. The lichen is constantly moving, but not from the wind, but the poisonous marsh gas. Ysgith, or as it is more accurately known by its other name “Harrier”.

And among the mud, swamps, pond and lagoons in duckweed-covered rivers and wetland vegetation, it is seething with life. It is not only inhabited by beavers, frogs, turtles and waterfowl. Ysgith is full of wild beasts far more dangerous, armed with claws, tentacles and prehensile limbs, with which they catch, maim, drown and tear apart. These creatures are so many that no one has ever managed to get to know and classify them all. Not even the witchers. He himself had seldom hunted in Ysgith and in general the Lower Angren.

The country was sparsely populated; the few people who lived on the edges of the swamp were used to the monsters and treated them as landscape elements. They respected them, and they seldom thought of hiring a witcher to fight them. Rarely, but not never. Geralt, therefore knew Ysgith and its horrors. *Two swords and a bow*, the thought. *And my experience and training as a witcher. Going as a group should work. Especially if I lead in the forefront and keep an eye on everything. On rotten trunks, piles of weeds, bushes, clumps of grass, plants, even orchids. Because in Ysgith sometimes what looks like a normal orchid can actually turn out to be a poisonous crab spider. Dandelion will need to be watched to make sure he doesn't touch anything. There are plenty of plants that would like to supplement their diets with pieces of meat. Those whose branches that come in contact with the skin work as effectively as crab spider venom. And we must not forget the swamp gas. A poisonous vapour. We'll have to think about something to cover the mouth and nose.*

‘Well?’ Regis pulled him from his thoughts. ‘Do you agree?’

‘I agree. Let's go.’

\* \* \*

*Something prompted me then, the Witcher recalled, not to say anything to the rest of the company about the idea of crossing Ysgith. And to not even ask Regis about it. Not even I know why. Today when everything is fucked up, I could persuade myself that I paid attention to the behaviour of Milva. To the problems that she had. To her obvious symptoms. But it would not be true. I noticed nothing, and what I did noticed, I underestimated. Like an idiot. And we kept heading east, hesitating in entering the swamps.*

*On the on the hand, it is well that we did hesitate*, he thought taking the sword and running his thumb down the metal, sharp as a razor blade. *If we had entered Ysgith immediately, today I would not have this weapon.*



\* \* \*

Since dawn they had not seen or heard any troops. Milva led the way, far ahead of the rest of the company. Regis, Dandelion and Cahir talked.

‘I hope your druids will help in the matter of Ciri,’ worried the poet. ‘I meet druids occasionally, and believe me, they are usually recluses. They might not want to talk to us, let alone use magic.’

‘Regis,’ reminded the Witcher, ‘knows someone among those of Caed Dhu.’

‘And this knowledge doesn’t go back three or four hundred years?’

‘It is far more recent,’ the vampire said with an enigmatic smile. ‘In any case, druids are long-lived. They constantly stay out in the air, among the primal and unspoiled nature, and this has great influences on their health. Breathe a lung full of air, Dandelion, fill your lungs with forest air, and you’ll also be healthy.’

‘From this forest air,’ Dandelion said with a sneer, ‘I’m going to start growing hair on my body, the plague. At night I dream of taverns, beer and bathrooms. And the primal nature can go to the primal devil, and I also doubt its beneficial influence on health, especially mental. The mentioned druids are the best example, because they are bizarre and unusual. They are absolutely crazy in regards to nature and its defence. Several times I have been there when they have delivered petitions to rulers, demanding a ban on hunting, cutting down trees, don’t throw rubbish into the rivers and similar nonsense. And the height of stupidity was when a delegate submitted himself wearing only mistletoe to King Ethain of Cidaris. I was there then...’

‘What did he want?’ Geralt said with interest.

‘Cidaris, as you know, is one of the kingdoms in which the majority of the population make a living from fishing. The druid demanded that the king order the fishermen to use nets with a large mesh and to strictly punish those who would fish with nets smaller than those ordered. Ethain’s jaw dropped when the man in mistletoe made it clear that this was the only way to protect the fish stock from depletion. The king led him to the terrace, and showed him the sea and told how his bravest sailor once sailed westward for two months and came back because they ran out of fresh water on the ship and on the horizon there was no sign of land. Did he, he asked the druid, imagine that the stocks could be exhausted from such a sea? Of course, confirmed the druid in mistletoe, fishing will be the last chance of mankind to obtain food from nature, there will come a time when the fish run out and there is hunger in the eyes of the people. It is therefore necessary to fish with nets made with larger meshes, to catch the larger fish and protect the smaller fry. Ethain asked the druid, when, according to the druid, will this terrible time of hunger come, and the druid replied, not for two thousand years, according to their forecasts. The king dismissed him and politely asked him to come through here in a few thousand years and then he would think about it. The druid did not understand the joke and began to object, so they threw him out of town.’

‘All druids are alike,’ confirmed Cahir. ‘We, the Nilfgaardians...’

‘I gotcha!’ Dandelion cried triumphantly. ‘We, the Nilfgaardians! Only yesterday, when I called you a Nilfgaardian you jumped like you had been stung by a wasp. See if you can decide, Cahir, who you are.’

‘To you,’ Cahir shrugged, ‘I am a Nilfgaardian, and I can see I’m not going to convince you otherwise. However, to be accurate, know that such a name in the Empire is only entitled to the indigenous inhabitants of the capital and the surrounding area, located along the lower basin of the Alba. My family comes from Vicovaro and therefore...’

‘Shut your mouth!’ Milva ordered sharply with little courtesy, who was at the forefront. Everyone immediately fell silent and halted the horses, as they had been taught when the girl saw, heard or felt not only danger, but also something

they could eat if it was possible to approach it and hit it with an arrow. Milva indeed prepared her bow, but jumped from the saddle. So she was not hunting. Geralt approached with caution.

‘Smoke,’ she said tersely.

‘I don’t see it.’

‘Use your nose.’

The Archer’s sense of smell was not mistaken, but the smell of smoke was barely noticeable. It could not be smoke from a fire or conflagration. *This smoke*, Geralt thought, *smells nice*. It came from a fire, which was baking something.

‘Will we avoid it?’ Milva asked softly.

‘First let’s take a look,’ he said getting off his horse and handing the reins to Dandelion. ‘Better to know what we are avoiding. And who it is behind us. Come with me. The rest of you stay in your saddles. Be alert.’

In a thicket on the edge of the forest stretched a view of a hill with logs placed in piles around it. A fine ribbon of smoke rose from the logs. Geralt calmed down a bit – in sight nothing moved and between the logs was not enough space to be able to hide a large group. Milva noticed it to.

‘There are no horses,’ she whispered. ‘It is not the army. I’d guess woodcutters.’

‘Me too. But I’ll go check. Cover me.’

While approaching, carefully dodging between piles of tree trunk, he heard voices. He moved closer. And was greatly surprised. But his hearing did not deceive him.

‘Double clubs!’

‘Stack of diamonds!’

‘Screwed!’

‘Raise. Hearts! Oh m ...’

‘Ha, ha, ha! A jack and a runt! Before you take a good shit you have to mount a heap!’

‘I’ll put down the jack! Hey, Yazon, you have sunk like a duck’s ass!’

‘Why not put down the lady, you bastard? I picked up a spade ...’

The Witcher might have still remained cautious, after all Screwed could be played by many different people and many different people have the name Yazon. However, above the excited voices of the players was a well known hoarse croak.

‘Rrrraaaa ... motherfuckers!’

‘Greetings, boys,’ Geralt said as he came out from behind a pile of logs. ‘I’m glad to see you alive and healthy. Even with the parrot.’

‘Damn it!’ Zoltan Chivay dropped his cards in surprise, after which he jumped to his feet so suddenly that Field Marshal Duda, who was on his shoulder, flapped his wings and shrieked with terror. ‘The Witcher has found us! Or is he a mirage? Percival, do you see what I’m seeing?’

Percival Schuttenbach, Munro Bruys, Yazon Varda and Figgis Merluzzo surrounded Geralt and patted and hugged him. And when the rest of the company emerged from behind the piles of logs, the shouts of delight intensified accordingly.

‘Milva! Regis!’ Zoltan shouted, squeezing all. ‘Dandelion, alive, albeit with a bandage on his head! And what do you have to say about this melodramatic cliché? Life, is not poetry! And you know why? Because it is not subjected to criticism!’

‘And where is Caleb Stratton?’ Dandelion said looking around.

Zoltan and the other fell silent and suddenly became serious.

‘Caleb,’ the dwarf said at last, inhaling through his nose, ‘lies under the ground next to a birch tree, away from his beloved mountain peaks and coal. When we were caught by the Black ones at the Ina, he moved his feet too slowly and did not reach the forest ... They struck him in the head with a sword and when he fell they pierced him with pikes. Come now, do not be sad, we have already mourned, it is enough. Better to be happy. You however, escaped the riot in the camp. You have even increased the size of your company, I see.’

Cahir bowed slightly under the watchful gaze of the dwarf and said nothing.

‘Well, sit down,’ invited Zoltan. ‘We are roasting a lamb here. We found it a few days ago, lonely and sad, we gave it a good death, and it won’t die of hunger or end up in the clutches of a wolf, we were compassionate and slit her throat. Please sit down. And you, Regis, please come to this side for a moment and you to Geralt.’

Behind a pile of logs, two women were sitting. The younger of them was nursing a baby and she turned away shyly at seeing them approaching. Nearby, on the sand with a pair of children played a young girl with a bandage of dirty bandage on her hand. The witcher knew her at once and met her hazy, indifferent eyes.

‘We untied her from the wagon that was already burning,’ said the dwarf. ‘In the end the stubborn priest ended up like the one he hated so much. He underwent a baptism of fire. The flames burned the flesh of her hand. We have treated it the best that we could, smearing it with lard, but it somehow keeps filling with pus. Surgeon, if you could ...’

‘Immediately.’

When Regis went to unfold the dressing, the girl wailed, leaning back and covering her face with her good hand. Geralt came over to hold her, but the vampire restrained him with a gesture. He looked deeply into the eyes of the girl and she immediately calmed down. Her head fell slightly onto her chest. She did not even flinch when Regis carefully peeled off the dirty rags and rubbed her scorched arm with a strangely scented ointment.

Geralt turned his head and looked at the two women with the two children and then at the dwarf. Zoltan grunted.

‘The women,’ he explained in an undertone, ‘we found wandering here in the Angren. They were lost during their flight, they were alone, frightened and hungry, so we offered to accompany them. It just came out.’

‘It just came out,’ Geralt repeated, smiling slightly. ‘You are an incorrigible altruist, Zoltan Chivay.’

‘Every person is defective. You, you’re still looking to rush to a girl’s rescue.’

‘I still do. Although the issue is complicated.’

‘By this Nilfgaardian who used to follow you, but is now part of your company?’

‘Partially. Zoltan, where are the refugees? Who ran away? Away from the Nilfgaardians and the Squirrels?’

‘It is hard to guess. The kids do not know shit; the girls are not very talkative and are afraid of something. Blaspheme before them, and they turn red as beets like these ... Never mind. But we encountered other fugitives, woodcutters, from them we know that the Nilfgaard are prowling. Our old friends, from the incursion, who came from the west, from the other side of the Ina. But there are also reports of troops that came from the south. From beyond the Yaruga.’

‘And who are they fighting?’

‘This is a puzzle. The woodcutter spoke about an army, which is led by some White Queen. She is fighting the Black ones. Apparently she has taken her army to the other side of the Yaruga and carries fire and sword into imperial lands.’

‘Whose army is moving?’

‘I have no idea,’ Zoltan scratched his ear. ‘You know, every day hooves tread the path, but I do not ask them who they are. We hide in the bushes ...’

Regis interrupted the conversation, after finishing treating the girl’s burn.

‘The dressing must be changed daily,’ he said to the dwarf. ‘I’ll leave you with an ointment and something that does not stick to the burn.’

‘Thank you, Surgeon.’

‘The arm will heal,’ the vampire said quietly, staring at the witcher. ‘Over time the scar will disappear along with the young skin. Worse is what is happening in the head of this unfortunate. This is something my ointments cannot cure.’

Geralt was silent. The vampire wiped his hands with a rag.

‘Fate or curse,’ he said in a low voice. ‘To be able to perceive the disease in the blood, the essence of the disease but not be able to cure...’

‘True,’ sighed Zoltan, ‘dressing the skin is one thing, but if the brain is fucked up, you cannot do anything. Just be

caring and care for her... Thank you for your help, Surgeon. I see that you have also joined the company of the witcher.'

'It just came out.'

'Hmmm,' Zoltan stroked his beard. 'So then, what are your plans to find Ciri?'

'We are headed to the east, to Caed Dhu, to the Druid Circle. We hope the druids will help...'

'There is no help,' the girl sitting next to the piles of logs with a bandaged arm spoke in a loud and metallic voice. 'There is no help. Only blood. And a baptism of fire. The fire purifies. But also kills.'

Regis firmly grabbed the stunned Zoltan by the arm, and with a gesture ordered him to silence. Geralt, who knew about hypnotic trances, was silent and did not move.

'He who spills blood, and he who drank blood,' said the girl, without raising her head, 'will pay with blood. Three days will pass and one will die in the second, and then something will die in each. After a bit both will die, little by little... And when at last they collide with iron shoes and dry her tears, then what is left will die. Die, even that which never dies.'

'Speak,' Regis said quietly and gently. 'Tell us what you see.'

'Mist. A tower in the mist. This is the Tower of Swallows... On a lake, which is covered in ice.'

'What else do you see?'

'Mist.'

'What do you feel?'

'Pain...'

Regis did not have time to ask the next question. The girl shook her head and screamed wildly. When she raised her eyes there was indeed nothing in them but mist.

\* \* \*

*Zoltan, Geralt remembered, still running his fingers over the blade covered in runes, after this event acquired a new respect for Regis, he abandoned the familiar tone with which he used to address the surgeon. Under the request of Regis, they did not say a word about the strange event to the rest. The Witcher was not greatly affected by the event. He had seen similar trances and sometimes it was said that the talk of the hypnotized was not prophetic, but a simple repetition of one's thoughts and subconscious suggestions of the hypnotist. Admittedly, in this case it was not hypnosis, but the vampire's spell, and Geralt wondered what the girl would have drawn out of Regis's mind had the trance lasted longer.*

\* \* \*

For half a day they walked along with the dwarves and their protégés. Zoltan Chivay then stopped walking and took the Witcher aside.

‘We must separate,’ he said. ‘We have already made our decision, Geralt. To the north is Mahakam, the valley leads directly to the mountains. Enough adventure. We are returning to our own. Beneath Mount Carbon.’

‘I understand.’

‘I’m glad that you understand. I wish you luck, you and your company. A strange company, I dare to observe.’

‘They want to help me,’ the Witcher said quietly. ‘It is something new for me. So I have decided not to investigate their motives.’

‘Wise,’ Zoltan said as he removed from his back Sihil in its sheath, wrapped in goatskin. ‘Here, take it. Before our paths separate.’

‘Zoltan...’

‘Don’t talk, just take it. We will spend the war in the mountains seeing nothing but iron. But it would be nice to at times, over a beer, to mention that a Mahakam forged Sihil is wielded in good hands and for a good cause. There is no disgrace. And when you find the ones who wronged your Ciri, give them one for Caleb Stratton. And remember Zoltan Chivay and the dwarven forges.’

‘You can be assured,’ Geralt took the sword and buckled it across his back. ‘You can be assured that I will remember. In this lousy world, Zoltan, goodness, honesty and integrity are very memorable.’

‘You’re right,’ the dwarf squinted his eyes. ‘Therefore I will not forget you or the exiles from the clearing, or when Regis pulled the horseshoe from the fire. When it comes to reciprocity in this regard...’

He paused, coughed, cleared his throat and spat.

‘Geralt, we robbed a merchant in Dillingen. A wealthy man who had gained a fortune in the market. When he loaded his wagon with gold and jewels and left the city, we struck against him. He defended his assets like a lion and called for help, so we hit him on the head with a club a few times until he was calm and quiet. Remember the chest we were carrying in the wagon that we buried alongside the river? Indeed that was the stolen wealth. A thief’s loot, on which we planned to build our futures.’

‘Why are you telling me this Zoltan?’

‘Because to you, I have the feeling, appearances are not deceiving if played for too long. What you took to be good and noble proved to be vile and dishonest under a pretty normal mask. It is easy to deceive, witcher, because you do not ask for motives. But I will not deceive you. And do not look to the women and children; do not take the dwarf that stands before you to be honest and noble. Before you is a thief, a criminal and perhaps a murderer. Because I do not rule out the merchant we left in a ditch by the side of the road in Dillingen.’

They were silent for a long time, looking to the distant mountains covered in clouds to the north.

‘Goodbye, Zoltan,’ Geralt said finally. ‘It may be that the forces of whose existence I am slowly ceasing to doubt will still allow us to meet again. I wish it is so. I would like to introduce you to Ciri, and she would wish to meet you. But even if I do not succeed, know that I will not forget you. Farewell, dwarf.’

‘Can I give you a hand? A thief and a bandit?’

‘Without hesitation. Because I am no longer as easily fooled as I used to be. While I don’t question motives, I am slowly learning the art of looking beneath the masks.’

\* \* \*

Geralt waved Sihil across the path of a passing moth.

*After parting with Zoltan and his group, the Witcher recalled, we found a group of peasants wandering in the woods. Some fled at the sight of us, but Milva stopped a few, threatening them with her bow. The peasants, as it turned out, were, until recently, Nilfgaardian prisoners. They were being used to cut down cedars for the emperor, until a few days ago, when a detachment attacked the guards and released them. Now they were returning to their homes. Dandelion tried to determine who were these liberators and began a tenacious investigating,*

\* \* \*

‘The soldiers were in the White Queen’s service and fought against the Black ones! They said they are fighting behind the enemy like gorillas.’

‘Like what?’

‘Well, like I said. Like gorillas.’

‘Gorillas, damn it,’ Dandelion frowned and waved his hand. ‘Oh, people, people... I’m asking, what emblems were they were carrying?’

A peasant took a stick and scratched the shape of a rhombus into the dirt.

‘A diamond,’ said Dandelion versed in heraldry. ‘Not the Temerian lily, but the diamond. The emblem of Rivia. Interesting. For Rivia is a good two hundred miles away. Not to mention the fact that the armies of Rivia and Lyria were destroyed during the battles of Aldersburg and Dol Angra, and their country is now occupied by Nilfgaard... I do not understand!’

‘That’s normal,’ the Witcher cut him off. ‘Enough talk. It is time to go.’

\* \* \*

‘Ha!’ cried the Poet, who had been thinking about the information he extracted from the peasants the whole time. ‘I messed up! Not gorillas but guerrillas! Guerrillas! Behind enemy lines, you see?’

‘We realize,’ Cahir nodded. ‘In short, in this area is Nordling guerrilla units. Some of the branches probably formed from the remnant of the armies of Lyria and Rivia, broken in mid-July at Aldersberg. I heard of the battle when I was captured by the Squirrels.’

‘This is good news,’ Dandelion said, proud that he had managed to decipher the riddle of the gorillas. ‘Even if the peasants got the emblems wrong, we are not dealing with the army of Temeria. And I do not think the news has reached the Queen of Rivia about two spies that not long ago enigmatically escaped the gallows of Marshal Vissegerd. If we stumble upon these guerrillas, we will have a chance to talk to them.’

‘We can count on that,’ Geralt said. ‘But to be honest, I would prefer to avoid them altogether.’

‘But these people are your countrymen, Witcher,’ Regis said. ‘After all they call you, Geralt of Rivia.’

‘A mistake,’ he said in a cold voice. ‘I call myself that. The name gives my clients more confidence.’

‘I understand,’ the vampire smiled. ‘But why did you choose Rivia?’

‘I picked a stick, marked with different sounding names. This method was suggested to me by my teacher. He did not like the first few. Then I insisted on taking the name Geralt Roger Eric du Haute-Bellegarde. Vesemir considered this to be ridiculous, pretentious and stupid. It seems that he was right.’

Dandelion snorted loudly, and meaningfully, looking at both the vampire and the Nilfgaardian.

‘The many parts of my name,’ Regis said, looking slightly offended, ‘are my real name. And they are consistent with vampire tradition.’

‘Mine also,’ Cahir hastened to explain. ‘Mawr is the name of my mother and my grandfather’s name was Dyffryn. There is nothing ridiculous about it poet. And you yourself, out of curiosity, what is your name? Because Dandelion is an obvious pseudonym.’

‘I cannot reveal my true name,’ said the bard mysteriously, looking proudly down his nose. ‘It is too well known and famous.’

‘And mine,’ Milva suddenly joined in the conversation, after being grim and silent, ‘made me sick in the guts when I was named so I shortened it to: Maria, Mariquilla or Marieta. Well when one hears my name, they think they are free to slap my ass...’



\* \* \*

It was growing dark. The cranes had flown away, their trumpeting cries faded into the distance. The breeze blowing from the hills was silent. The witcher put Sihil back into its sheath.

*It was this morning. This morning. And at noon the problems began.*

*We could have known before, he thought. But who of us except Regis, knows these things? Yes, we all knew that Milva vomited at dawn. But sometimes we ate things that had all of our guts churning. Dandelion also vomited once or twice, and once Cahir got diarrhoea, and was terrified that he had caught dysentery. The fact that the girl now and again jumped from her saddle and ran off to the bushes, I took for a bladder infection...*

*How could I have been so stupid?*

*Regis, it seems, guessed the truth. But he remained silent. He stayed silent until he could no longer remain silent. When we stopped to camp in an abandoned shack, Milva took him into the forest, talking with him for a long time and often loudly. The vampire came out of the forest alone. Boiled some water and mixed some herbs, then suddenly called us all to the hut. He began bluntly, with his professor's voice.*

\* \* \*

‘I appeal to all,’ said Regis. ‘We are a team, and so we assume mutual responsibility. Nothing changes the fact that among us there is one who bears the highest responsibility. Directly, so to speak.’

‘Express yourself more clearly, damn it!’ snapped Dandelion. ‘Team, responsibility...What is wrong with Milva? What is this disease?’

‘This is not a disease,’ Cahir said quietly.

‘At least not in the strict sense of the word,’ confirmed Regis. ‘The girl is pregnant.’

Cahir nodded as a sign that he had guessed. Dandelion was dumbfounded. Geralt bit his lip.

‘In which month?’

‘She refused, fairly impolitely, to give me a date, including the date of her last menstrual cycle. But I know this. This will be the tenth week.’

‘So forget your pathetic appeal to direct the responsibility,’ Geralt said grimly, ‘at any of us. If you had any doubts in this respect, this dispels them. But you had a right to speak of collective responsibility. She is now with us. Suddenly we all have to assume the role of husbands and fathers. We listen in suspense to what the doctor has to say.’

‘A good, regular diet,’ Regis began enumerating. ‘No stress. Healthy sleep. And soon she will need to stop riding a horse.’

Everyone was silent for a long time.

‘We understand,’ Dandelion said finally. ‘We have a problem, gentlemen, husbands and fathers.’

‘More than you think,’ said the vampire. ‘Or less. Everything depends on your point of view.’

‘I don’t understand.’

‘Well, you should,’ murmured Cahir.

‘She demanded,’ Regis said, ‘that I prepare her a strong and effective... medication. She considers this to be the remedy to her problem. She is determined.’

‘Did you give it to her?’

Regis smiled.

‘Without the agreement of the other fathers?’

‘The medicine that she is asking for,’ Cahir said quietly, ‘is not a miracle cure. I have three sisters; I know what I’m talking about. She seems to think that she will drink the decoction and the next day will continue to ride with us on our journey. This is not so. It will be at least ten days before she can even dream about sitting on a horse. Before you give her the medicine, Regis, you have to tell her. And you can only give her the medicine when we can find her a bed. A clean bed.’

‘I understand,’ Regis nodded. ‘One vote in favour. And you, Geralt?’

‘What about me?’

‘My lords,’ the vampire fixed them with his dark eyes. ‘Do not pretend you do not understand.’

‘In Nilfgaard,’ Cahir said, blushing and lowering his head, ‘such matters are determined solely by the woman. Nobody has the right to influence her decision. Regis said that Milva is determined to take the... medicine. Therefore I think of this fact as accomplished. And the consequences of this fact. But I am a foreigner and not familiar with... I should not have spoken at all. Forgive me.’

‘For what?’ the troubadour said with surprise. ‘Do you think of us as savages, Nilfgaardian? As primitive tribes, adhering to shamanic taboo? It is obvious that only a woman could make such a decision, it is their inherent right! If Milva decides to...’

‘Shut up, Dandelion,’ the Witcher growled. ‘Be so kind as to shut up.’

‘Do you believe otherwise?’ the poet raised his voice. ‘Would you forbid...’

‘Shut up, damn it, because I will not vouch for myself! Regis, I get the feeling you are conducting a poll between us, why? You’re the doctor. The measure which she asks for ... Yes, measure because I don’t think the term medicine is

suitable here ... Only you can prepare the measure and give it to her. And you will do so when asked again. Do not refuse.'

'The measure has already been prepared,' Regis held up a small bottle of dark glass. 'If she asks again, I will not refuse. If she asks again.'

'So what is this? About our unanimity? The universal consent? What are you waiting for?'

'You know what this is about,' said the vampire. 'You feel exactly as I do. But since you asked, I will answer. Yes, Geralt, that is what I need, and it is not me waiting for something.'

'Can you speak more clearly?'

'No, Dandelion,' said the vampire. 'I cannot be clearer. Especially since there is no need too. Right, Geralt?'

'It is true,' the Witcher dropped his forehead into his hands. 'Yes, damn it, it's true. But why are you looking to me? I've got to do this? I can't do it. I can't. I am not suitable for this role ... Not at all, do you understand?'

'No,' Dandelion interjected. 'I do not understand at all. Cahir? Do you understand?'

'Yes' he said slowly. 'I think so.'

'Aha,' the troubadour nodded. 'Aha. Geralt understands, Cahir think he understands. And when I ask for an explanation you first order me to shut up, and then I get told there is no need to understand. Thank you. I've spent twenty years in the service of poetry, long enough to know that there are things that one understands immediately, even without words, or they will never understand.'

The vampire smiled.

'I do not know anyone,' he said, 'who could have put it more beautifully.'

\* \* \*

It was completely dark. The witcher stood up.

*You only die once, he thought. There is no escape. There is no more waiting. I have to do this and that's it.*

\* \* \*

Milva was sitting alone by a small fire that was kindled in the woods, in a hole left by an uprooted tree, out of the wind and away from the hut in which the rest of the company was spending the night. She did not move when she heard his footsteps. As if she was expecting him. She shifted to one side making room for him beside her on the tree trunk.

‘So what?’ she said dryly, without waiting for him to say anything. ‘Quite the mess, eh?’

He did not answer.

‘It’s not what you imagined when we set off, eh? When you accepted me into the company? Did you think that you would end up with such a stupid wench? I’ve heard you men talk about me saying that I’m a maiden but I may be useful. She is a healthy, strong, young woman who can pull a bow and sit in a saddle. And it appeared that I was no benefit, but a hindrance. Just a stupid girl with a swollen belly!’

‘Why did you come with me?’ he asked quietly. ‘Why did you not stay in Brokilon? If you knew ...’

‘I knew,’ she interrupted quickly. ‘After all, I was among the Dryads, and in a moment they know if a girl is pregnant. They knew sooner than myself... But I did not expect my weakness to catch up with me so soon. I thought there would be an opportunity to drink a decoction or find some herb, and nobody would notice...’

‘It’s not that simple.’

‘I know, the vampire told me. I have waited too long. Now it will not go smoothly...’

‘That’s not what I meant.’

‘The plague!’ she said finally. ‘And to think I had Dandelion in reserve! I noticed that he was keeping up, but he was still weak and not accustomed to trouble, so I watched, and I expected that he would not be able to continue on the way and have to turn back. I thought that if it was really bad, I’d go back with him... And here we are – Dandelion is fine and I...’

His voice broke suddenly. Geralt hugged her. And immediately knew that this was the gesture that she had been waiting for, that she so badly needed. The roughness and hardness of the archer from Brokilon had disappeared, instantly she was a trembling, delicate, softness of a frightened little girl. But it was she who broke the long silence.

‘You said... There in Brokilon. That I would need a shoulder... To lean on. That night I cried in the darkness... But you are here, I feel your shoulder. And yet I want to cry... Oh... Why do you tremble?’

‘Nothing. A memory.’

‘What will become of me?’

He did not answer. The question was not directed at him.

‘Father showed me once... In my country, there is a river inhabited by black wasps, that lay their eggs in living caterpillars. When the larvae hatch, they eat the insides... Now inside me there is a similar thing. In me, inside my stomach. Growing, growing and over time it will eat me alive...’

‘Milva...’

‘Maria. I’m Maria, not Milva. How can I kite? I’m a hen with an egg, I do not kite... Milva of the Dryads, who courageously goes onto the battlefield and pulls arrows from the bloody corpses, not feeling sorry for any of them, but feeling sorry for the good arrowheads! And if any of them were found to still be breathing, she would take a knife to their throat. For fate betrayed those humans and Milva laughed... Their blood cries out now. That blood, like a wasp’s venom, now eats Milva from the inside. Maria pays for Milva.’

He was silent. Mainly because he did not know what to say. The girl rested on his shoulder.

‘I was leading to Brokilon a commando squad,’ she said quietly. ‘It was June, the Sunday before the solstice. We were hunted, there was fighting, seven of us escaped – Five half elves, an Elf and me. We rode up the Ribbon for half a mile, but there were riders behind us, riders in front of us and all around were marshes and swamps... At night, we hid in the brushwood. The horses needed rest and so did we. Then the elf took off his clothes without a word and lay down. I froze; I didn’t know what to do... Leave, and pretend I didn’t see? The blood was pounding in my temples, and he suddenly said – “Who knows what tomorrow will bring? Who of us will cross the Ribbon and who of us will be cover by the earth? *En’ca Minne*.” Which means A little love. None, he said, can overcome death. Or fear. They were afraid, he was afraid, I was afraid... So I also stripped and lay down next to him on a blanket. When we first embraced, I gnashed my teeth, after all I was not ready, but frightened and dry... But he was wise and sensitive, even though he looked like an inexperienced youngster, he was still an elf... Wise... Sensitive... he smelled of moss, grass and roses... After a second I poured into his arms... happy... A little love? The devil knows to this day, what was love, and what was fear, but I’m sure the fear was greater... Because love was fake, though good, but fake, because it was like a show in a small theatre, if the actors have talent, you forget that they are pretending and think it’s true. But the fear was. Truly was.’

He remained silent.

‘But we cannot overcome death. At dawn, two of them were killed crossing the Ribbon. Of the three that survived, I have not seen more than once. My mother used to say that every girl always knows whose fruit she carries in her womb... But I do not know. Not even the names of those elves I found, so how do you know? Tell me, how?’

He was silent. He allowed his shoulder to speak for him.

‘And besides, all I want to know is if the vampire has prepared the remedy... You will have to leave me in a village... No, do not talk, be silent. I know how you are. You are not even able to get rid of this vicious mare to get another horse. You do not leave any one behind. But now you are going to. After the remedy, I will not be able to climb into the saddle. But I will heal, and I will follow you. Because I want you to find Ciri, witcher. With my help you can find and recover her.’

‘That is why you came with me,’ he said raising his head. ‘For this reason.’

She bowed her head.

‘That’s why you came with me,’ he repeated. ‘You wanted to help save someone else’s child. You wanted to pay. To pay off a debt and you were determined to do it at the time, when we left... Someone else’s child for you own. And I promised to help when you needed it. Milva, I cannot help you. Believe me, I cannot.’

This time she was silent. He no longer felt that he could be silent.

‘Then, in Brokilon, I contracted a debt with you and I promised you I would pay. It was not reasonable. I was a fool. You offered me help when I needed urgent help. There is no way to pay that debt. You cannot put a price on something priceless. Some say that absolutely everything in the world has its price. It is not true. Some things are priceless, and

you cannot pay. There is an easy way to recognize those things, because once lost, they are lost forever. I have lost many of those things. So today I cannot help you.'

'You just did,' she said calmly. 'You do not know how much. Now go, please. Leave me alone. Go away, witcher. Go away, before you shatter my world completely.'

\* \* \*

When they left at dawn, Milva was at the head of the company, calm and smiling. And riding behind her was Dandelion who began to strum his lute, while whistling a tune.

Regis and Geralt were bringing up the rear – at one point the vampire looked over at the witcher, smiled and nodded with approval and admiration. Without a word. He then pulled from his doctor's bag a small dark glass bottle and showed it to Geralt. He smiled again and threw it into the bushes.

The Witcher was silent.

\* \* \*

When they stopped to water the horses, Geralt pulled Regis aside into a secluded spot.

'Change of plans,' he announced dryly. 'We are not going through Ysgith.'

The vampire paused for a moment, staring at him with black eyes.

'If I didn't know,' he said at last, 'that as a witcher you only fear real danger, I would think that this is the unreasonable babble of the insane.'

'But you do know. So think more logically.'

'Certainly. However, I would draw your attention to two things. First, the condition in which Milva finds herself is not a disease or disability. She must of course take care of herself, but she is completely healthy and functional. I would say even more capable. The hormones...'

'Drop the mentoring tone,' Geralt interrupted. 'Because it is starting to get on my nerves.'

'That was the first thing,' reminded Regis, 'the second is that if Milva realises you are being overprotective, treating her like a plaything and sheltering her like an egg, she is simply going to get mad. And then she will get stressed, which is absolutely inappropriate for her. Geralt, I do not want to be a mentor. I want to be rational.'

He did not answer.

‘And there is a third issue,’ Regis said, his eyes still drilling into Geralt. ‘I do not push for Ysgith for a lust for adventure, but as a necessity. For the armies roam the hills and we must get to the Druids in Caed Dhu. It seems to me that this is urgent. That we want to get the information as quick as possible and be off to rescue Ciri.’

‘Yes,’ Geralt looked away. ‘It is important. I want to save and recover Ciri. Until recently I thought at any price. But not now. Not at this price. I will not pay this price; I do not agree to take this risk. We are not going through Ysgith.’

‘And the alternative?’

‘The opposite shore of the Yaruga. We will go up the river, far beyond the marshes. We’ll then cross back across the river and travel on to Caed Dhu. If it is too difficult, then just the two of just will visit the Druids. I’ll swim and you can cross in bat form. Why are you staring at me? After all, the river is not obstacle for a vampire; it is another myth and superstition. Or maybe I’m wrong?’

‘No, no you’re not wrong. But I can only fly when the moon is full.’

‘It is only two weeks away. By the time we reach the right place, it will be almost full.’

‘Geralt,’ the vampire said, still not taking his eyes from the witcher. ‘You are a strange man. For clarification, it was not a derogatory term. Very well, we renounce Ysgith as to dangerous for a woman in a difficult state. Crossing to the other shore of the Yaruga, in your opinion, is safer.’

‘I can assess the level of risk.’

‘I do not doubt it.’

‘Not a word to Milva and the others. If they ask, this is part of our plan.’

‘Of course. Let us start searching for a boat.’

They did not have to search for a long time, and the result of the search exceeded expectations. They did not find a boat, but a ferry. Hidden among the willows, cleverly camouflaged with branches and bunches of rushes, it was betrayed by the rope connecting it to the left bank.

They also found the ferryman. When he heard them coming, he hid in a thicket, but Milva easily tracked down his hiding place and pulled him out by his collar. She also found in the thicket a powerfully built young man with face like an idiot. The ferryman was shivering with fear and his eyes were circling like mice in an empty granary.

‘To the other side?’ he groaned when he heard what was required of him. ‘Not for anything! That is Nilfgaardian territory and this is wartime! They will catch us and plant us on a pole! I will not cross! Kill me if you like, but I will not cross!’

‘I can kill you,’ Milva said with clenched teeth. ‘But before I do I may break all your bones as well. Open your mouth again and you’ll see how I can.’

‘War time,’ the vampire’s eyes drilled into the ferryman, ‘certainly does not prevent smuggling, my good man? This is your ferry, yet it is cunningly placed far from the royal and Nilfgaardian frontiers, if I’m not mistaken? So get under way and push it into the water.’

‘This would be wise,’ Cahir said, stroking the hilt of his sword. ‘If you do not go with us, then we will cross without you and your raft will remain on the opposite shore. You’ll have to swim for it. So take us across then come back. An hour of fear, then forget about it.’

‘But you will wear a big purse,’ hissed Milva ‘so you won’t forget us until winter.’

In view of these arguments, the ferryman relented and soon the whole company was on the ferry. Some of the horses, especially Roach, were stubborn and refused to embark, but the ferryman and his assistant managed to get them aboard. The skill with which they did this, argued that this was not the first time they had smuggled stolen horses across the Yaruga. The fool assistant grabbed the rope and started the crossing.

When they were out on the open water and the wind enveloped them, they became more animated. The crossing of the Yaruga was something new, the next step, indicating progress in the journey. Before them was the Nilfgaardian shore, the line, the border. Everyone felt the excitement. Even the ferryman and the assistant, who suddenly began to whistle a tune. Geralt also felt a strange exhilaration, as if at any moment from the alders on the left bank Ciri would emerge and he would shout with joy at the sight.

Instead the ferryman shouted. And it was not in joy.

‘Gods! We’re doomed!’

Geralt looked in the indicated direction and cursed. Among the alders high on the left bank, armour flashed and hooves thundered. Within seconds the pier on the left bank was covered with horsemen.

‘Black ones!’ cried the ferryman, pale and releasing the wheel. ‘The Nilfgaardians! Death! Gods, save us!’

‘Hold the horses, Dandelion!’ Milva ordered, removing her bow from its case. ‘Hold the horses!’

‘It is not the imperials,’ Cahir said. ‘I do not think...’

His voice was drowned by the cries of the nearest horse and the screaming ferryman. Spurred on by the shouts, the assistant grabbed an axe, swung and cut at the rope. The ferryman helped him with a second axe. The riders on the pier saw it to and began to shout. Several dove into the water and grabbed the rope. Some threw themselves into the water and swam towards the boat.

‘Leave the rope!’ Dandelion cried. ‘They are not Nilfgaardians! Do not cut...’

But it was too late. The rope was cut and sank under its weight; the ferry turned slightly and began to sail down the river. The horsemen on the shore raised a terrible roar.

‘Dandelion is right,’ Cahir said grimly. ‘Those are not the imperials... This is the Nilfgaardian shore, but that is not Nilfgaard.’

‘Of course not!’ exclaimed Dandelion. ‘I recognise the emblems! Eagles and diamonds! That is the emblem of Lyria! It is Lyria and Rivia! Hey, people...’



‘Take cover behind the rail, you idiot!’

The Poet, as usual, rather than obeying a warning, he went to investigate what it was for. And then in the air, arrows whistled. Some of them stuck into the side of the ferry, some flew higher and splashed into the water. Two flew straight at Dandelion, but the Witcher already with his sword in hand, jumped and with two quick blows, deflected the arrows.

‘By the Great Sun,’ Cahir gasped. ‘He deflected them... Two arrows! Incredible! I have never seen anything like it...’

‘And you’ll not see it again! This was the first time in my life I was able to deflect two! Hide behind the side!’

The soldiers stopped firing, seeing the current started to push the ferry directly to their bank. The water foamed from where it was filled with horses. The pier was filled with further horses. There were at least two hundred armed men on the banks.

‘Help!’ cried the ferryman. ‘Grab those spars, my lords! Push us away from the banks!’

The obeyed immediately, grabbing the spare spars on board. Dandelion and Regis stayed with the horses. Milva, Cahir and the witcher supported the efforts of the ferryman and his assistant.

With the five spars they were slowly able to turn the ferry about and send it gliding towards the center of the river. The soldiers on the bank again raised a roar, and laid their hands on their bows, arrows began to whistle through the air and one of the horses whinnied wildly. Luckily the ferry, driven by a strong current, began moving away from the shore, faster and faster, beyond the reach of effective shots.

Soon they were sailing down the middle of the river. The ferry was spinning like shit in a sink. The horses continued to stamp and neigh, shaking the vampire and Dandelion, who were holding the reins. The riders on the shore shook their fists at them in a threatening manner. Geralt could distinguish among them a knight on a white horse, waving a sword and giving orders. After a moment the cavalcade rode back into the woods and galloped along the high edge of the bank. Their armour gleamed among the thickets.

‘They will not let us go, the bastards,’ the ferryman moaned. ‘They know that the current will curve around and carry us against their shore ... Have the spars ready, lady and gentlemen! If we turn towards the shore on the right, we must help overcome the current and make a landing ... Otherwise we are fucked ... ‘

They sailed, spinning and sliding slightly towards the right bank, with its high, steep cliffs, bristling with pines. The left bank, from which they were moving away from, had a flat semi-circular headland protruding into the river. The horsemen galloped onto the headland, their momentum helping them enter the water. Around the headland, clearly there were shoals, some sandy, and before the water reached the horses’ belly, they had gone quite far into the river.

‘They have us in range,’ Milva said in sombre tone. ‘Take cover.’

Arrows whistled again, some hit against the boards of the ferry. However, the current steer the front of the craft in the direction of the right bank.

‘To the spars now!’ The ferryman cried, trembling. ‘We must land before the current snatches us!’

‘It was not easy. The current was strong, the water was deep and the ferry was unwieldy. At first it did not react to all of their efforts, but finally they planted the spars firmly into the ground. It seemed like they would succeed, when suddenly Milva let go of her spar and without a word pointed at the right bank.

‘This time ...’ Cahir said, wiping the sweat from his brow. ‘This time, it is Nilfgaard.’

Geralt also saw it. The riders, who had appeared on the right bank, wore black and green cloaks, the horses wore distinctive harnesses. There were at least a hundred.

‘We go from the frying pan into the fire ...’ groaned the ferryman. ‘By the Gods! It is the Black ones!’

‘The spars!’ roared the Witcher. ‘Use the spars and the current! Get further from the shore.’

Again, this proved to be a difficult task. The current by the right bank was strong and pushing the ferry straight towards a high embankment, they could already hear the cries of the Nilfgaardians.

When after a few moments of straining with the spar, Geralt looked up and saw pine boughs over his head. An arrow shot from the top of the cliffs, struck on the deck of the barge only two feet away from him. Another was heading straight for Cahir, which the witcher deflected with a slash of his sword.

Milva, Cahir, the ferryman and his assistant, no longer pushed from the bottom, but from the shore and the slope. Geralt threw down his sword and sized a spar to help them, and the ferry began to drift back towards the center of the river. But it was still dangerously close to the right banks and on the bank the Nilfgaardians started a galloping chase. Before they had time to get away they sailed around the ends of the cliffs. In the small reeds on the shore appeared the Nilfgaardians. The air began to howl with the sounds of feathered arrows.

‘Take cover!’

The ferryman’s assistant suddenly coughed in an odd way and dropped his spar into the water. Geralt saw the arrowhead and four inches of the shaft protruding from his back. Cahir’s chestnut reared on two legs and whinnied with pain, snorted and shook its neck that was pierced by an arrow, it knocked down Dandelion and jumped overboard. The other horses also whinnied and reared; the barge was shaking and pounding with hooves.

‘Hold the horses!’ shouted the vampire. ‘Hold ...’

He stopped suddenly, fell back onto the railing and sat down heavily. A black feathered arrow was protruding from his chest.

Milva also saw this. She screamed with rage, seized the bow at her feet and pulled arrows from her quiver. She began to shoot. Faster. Arrow after arrow. Not one missed its target.

On the shore was pandemonium, the Nilfgaardians retreated into the forest, among the reeds, leaving the dead and the screaming wounded. Hidden in the woods, they continued to fire, but the arrows could not reach them, because the ferry was dragged by the current to the center of the river. The distance was too great for the Nilfgaardians with their short bows. But not for Milva’s bow.

Among the Nilfgaardians there suddenly appeared an officer in a black cloak, wearing a helmet, from which swayed the wings of a crow. He shouted, waving his club, pointing down the river. Milva her legs wide, brought the string to her cheek, and measured the distance.

An arrow sounded in the air, the officer bent back in the saddle, sagging into the arms of his soldiers. Milva again stretched the bow string and realised it from her fingers. One of the Nilfgaardian supporting officers screamed piercingly and flew from his horse. The others disappeared into the woods.

‘Masterful shots,’ Regis said quietly from behind the witcher. ‘But we better work the spars. We’re still too close to shore, and we are going into the shallows.’

Geralt and the archer turned around.

‘You’re alive?’ they cried in unison.

‘You don’t think,’ the vampire showed them the black feathered arrow, ‘that I can be harmed by a single stick of wood?’

There was no time to wonder. The ferry again turned around and flowed towards the center of the river. But from around a bend in the river, appeared another beach, sandy and with shallow shoals and on the shore were the Nilfgaardian troops. Some rode into the river and prepared their bows. Everyone, including Dandelion, rushed to the spars. Soon they were unable to reach the bottom; the current was dragging the ferry.

‘Well,’ said Milva, panting and releasing the spar. ‘Now they will not catch us ...’

‘One has ridden out to the end of a sand bank,’ Dandelion pointed. ‘He is getting ready to shoot! Take cover now!’

‘It will not hit,’ Milva estimated with the look of an experienced archer.

The arrow splashed into the water two fathoms from the bow of the ferry.

‘He is aiming again!’ cried the minstrel, leaving the side of the ferry. ‘Beware!’

‘It will not hit,’ Milva repeated while she adjusting the guard on her left forearm. ‘The bow is not bad, but the archer is no good. A scatterbrain. After each shot he is shivering and slipping like he is flowing a snails trail. Grab the horses. Do not let go of them.’

This time the Nilfgaardian’s arrow flew over their heads and the ferry. Milva raised her bow, stood with legs apart, quickly pulled the string to her cheek and lowered it gently, without changing position a fraction of an inch.

The Nilfgaardian fell into the water as if struck by lightning, and began to bob in the tide. His black cloak began to puff out like a balloon.

‘There, it is done,’ Milva put down her bow. ‘But it is already too late for him to learn.’

‘The other troops behind us,’ Cahir pointed to the right bank. ‘I assure you that they will not cease in their pursuit. Not after Milva shot their officer. The river meanders, at the next turn the current will bring us to the shore again. They know this and will wait ...’

‘We have nothing but bad trouble,’ said the ferryman rising from his slain assistant. ‘The current will drive us back to the right shore. Where we will be between two fires ... Because of you, lady and gentlemen! This blood will fall on your heads ...’

‘Shut up and grab the spars!’

On the left bank, closer now, near the edge of the river stood a line of riders Dandelion had identified as the Lyrian guerrillas. They shouted and waved their hands. Geralt saw among them a rider on a white horse. He was not sure, but it seemed to him that the rider was a woman. A blond woman in armour, but without a helmet.

‘What are they shouting?’ Dandelion had his ears pricked. ‘Something about the queen, or so?’

The shouting on the left bank intensified. They clearly heard the clanking of iron.

‘The battle,’ Cahir evaluated in two words. ‘Look. The imperials in the forest. The Northerners are fleeing from them. And now they are trapped.’

‘The solution to this trap,’ Geralt spat into the water, ‘was this ferry. They wanted it, I think, to save the queen and the elders by transporting them by ferry to the other side. And we seized the ferry. Oh, they do not like us, now they do not like ...’

‘Well they should,’ Dandelion said. ‘The ferry would have done them no good, but carried them straight into the hands of the Nilfgaardians on the right bank. We should also avoid the right bank. The Lyrians can be negotiated with, but the Black ones would kill us without mercy ...’

‘It carries us faster and faster,’ Milva assessed, spitting into the water and watched the rejected sputum. ‘And we are sailing in the middle of the river. We may be able to out run both. The turns are smooth, the banks are low and covered with only reeds. We could sail down the Yaruga and they could not catch up with us. Soon they would get bored.’

‘Like hell,’ moaned the ferryman, ‘in front of us is Red Binduga! There is a sand bank and a bridge goes over it! The ferry will get stuck ... If we continue to go this way, they’ll be waiting ...’

‘The Nordlings will not overtake us,’ Regis pointed to the left bank. ‘They have their own worries.’

Indeed, on the left bank a bloody fight was unfolding. The heart of it was hidden in the woods and was hinted at by the cries of war, but in many places fighting took place on the shore and the bodies of Black ones and Nordlings fell with a splash into the Yaruga River. The clash and screech of steel died away, as the ferry quickly floated down the river.

They sailed down the middle of the river. On both sides it was quiet. Geralt was beginning to hope that everything would end well when he saw before them a wooden bridge that connected the two banks. The river flowed under the bridge, between sand banks and islets. One of the pillars of the bridge was supported on one of the islands. On the right bank was Binduga - where they saw piles of trunks and wood.

‘There is a little shallow,’ whispered the ferryman. ‘Just in the middle that can be passed on the right hand side of the island. The current will take us past there, but hold on to your spars, we may become stuck ...’

‘On the bridge,’ Cahir said, shading his eyes with his hands, ‘is an army. On the bridge and on the shore ...’

They all could see it. And everyone saw that suddenly from behind the army, emerging from the woods, was a squad of men on horseback in green and black layers. They were close enough to hear the sounds of battle.

‘Nilfgaard,’ Cahir said dryly. ‘Those who chased us. Which means those are the Nordlings on the bridge ...’

‘The spars!’ cried the ferryman. ‘While they are fighting, we can slip by!’

They did not slip by. They were already very close to the bridge when it suddenly started banging with the sound of running soldiers boots. The running soldiers wore white adorned with a red diamond. Most had crossbows, which they rested on the railing and pointed at the ferry approaching the bridge.

‘Do not shoot, by the gods!’ Dandelion shouted with all the force of his lungs. ‘Do not shoot, we are your people!’

The soldiers did not hear. Or did not want to listen.

The salvo of crossbow bolts was devastating. Among the people the only one hit was the ferryman, still trying to steer with his spar. The bolt went through him from side to side. Cahir, Milva and Regis hid behind the rail just in time. Geralt reached for his sword and deflected a bolt, but there were still many more bolts. Dandelion, still shaking his hands and yelling, was not hit by some inexplicable miracle. However, the actual slaughter the hail of bolts cause was among the horses. The grey was pierced by three bolts and fell to its knees. It fell kicking its legs and struck Milva, and Regis’s bay stallion. Roach shot in the withers reared up and jumped overboard.

‘Don’t shoot!’ Dandelion shouted. ‘We are your people!’

This time he succeeded.

The ferry, carried by the current, crashed to a halt against the bank. Everyone jumped onto the island or into the water, escaping the hooves of the horses kicking in agony.

Milva was the last, for her movement suddenly became frighteningly slow. *She was hit with a bolt*, thought the witcher seeing the girl drag herself overboard with effort, and then fall limp onto the sand. He jumped towards her, but the vampire was faster.

‘Something has torn in me,’ she said very slowly. Her hands were pressed to her lower abdomen. Geralt saw the legs of her wool trousers darken with blood.

‘Pour this onto my hands,’ Regis handed him a bottle drawn from his bag. ‘Pour it onto my hands, quickly.’

‘What is happening?’

‘Abortion. Give me a knife; I have to cut off the clothing. And go away.’

‘No,’ said Milva. ‘I want him to stay with me ...’

A tear run down her cheek.

Above them the bridge resonated with the boots of soldiers.

‘Geralt!’ Dandelion cried. The Witcher, seeing what the vampire was doing to Milva, turned his head in embarrassment. He saw soldiers in white jackets rushing along the bridge. On the right bank, from Binduga, yelling could still be heard.

‘They are fleeing,’ Dandelion gasped, running over and tugging at his sleeve. ‘The Nilfgaardians are almost at the bridge! They are still fighting hard, but most of the soldiers have gone over to the left bank! Do you hear? We also need

to run!’

‘We can’t’ he said gritting his teeth. ‘Milva miscarried. She will not be able to walk.’

Dandelion swore disgustingly.

‘We will need to carry her,’ he said. ‘It is our only chance ...’

‘Not our only,’ Cahir said. ‘Geralt, to the bridge.’

‘Why?’

‘Let’s halt the flight. If the Nordlings can hold the right side of the bridge, we can get Milva to the left bank.’

‘How do we stop them fleeing?’

‘I have led soldiers before. Climb the pillar onto the bridge!’

Once on the bridge Cahir showed that he indeed had experience in controlling panic among the troops.

‘Where are you going, you sons of bitches! Where, you motherfuckers!’ he roared, emphasizing each word with a blow of his fists, on the boards of the bridge. ‘Halt! Stand your ground, you fucking scoundrels!’

Some of those fleeing – far from all – stopped at the terrifying roars and the sight of Cahir waving his bright sword. Others tried to sneak behind his back. But Geralt also drew his sword and joined the show.

‘Where are you going?’ he cried, clutching a soldier and throwing him back in place. ‘Where are you going? Stop! Turn around!’

‘The Nilfgaardians, sir!’ cried the Landsknecht. ‘It’s a bloodbath! Let us pass!’

‘Cowards!’ Dandelion cried, climbing onto the bridge and emitting a voice Geralt had not heard before. ‘Unworthy cowards! Rabbit hearts! You flee to save your skin? To live with indignity and baseness?’

‘There are too many, sir knight! We cannot face them!’

‘The Centurion is dead ...’ moaned another. ‘The Decurion had vanished! Death is coming!’

‘Raise your heads! Your comrades,’ Cahir shouted, shaking his sword, ‘still fight at the shore and on the bridge! They are still fighting! Shame on him who does not go to their aid! Follow me!’

‘Dandelion,’ the Witcher hissed. ‘Go back to the island. You have to help Regis get Milva to the left bank. Why are you still standing here?’

‘Follow me, lads!’ Cahir yelled, brandishing his sword. ‘Follow me, those who believe in the gods! For Binduga! Kill, kill!’

Several soldiers shook their arms at took up the cry, their voices expressing very different degree of resolve. Several of those who had already fled, shamed, turned back to the bridge and joined the rest of the army. The army suddenly led by the Witcher, stood against Nilfgaard.

Perhaps the real army would have marched to the shore, but typically, at the entrance to the bridge appeared dark men on horseback. The Nilfgaardians had pierced the defences and had come to the bridge, the boards rattled under the horseshoes. Some of the soldiers turned and ran again, others stood still and indecisive. Cahir cursed. In Nilfgaardian. But no one realised except the witcher.

‘What you started, you need to finish,’ Geralt growled, clutching his sword in his hand. ‘Let’s go to them! You have to get the troops fired up for battle!’

‘Geralt,’ Cahir stopped, and looked at the Witcher uncertainly. ‘You want me to kill ... My countrymen? I can’t ...’

‘I shit on this war,’ The Witcher clenched his teeth. ‘This is for Milva. You joined the company. Make a decision. You are with me or you are on the side with the Black ones. Quickly.’

‘I’m going with you.’

And so it happened that the Witcher and the Nilfgaardian shouted wildly waved their swords and rushed forward without hesitation, the two comrades, two friends and companions, to meet a common enemy in an unequalled battle. This was their baptism of fire. A baptism of a common struggle, rage, madness and death. They went to their death, they, the two companions. Or so they thought. They could not possible know that they would not die that day, on this particular bridge, slung over the Yaruga River. They did not know that it was intended for them a different death. In another place and at another time.

The sleeves of the Nilfgaardians had silver embroidery depicting a scorpion. Cahir slashed two with swift strokes of his long sword. Geralt also struck two with Sihil. Then he jumped onto the railing of the bridge, running along it and attacking another. He was a Witcher, maintaining his balance was for him a trifle, but the acrobatic feat amazed and surprised the Nilfgaardian attackers. They died, amazed and surprised by the dwarvern blade which cut through their mail like wool. Blood soon made the boards and planks of the bridge slippery.

Observing the advantage of their armed commanders over the numerically strong army on the bridge, the defenders raised a chorus, a bellowing, in which could be heard the returning of morale and fighting spirit. And so it was that those who had recently been deserting in panic, rushed over the Nilfgaardians like ravenous wolves, cutting with swords, axes, stabbing with spears and bludgeoning with clubs and halberds. The railings on both sides of the bridge cracked, the horses flew into the river along with their riders on their black cloaks.

The uproarious army pushed onto the opposite shore, howling and pushing Geralt and Cahir, the accidental commanders, not letting them do what they wanted to do. Which was to withdraw stealthily, back to Milva and move her to the left bank.

The battle raged on. The Nilfgaardians surrounded and cut off the soldiers on the bridge who had not escaped, yet defended themselves fiercely from behind barricades built of cedar and pine logs. At the sight of the impending siege of the handful still defending themselves a joyful shout was raised. A little too hastily and prematurely. A compact wedge of reinforcements had pushed and driven the Nilfgaardians from the bridge, but now, at the entrance of the bridge, a counter attack fell on their flank. If not for the barricades and the pine logs, inhibiting both the escape and the momentum of the cavalry, the infantry would have been scattered in the blink of an eye. Covered by the wood piles and logs, the soldiers began a fierce fight.

For Geralt, this was something he did not know a lot about, a whole new battle. There was no fencing or fancy footwork, it was just a chaotic and constant raining of blows, which were flying in from all sides. Still, he benefited of the very well-deserved privilege of being a commander – the soldiers surrounded him, covering his flanks and protected his back for him, making a place in front where he could strike and sow death. But the crowd was getting bigger. The Witcher and his army, without knowing how, fought shoulder to shoulder with a handful of bloodied and fatigued defenders at the barricades, mostly dwarvern mercenaries. They fought in a ring.

And then came the fire.

One of the sides of the barricade, located between Binduga and the bridge, was a big, spiny hedgehog pile of boughs and branches, an invincible obstacle for horses and infantry. Now the pile had caught fire – someone had thrown in a torch. The defenders retreated, driven by the heat and the smoke. Whirling, blinded, hindering each other, they began to die under the blows of the Nilfgaardian attackers.

The situation was saved by Cahir. Having experience with war, he led his troops around the barricade. They had separated from Geralt's group, but now returned. He had won a horse with black trapping and swung his sword around him, striking the flank. Behind him, yelling fanatically came, halberdiers and spearmen in doublets with red diamonds.

Geralt arranged his fingers and hit the burning pile with the sign of Aard. Not counting on a great result, since it had been weeks without his witcher's elixirs. But there was a result. The pile exploded and disintegrated, squirting sparks.

'Follow me!' He yelled, slashing the temple of a Nilfgaardian who had risen above the barricade. 'Follow me! Through the fire!'

They followed after him. Throwing spears of burning branches with their bare hands at the Nilfgaardian horses. *A baptism of fire*, thought the witcher, frantically slashing all around him. *I had to pass through a baptism of fire to save Ciri. And now I go through a fire in battle, that generally I do not care about. Which in general I don't understand. The fire, which was to purify me, simply burns my hair and face.*

The blood that was splattered hissed and steamed.

'Forward, by the gods! Cahir! To me!'

'Geralt!' Cahir pulled another Nilfgaardian from his saddle. 'To the bridge! Protect the bridge! We must tighten the defence ...'

He did not finish because out of the smoke came a galloping horseman in a black breastplate, without a helmet, his hair bloodied and dishevelled. Cahir parried a blow from his long sword, but fell off of his horse's rump. The Nilfgaardian stooped to nail him to the ground. But he did not finish the move. On his forearm shone a silver scorpion.

'Cahir!' he cried in amazement. 'Cahir aep Ceallach!'

'Morteisen ...' Cahir, stretched on the ground, said in a voice no less astonished.

A dwarvern mercenary, who ran alongside Geralt, dressing in a doublet that was burned and charred, lost no time in amazement at all. With a flourish he thrust his spear into the belly of the Nilfgaardian, pushing the pole in far then yanked it out. Another came and pressed his heavy boot onto the breastplate of the fallen and stabbed a spear into his throat. The Nilfgaardian issued a gasp, vomited blood and scratched the earth with his spurs.

At that moment the witcher was hit in the back with something very heavy and hard. His knees buckled under him.



He fell and heard a great roar of triumph. He saw the riders in black cloaks flee into the forest. He heard the bridge rumble under the hooves of the horses approaching from the left bank, cavalry, carrying a flag with an eagle surrounded by red diamonds.

And so ended the great Battle for the Bridge on the Yaruga, a battle that in latter chronicles, of course, does not even get the slightest mention.

\* \* \*

‘Do not be troubled, noble sir,’ said the surgeon, while massaging and tapping the witcher’s back. ‘The bridge was demolished. We chased the enemy to the opposite shore. Your friends and the lady are also safe. Is she your wife?’

‘No.’

‘Oh, I thought ... It is terrible, my lord, when war harms the pregnant ...’

‘Be silent, not a word about it. Whose are these banners?’

‘You do not know for whom you fought? Surprise, surprise ... This is the army of Lyria. You see the black eagle of Lyria and the red diamonds of Rivia. Well, I’m finished. It was just a contusion. Your back will hurt for a while, but it’s nothing serious. You’ll recover.’

‘Thanks.’

‘It’s me who should be thanking you. If you had not defended the bridge, Nilfgaard would have exterminated us to the last; we would have been thrown into the river. We would not have had time to escape persecution ... You saved the Queen! Farewell, my lord. I’m going, other wounded need my help.’

‘Thanks.’

He sat on a tree stump, tired, sore and uncaring. Alone. Cahir had disappeared somewhere. Between the piles in the middle of the broken bridge the Yaruga flowed green and gold, gleaming in the glare from the sunset.

He raised his head, hearing steps, the clatter of hooves and armour.

‘That’s him, Your Majesty. Let me help you down ...’

‘I’m fine.’

Geralt raised his head. The woman who stood before him in armour had very fair hair, almost as white as his own. He realised that the hair was not white, but grey, but the woman’s face showed no signs of aging. Maturity, yes. But not old age.

The woman pressed to her mouth a cambric handkerchief with lace edges. The handkerchief was covered in blood.

‘Stand up, sir,’ one of the knights, standing next to Geralt whispered. ‘Offer up tribute. This is the Queen.’

The Witcher stood up. He bowed, overcoming the pain in his loins.

‘Tyf defended moft?’

‘What?’

The woman removed the handkerchief from her mouth and spat blood. Some of the red droplets fell onto her breastplate.

‘Her Majesty, Meve, Queen of Lyria and Rivia,’ said one of the knights standing beside the woman, who was dressed in a purple cloak adorned with gold embroidery, ‘asks whether you are the man who heroically defended the bridge over the Yaruga?’

‘It just happened.’

‘Wyflo!’ the queen attempted to laugh, but did not succeed. She frowned, then cursed, although unclear and spat again. Before she was able to cover her mouth, he saw a terrible wound and noticed the lack of several teeth. She caught his eye.

‘The attack,’ she said from behind the handkerchief, looking into his eyes. ‘Jakif fkurwyfyn slammed me in the mouth.’

‘Queen Meve,’ the man in the purple cloak said emphatically, ‘stood in the first line, brave as a knight and stood against the overwhelming forces of Nilfgaard! The wound hurts, but it will not disfigure! You saved her and the whole army. After some traitors kidnapped the ferry, the bridge was our only hope. And you heroically defended ...’

‘Pfeftan, Odo, as fie nazywaf, hero?’

‘Me?’

‘Of course you.’ The knight with the purple cloak looked at him menacingly. ‘What’s wrong with you? Are you wounded? Did you hit your head?’

‘No.’

‘Then answer, when the queen asks! You can see that she is wounded in the mouth and finds it difficult to speak!’

‘Pfeftan, Odo.’

The knight in purple bowed, and then looked at Geralt.

‘What is your name?’

*Who cares, he thought. I'm sick of all this. I will not lie.*

‘Geralt.’

‘Geralt from where?’

‘Nowhere.’

‘No famowy?’ Meve redecorated the sand under her feet with splashes of saliva mixed with blood.

‘What? No, no family. Your Royal Highness.’

Meve drew her sword.

‘Kneel.’

He obeyed, still unable to believe what was happening. Still thinking about Milva and the way he chose for her, fearing the Ysgith marsh.

The queen turned to Purple.

‘You powief formula. I can not spweak.’

‘For unprecedented valour in battle for a just cause,’ Purple recited emphatically, ‘as proof of your virtue, honour and fidelity to the crown, I, Meve, by the grace of the gods, queen of Lyria and Rivia, By my power, right and privilege knight thee. Serve faithfully. Accept this accolade, one that will not hurt.’

Geralt felt a blow on the shoulder blade. He looked into the pale green eyes of the queen. Meve spit, thick and red, pressed a handkerchief to her face and winked at him from over the lace.

Purple walked over to the queen and whispered. The Witcher heard the words –“predicate”, “red diamonds”, “banner” and “tribute”.

‘Slufilie,’ Meve nodded. She spoke more clearly, overcoming the pain from the gap in her broken teeth. ‘You held the bridge together with the soldiers of Rivia, valiant Geralt of nowhere. Thus this honour, ha, ha. Well, it gives me great privilege to knight – Geralt of Rivia. Ha, ha.’

‘Bow, sir knight,’ Purple hissed. Geralt of Rivia, the knight bowed to Queen Meve, his sovereign, who did not see his smile, a bitter smile, over which he had no control.