



ANDRZEJ SAPKOWSKI

THE
WITCHER
CROSSROADS OF RAVENS

TRANSLATION BY DAVID FRENCH

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Translated by David French

Originally published in Polish as Rozdroże kruków



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*To my dear and much-missed friend, Jan “Jasiu”
Matuszyński.*

Thank you for everything.

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*Darkness surrounds, a fell wind is blowing
A murderous threat in the night is heeded
Evil creeps closer, the danger is growing
Make haste, O Witcher, help is needed!*

*Hark! Yonder sound a victim's moans
All around the cold and black of night
Blood has splashed the white of stones
Vain are the screams; no Witcher is in sight.*

Anonymous ballad, c. 1150 p. R.

*Remember not the sins of my youth,
nor my transgressions.*

Psalm 25:7



Kaedwen is a land wedged in between the Dragon Mountains from the north, the Blue Mountains from the east, and the impenetrable wastes from the west. It is reigned over by the hereditary monarchs of the Topp dynasty. The first capital was in ancient Ban Ard, but in the year 1130 post Resurrectionem King Dagread gave that town to the mages for a school, while he moved his capital to Ard Carraigh, which lies in the centre of the country.

Kaedwen's other notable burghs are Ban Fearg, Daevon, Ban Fillim and Ban Gleann.

Since time immemorial, the arms of the Topps and the land entire has been the unicorn—d'or, licorne effrayée de sable.

Set around the royal lands of Kaedwen are the borderlands, called the marks or marches, which also belong to the monarch. They are governed by the margraves (or counts): either hereditary or nominated by the king. Their name derives from the fact that those lands are, one could say, the advance guard, and move ever onward, driving conquests and wresting new lands from the elves for Kaedwen, shifting the borders and setting their signposts—id est their marks—further and further. The marches consist of the Western, the Upper, the Lakeland and the Lower.

Baldwin Adovardo, *Regni Caedvenie Nova Descriptio*

In spite of his sincerest intentions—or actually for important reasons—

Geralt could not concentrate at all on the alderman's prattle. All his attention was being taken by the large stuffed crow on the table. The crow, glaring at the witcher with its glass eye, was standing on a plinth of green-painted clay, with both its feet stuck into it. Thus, the crow, despite looking utterly alive, could in no way have been so; there was no doubt about that. Why then, Geralt couldn't help wondering, had the crow already winked its glass eye at him several times? Magic? Probably not, for his witcher medallion hadn't twitched or vibrated, not once and not in the slightest. Might it then be a hallucination? Was he seeing things? Perhaps because of being punched in the head several times?

"I shall repeat the question," Alderman Bulava repeated. "I shall repeat it, though it is not my custom."

Alderman Bulava had already assured Geralt several times that he wasn't in the habit of repeating himself. Even so, he kept doing it. He clearly enjoyed it, though it wasn't his custom.

"I repeat my question: what really happened? What did you have against that deserter that you carved him up so terribly? Some old grievance? You see, I don't believe at all that you cared for that peasant and his young daughter's honour. That you were somehow coming to her aid. Like some damn knight errant."

The crow glared. Geralt moved his arms, which were tied behind his back, trying to get the blood circulating. The twine was digging painfully into his wrists. He heard the heavy breathing of the village enforcer behind him. He was standing very close and Geralt was certain the man was just waiting for an excuse to punch him in the ear again.

Alderman Bulava wheezed, lounged back in his chair and stuck out his belly and velvet kaftan. Geralt stared at it and identified what the alderman had eaten that day, the previous day and the day before that. Concluding that at least one of those dishes had been served in tomato sauce.

"I thought," the alderman said finally, "I'd never have to look on any of you witchers again. None have been seen for years. It was said that after the year one hundred and ninety-four few survived up there in the mountains. Then word had it that whoever was left had died of hunger or from the

plague. But what have we here? One of them shows up right in my village. And the first thing he does is murder somebody. But when caught red-handed, he has the audacity to cite some bloody edicts.”

“On the strength of the titulary edicts of the year one thousand one hundred and fifty,” Geralt cleared his throat and croaked out, “issued by Dagread, King of Kaedwen and the borderland Marches, primo: witchers are permitted freely to practise their profession in the lands of the Kingdom and the Marches and are exempt from the jurisdiction of local powers—”

“First of all, primo,” Bulava interrupted sharply, “it’ll soon be half a century since Dagread turned to dust, and along with him his titulary despotic edicts. Second of all, primo, no king can exempt anyone from anything, for the king is far away in Ard Carraigh, while this place is governed by the local powers. Meaning me. And third of all, primo, you, chum, were not arrested for practising your profession, but for murder. Catching werewolves and killing leshens is your witcher work. No king privileged you to slaughter people.”

“I was acting in the defence—”

“Daryl!”

The enforcer obediently thumped Geralt, this time in the back of the neck.

“Your repetition is annoying,” said the alderman, looking up at the ceiling. “Do you know what happens when you annoy someone? Even a calm fellow like me?”

The crow glared with its glass eye. Geralt said nothing.

“You are not a witcher,” said Bulava finally. “You are a defect. You need to be repaired. You should be sent back to that mountain Fastness of yours folk talk of. I don’t know how things are done up there. It may be that a botch job like you is dismantled to be used to manufacture new and better witchers. After all, that’s what they do there, isn’t it? They assemble witchers from various human parts, sew or stick them together or something. I’ve heard all sorts. Thus, so as not to talk in vain... I will pack you off, you botched-up witcher, back to the mountains, beyond Gwenllech. In one week’s time.”

Geralt said nothing.

“Won’t you even ask, why in a week?” said the alderman, baring his yellow teeth. “You like to quote edicts and laws. Well, I also believe in the

law. And the law says that comers-in shall not carry weapons in the borough. And you walked in here with a weapon.”

Geralt wanted to argue that he hadn’t walked, but had been hauled in. He didn’t manage to.

“The penalty is twenty lashes,” announced Bulava. “It will be administered by Daryl here, and he has a heavy hand. You won’t get back on your feet in less than a week. Righto, off with him. Take him to the village green, bind him to the post—”

“Whoa there,” said a man in a dun mantle with a very dirty hem, who was entering the chamber. “What’s this, Bulava, so hasty with the post and the horsewhip? You mean to mar this here witcher? Just hold on, nothing doing. I need him in one piece on the work site.”

“What do you think you’re doing, Blaufall, interrupting me in the execution of my duty?” said the alderman with his arms akimbo. “I already have to put up with you constantly taking men from the village for forced labour on the roads. But don’t interfere with my jurisdiction: it’s no business of yours. Crimes must be punished—”

“It’s a trifle, not a crime,” interrupted Blaufall. “There is no offence, simply self-defence and rescuing folk. Don’t make faces, don’t make faces, for I have a witness. If you please, fellow. Go on, fear not. Say what happened.”

Geralt recognised the peasant. It was the same one he had saved from being robbed the day before, and who had fled into the trees rather than thanking him. The father of the wench whom he recalled stripped down to her undergarments.

“I testify...” the peasant grunted, pointing a finger at Geralt. “I testify in words that this here youth rescued me from brigands... Saved my chattels... Delivered my daughter from being dishonoured... Freed the innocent girl from those murderous hands...”

“And that deserter,” Blaufall prompted, “fell on him with a hatchet. The youth was only defending himself. It was self-defence! Confirm the truth of it, fellow.”

“Aye, so it was... Right enough! M’lord alderman, yonder youth isn’t to blame!” The peasant was pale and speaking unnaturally loudly. “M’lord alderman! Release him, I beg. And here... Please take it, sir... By way of, hmm... Perhaps there were some costs or losses... I’ll gladly

recompense...”

Bowing deferentially, the peasant handed the alderman a small pouch. Bulava swiftly secreted it into a pocket in his puffy trousers, so deftly there wasn't even a clink of coins.

“Self-defence!” he snorted. “He carved the man up into slices with his sword. Innocent youth... I ought to—”

They went out to the village green. The bruisers shoved Geralt without untying his arms.

“Are you so hot-headed, Blaufall, as to even dig up a witness?” said the alderman. “Do you need this witcher so badly?”

“As if you didn't know. We are building a road, a Highway. It will run from Ard Carraigh through the forests to Hengfors itself. And not just any old thing, not some track, but a road, dry and level, lined with barks and fascines, so that carts and wagons can travel along it. It's a great thing, a Highway, bearing brisk trade, I mean from our lands with the North. They say the king himself has ordered haste. And there are monsters in the forest and in the bogs, a labourer dies every few days, killed or snatched away by some beast...”

“Since when have you cared about labourers? You always said they matter not; you lose one and another will soon—”

“Fuck the labourers, they're mostly unpaid peasants. But occasionally a monster kills a foreman, and that disrupts my schedule, the business end of the work goes down the drain. Oh, what am I saying. I tell you; I need a witcher. I won't meet my deadline, never mind my bonus going to hell, and then they'll send inspectors. And inspectors—”

“Always find something,” said Bulava, nodding his head in understanding. “If it's not building materials sold on the quiet, it's inflated estimates, or—”

“Don't stray from the subject,” said Blaufall grimacing. “And release the witcher at once, without delay. I'll take him to the work site right away... Hey... What have we here?”

“Soldiers from the guardhouse,” said the alderman, shielding his eyes with a hand. “Captain Carleton's men.”

About a dozen horsemen galloped onto the village green, kicking up dust and frightening chickens. Soldiers. Colourful, garish, and rather shabby. Only the two men at the head were dressed more smartly. The commander, a moustachioed man in an elk-hide jerkin with a gilt pendant, wearing a hat with a plume of ostrich feathers. And a long-haired elf with a band around his forehead in the green uniform of a scout.

“Captain Reisz Carleton, said Bulava, stepping forward in greeting. “Welcome, welcome. To what do we owe this honour?”

Captain Reisz Carleton leaned over in the saddle and spat vigorously. Then gave a sign to the scout. The elf rode over to the post with a horizontal timber and dextrously tossed a rope tied into a noose over it.

“Oho,” said Bulava and stood with his arms akimbo, looking back to see if his enforcers were standing behind him. “Well, if m’lord Captain hasn’t come to my village for a hanging? Ah, why, I can even see whose fate is the noose today. I see, I see those two in fetters... Ha, so m’lord Captain caught the rascals who deserted from his fort! The same who’ve been attacking peasants and maids in the woods?”

“I have no mind to hang them,” said Captain Reisz Carleton, twisting his moustache. “They will both run the gauntlet through the streets, being beaten with sticks. To teach them a lesson. And that is all. I have too few men to hang them for any old thing. And for some vagabond to murder them with impunity.”

The captain sat up straight in the saddle and raised his voice, addressing not just the alderman, but all the bruisers, Blaufall, his servants, and the small crowd of peasants that was now gathering.

“Why should I punish my soldiers? For what? For wilful desertion? For wanting to fuck a wench? Why, we sit in that guardhouse as if at the end of the world, like exiles, as if being punished. You can’t partake of ale or women there... Is it any wonder the boys occasionally seize some spoils, grab hold of some...”

“Why the bloody hell are women wandering through the forests?” said Reisz Carleton, raising his voice. “And why did this fellow choose that route with his lass? Couldn’t he leave her at home? Is it surprising the lads fancied a bit of... I don’t commend it! I don’t commend it, but I understand! Master Aelvarr? Ready over there?”

“Ready, Captain.”

“Then bring the witcher here, Bulava. He killed one of my soldiers, so he’ll hang. One must give an example of terror. And don’t cut him down, alderman, let him hang for a while as a warning.”

Blaufall stepped forward, giving the impression of wanting to speak, but thought better of it. The enforcers caught hold of Geralt, but stood hesitantly. With reason, as it turned out.

Everything went suddenly quiet. And a chill wind seemed to blow.

A pitch-black horse ambled very slowly onto the village green, from behind the barns. It bore a rider. White-haired, in a black leather jerkin with silver studs on the shoulders. Two swords were sticking up above the rider’s right shoulder.

Very slowly, with some grace even, the black horse passed the peasants and the alderman. Coming to a halt in front of Captain Carleton’s riders.

For a moment there was silence. Then the black horse tossed its head. The rings on its bit jangled.

“Alderman Bulava,” said the white-haired rider in the silence, “will release the young witcher at once. He will return his horse, weapons and belongings. Immediately.”

“Yes...” said the alderman, coughing. “Of course, Master Holt.”

“This moment...”

“Captain Carleton.” The horseman bowed his head faintly. “Good day.”

“Master Witcher Preston Holt.” Reisz Carleton touched the rim of his hat. “Good day.”

“Captain,” said the horseman, raising his voice, “you will kindly deign to remove from here that elf, his rope and the rest of your men. You are no longer needed here. Today’s lynching has been called off.”

“Indeed?” said the captain, stiffening in the saddle and placing a hand on the crossguard of his sword. “Are you so cock-sure, Master Witcher?”

“Aye, that I am. Farewell. Alderman, is the lad at liberty? His effects returned to him?”

“Why, you motherfucker!” yelled one of Carleton’s horsemen, unsheathing his sword and urging his steed forward. “I’ll—”

He didn’t finish his sentence. The rider called Preston Holt raised one hand and made a short gesture. The air howled and whistled; the peasants covered their ears. The horseman screamed, flew from the saddle, and fell heavily and inertly before the hooves of his companions. Their horses shied,

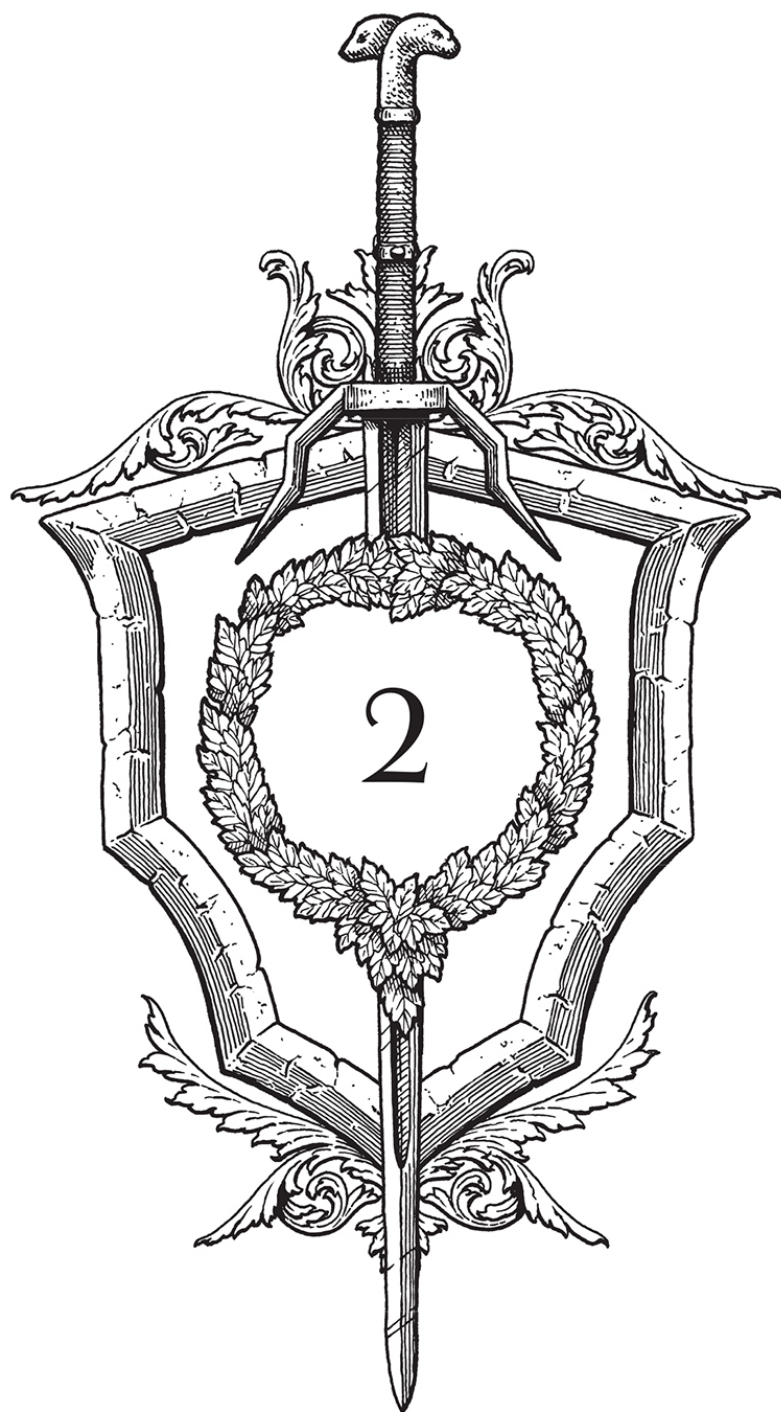
neighed, stamped their hooves, shook their heads; one reared up. The now riderless horse darted between the cottages, kicking and bucking.

A deathly silence descended.

“Anyone else?” asked Preston Holt, raising a gauntleted hand. “Anyone inclined to challenge me? Play the hero? No? I thought as much. I bid you farewell, gentlemen. Is the young witcher mounted?”

“I am,” Geralt replied.

“Then let us ride. Follow me.”



The Upper March set the mark of its border on the River Gwenllech. It is known that the ambition of the margraves there is still to make incursions into the valleys of the Dragon Mountains, hence they used to call their domain “cismontane,” as though it would soon enlarge to include the “tramontane” part, once the elves were driven deeper into the mountains. Nonetheless, the years pass by and nothing of the kind transpires.

Baldwin Adovardo, *Regni Caedvenie Nova Descriptio*

The Kingdom of Kaedwen was known throughout the inhabited world for its cold and capricious weather. Enclosed from the north by the barrier of the Dragon Mountains, and from the east by the great massif of the Blue Mountains, the land suffered from erratic and frequent visitations of air masses causing long and bitter winters, cold springs and short, rainy summers. As regards autumn, it varied—once sunny, warm and pleasant—once nothing of the kind.

Now, in the month of March, called “Birke” by the elves, the snow still remained here and there in ravines and hollows, while white patches lay in depressions in glades. The ice still covered some puddles and dykes in yellowing sheets. Although the sun gave off some warmth, when frosty winds blew from the mountains, they stung no less than in January.

Geralt had set off from Kaer Morhen the day before the Equinox. That was the custom of witchers. It was thus practised because after the winter monsters were at their hungriest, and so vicious that folk in villages and settlements were inclined to indulge in the hiring of a witcher, even though during the hungry gap they had eaten their stores and were practically destitute. But Geralt never got the chance to be hired. For things went as they went; barely two days’ ride from the mountains and bang! the peasant and his daughter, the marauders, the bald enforcer with the rotten teeth, wham, bam, and here we are. He had found himself being judged by Alderman Bulava of Neuhold, and then being rescued from that and the threat of being lynched by soldiers from the nearby fort by the strange white-haired individual with two swords on his back, riding a black horse, whom Geralt was now following.

“I suggest,” said the strange individual, turning around in the saddle, “that we ride together for a time. Captain Carleton may still want to hang you; it was apparent he wants it very much. He isn’t stupid enough to come after me, but you, alone, could be an easy target. So, if my company doesn’t bother you—”

“Not a bit,” said Geralt hurriedly, urging on his dun mare. “Gladly... I... I am—”

“I know who you are. Did your hair turn white after the mutations? After the Transformations? Loss of pigment, like I had?”

“Aye... But how—”

“How did I know there was someone like you there? Because I follow what goes on up there in the Stronghold. And it reached my ears that some wunderkind called Geralt had finished his training and was soon to venture abroad.”

“But Vesemir—”

“Never mentioned me? He never let slip the name ‘Preston Holt’? I’ll explain: Vesemir and I have been moving in different orbits, so to speak, for some time. If you know what I mean.”

Geralt didn’t actually know what an orbit was, but nodded wisely.

They rode on for a while in silence. Side by side.

“So, you set off from Kaer Morhen,” Preston Holt said finally. “You perhaps didn’t have the best beginning, but that’s the way it is with beginnings. In any case, I don’t mean to chide you. Quite the opposite; I had a look at that marauder’s body and your cuts may be considered faultless. Unnecessary, perhaps; ill-considered, perhaps; inelegant, perhaps—but actually faultless.”

They fell silent again, watched a herd of cattle being driven onto a mountain pasture and the cowherd running from cow to cow in order to warm his frozen little feet in fresh, warm cowpats. The cowpats didn’t warm him up much, but the running did.

“They’re driving cows, though the grass is barely peeping out of the ground,” observed Holt. “It’s a sign the season’s begun and you’ll have no difficulty finding work, Geralt. The villages will soon be willing to pay for their herdsmen and livestock to be protected. Let’s ride over there into the birchwood, near the opening of the sough.”

“The opening of the what?”

“The sough. That open channel there leads to a sough, a tunnel once used to drain water from a mine. We are—as you no doubt know—in the part of the Kingdom of Kaedwen called the Upper March. The wealth of the Upper March is mines: mainly salt, but also silver, nickel, zinc, lead, lapis lazuli and others. At least that’s how things were; today most mines are close to being worked out. Nothing lasts for ever.”

Geralt didn’t comment.

“Do you see that hill up ahead? It’s called Podkurek, that’s how it appears on official maps. And it came about because around a hundred

years ago a peasant named Podkurek quite by chance dug up there a nugget of silver the size of a large cabbage. A mine was established here right away, extending into the mountainside. Large amounts of silver and galena, which is lead ore, were mined. But the deeper the miners dug, the more problems they had with water. There are more sougths like this one, you'll see them. Finally, the costs of drainage made the entire extraction unprofitable. The miners moved to other places. They left a labyrinth of corridors and goafs, now partly flooded. And now the best part: the abandoned and flooded mine has been occupied and taken over by roving cynocephaly. I imagine you know what they are, don't you?"

"Cynocephaly," recited Geralt, after taking a deep breath, "are small creatures resembling dog-headed monkeys. They are gregarious and live underground in the dark. They're dangerous in packs—"

"Infernally dangerous," interrupted Preston Holt. "And quite often torment the amateur miners that come here to dig in the slopes of Podkurek in search of silver, which you can still find here. Look, there's the proof of my lecture: those light patches over there are the canvas sheets of wagons and tents. We're heading right for a camp of intrepid diggers. The first this spring."

The intrepid diggers greeted them initially with a delegation armed with shovels and stout cudgels. The menacing expressions of the welcome party sent a simple message: *get out of here, strangers, we was 'ere first*. Their expressions soon softened, however, when they saw that the newcomers weren't unwanted competitors. Indeed, joy appeared on their previously unfriendly faces.

"Goodness me, thank the gods!" cried the chief digger, hiding behind his back a mattock, which only a moment earlier he had been twirling warningly. "Thanks be to the gods! Goodness me, why it's the Most Honourable Witcher! And because we heard you were in the neighbourhood, we were meaning to send word to you. But instead, you arrive out of nowhere, out of nowhere!"

"That is my custom," said Preston Holt, straightening up in the saddle. "To appear from nowhere to help those in need. For I am a witcher."

In the meantime, several lamenting women had joined the diggers. The clamour became louder and louder and more and more incoherent. Preston Holt began to call for order using his voice and gestures. It was some time

before it became possible to discern what it was all about and what the diggers and the women were trying to express.

“We’re in need of a witcher!” called the chief digger, brandishing his mattock. “Those underground creatures what live under the mountain carried off a boy! They attacked, seized him and dragged him into the abyss! Who will rescue him now, if not you?”

“It’s not two weeks ago,” said Holt, “that I warned you to stay well away from the shaft and the gallery. Well? Didn’t I tell you? To dig on the other side of the mountain? The cynocephaly have seized a boy, you say? How old? Five? When was it? Ah, the day before yesterday? Why, you didn’t hurry to send word to me. Dismount, Geralt.”

Preston Holt got off his horse. Geralt couldn’t help noticing it caused him difficulty. And that his left leg was very lame. With a gesture, he shoed away the women who were surrounding him, wailing. He spoke for a while to the chief digger and then tugged Geralt by the sleeve.

“Well, young witcher,” he said. “It’s time to help people in need, the victims of monsters. For we have just been hired.”

“If the cynocephaly took the boy the day before yesterday,” grunted Geralt, “the chances are slim that he’s still—”

“Alive? Yes, it’s doubtful. But perhaps we’ll at least find him... Hmm... It’ll give the mother the chance to bury whatever is left... Why the hesitation, young Geralt? Not long ago, you waded in to defend a maiden’s virtue and hack a man to death without a second thought, and now you hesitate?”

“Have I said anything?” said Geralt, shrugging. “Am I hesitating? I am not.”

The remains of a wooden construction, probably a drainage treadmill, had survived on the mountainside. A shaft was gaping there, partially collapsed, exposing a precipice.

“A shaft of the mine remains,” Holt explained, “and an adit, look, it’s over there. Both of them lead to a higher working. The working is curved, because it runs parallel to a seam which is completely mined out. From here there’s a slope running downwards, leading to a lower working, which is

even more crooked, with numerous side tunnels. Lower down is one more gallery, but it's completely flooded. The cynocephaly occupy that lower gallery, or drift. There might also be some holes down there, connected up to natural caves.

"Here's the plan: I can't get down below with this leg, so I shall head outside the gallery, make a racket there and draw the cynocephaly to me. You are our only hope. You'll descend the shaft to the drift, and from there down the slope road. There you have a chance to find... what needs to be found. With a bit of luck. Which I wish you, lad. See you at the top."

"Perhaps first I should," said Geralt, taking a risk, "check out..."

"Do what?" said Holt grimacing. "Ah, I understand. There's no point in... checking anything out. Drink the elixir, grab your medallion and get down to the shaft."

"With all respect," blurted out the chief digger, who was standing alongside, "but this buck seems a mite too young... Will he cope? We thought you, Master Holt, would go down. In person—"

Preston Holt turned around and glanced at him. The digger cringed and started mumbling something. Which he didn't complete.

The drift had a high roof. Geralt could easily walk upright, with still a few spans of clearance above his head. Everywhere water was dripping down the walls: nothing could be heard apart from the sound of the falling drops. He sped up, wanting to reach the slope road as soon as possible, before Holt raised a hullabaloo near the gallery, as promised.

Deep caverns were visible in the walls of the working, what was left after the deposits of ore had been mined. In one of the caverns, he saw a strange brick building—or rather, the remains of one. He couldn't know they were the ruins of an ancient shrine.

Of all social groups, it was the miners who continued to believe in gods the longest—something Geralt also didn't know. Working in conditions of unrelenting danger, they had to believe that some kind of providence was watching over them and that prayers offered to it would guarantee their safety. As one might easily guess, experience soon proved that their prayers were useless, that roof-collapses and firedamp explosions happen as often

to believers as they do to non-believers. But the miners believed anyway, built chapels, lit candles and prayed. For a long time. But not for ever. Good sense, as usual, finally prevailed.

The corridor began to rapidly fall, and he was now in the slope road. He listened out, though still heard nothing but water dripping.

He felt he was close to the lower drift when it started.

A large stone came whistling from the darkness and brushed his hair. After the first one, more came flying, some of them finding their target. One struck Geralt in the head and knocked him off balance, and the cynocephaly fell on him from all sides, howling ferociously and barking, scratching and biting. It was impossible to count how many of them there were, they were scampering around too quickly. Geralt yanked his sword from the scabbard, only to lose it immediately—two of the creatures held him fast, and a third knocked the weapon from his hands with a blow of a large lump of rock. The creature held the captured sword aloft and roared triumphantly, opening its doglike jaws wide.

The triumph was premature, as Geralt threw off the two assailants, grabbed a stone and heaved it, hitting the cynocephalus straight in the teeth. The cynocephalus dropped the sword, Geralt leaped forward, seized the weapon before it fell, and slashed the creature that was struggling with the stone caught in its mouth. He hacked up the next two with swift blows. And fled towards the shaft. Behind him came the sound of ferocious barking and rocks were flying—with some of them finding their targets again. One hit him in the back of the head—he saw a flash and an explosion of stars lit up the working. Another stone struck him in the lower back and almost knocked him over. Twice the cynocephaly caught up with him, digging their teeth into his calves, with only his leather leggings protecting him from serious injuries. One leaped and bit him painfully above the knee where the legging ended. Geralt didn't slow down to kill it.

He reached the shaft under a hail of rocks, climbed up the remains of a ladder, dived out onto the surface, fell to the ground and lay there. For some time.

“Well, well,” said a voice. “You’re out. And without any serious injuries even. I see blood is dripping from a few places. But it’s not gushing anywhere, and that’s something. I’m full of admiration.”

Preston Holt stood over him, gnawing on a roasted chicken leg.

“Seriously?” Geralt grunted, still lying on the ground. “Give over! You were meant to be in the gallery... Making a racket... To distract—”

“Indeed?” said Holt, tossing the bone away. “Oh, yes. Forgive me, I completely forgot.”

Geralt swore. His mouth still close to the ground.

“That’s not all,” said Holt, licking his fingers. “They aren’t paying us anything. Because the boy turned up. Came home. He’d simply wandered off, and as usual the diggers put the blame on the cynocephaly. Get up, young Geralt. Witcher Geralt. Let me help you. Can you walk? Then let’s go. As I said, we won’t get paid. But they’ll feed us and put us up for the night. The girls will dress your cuts. If you ask politely, then maybe one of them will be nice to you.”

They set off in the direction of the camp and the steaming cauldrons. Witcher Geralt had difficulty walking.

Some young women dressed his wounds in several places and fed him. And the diggers let them stay the night. Holt in a tent and Geralt in a wagon.

One of the girls came to Geralt in the night and was nice. But only nice, only a little, and nothing more. And left soon after.

At dawn, Geralt scrambled out of the wagon and began to saddle his mare, still hissing with the pain. Holt surprised him in the middle of it.

“Why such haste?” he asked, rubbing an eye. “Wait. They’ll serve us breakfast and then we’ll be on our way.”

“Seriously?” Geralt muttered through his teeth. “And perhaps I’m not so sure I want to go anywhere with you. Perhaps I prefer to head off by myself.”

Holt leaned against the trunk of a birch tree and looked up at the sky. It was clear, quite cloudless.

“I understand your attitude perfectly,” he said. “But I had to, with the emphasis on ‘had to,’ test you out at the start, assess what you’re like in action.”

“I mightn’t have got out of there alive.”

“But you did.”

“No thanks to you. So now I’m—”

“I invite you to ride alongside me at least until noon,” Holt interrupted. “Which translates, rounding it up and calculating the time of day, into five to six furlongs. The time and the distance will suffice, I believe, for you to get the anger you feel towards me out of your system and look at the world more soberly. And then I’ll have an offer for you.”

“What kind of offer?” asked Geralt, squinting.

“Six furlongs. Noon.”

It was indeed close to noon when the sky suddenly turned black from wings and there was a noisy fluttering of feathers and a loud cawing. Dozens—if not hundreds—of black birds rose from the ground and the branches of nearby trees and flew off.

“Ravens,” gasped Geralt. “So many ravens! Impossible! Ravens don’t fly in flocks! Never!”

“Doubtless,” Holt agreed. “So many ravens at one time is an extraordinary thing, I’m astonished myself. Doubtless we are witness to an remarkable occurrence. And we find ourselves in quite an extraordinary place. If you noticed.”

“A crossroads.” Geralt looked around. “A convergence of ways.”

“A crossroads. A symbolic place. Four roads leading to the four points of the compass. A place of choice and decision. Which you will have to take, Geralt. Witcher Geralt.”

The ravens had alighted on the upper branches of trees. They were cawing, observing the riders.

“Three of the roads, including ours, are the roads of a solitary witcher. They are the destiny you chose by setting out from Kaer Morhen. If you ride along one of those three roads, if that is your decision, we part company. If, however, you choose the fourth way, you will come to hear my offer.”

The ravens croaked.

“I am, as you have probably noticed, advanced in years. Let me add: *most*

advanced in years. You'd be surprised *how* advanced. I am also—it is apparent and cannot be hidden—crippled. The days of my witcher glory are now a hymn of the past. I will not now venture forth with swords, nor will the luminosity of my blades, so to speak, dispel the darkness. But darkness exists, monsters still prowl around at night. You can face and vanquish them. People at peril from monsters eagerly await your help.

“Indeed, I am poetising here and you're waiting for an offer. Here it is: I offer you a partnership. I was well-known here in Kaedwen and still am. I never complained of a shortage of customers, but now people ask me for help which I can no longer give them. But you can. I've taken a good look at you and say: be my successor, Geralt. Instead of wandering hungry along the highways, come live with me. Take advantage of my reputation and you won't be short of work. And after your work is done, you'll have somewhere to return to. And somewhere to winter. While I... It will gladden me to know that someone will be continuing my work. And in addition, I make no bones about it, that someone will help me to sustain myself in old age.

“You don't have to decide at once. For now, it's enough for you to ride on—not alone, but with me. You'll keep me company a while longer. Agreed?”

“I don't really know... Agreed.”

“Then let's ride. And leave the crossroads to the ravens.”

The ravens bade them farewell with their cawing.

“Don't be cross,” said Holt, turning around in the saddle, “but I insist that in my company you express yourself with reasonable correctness. Specifically, by not saying ‘check it out’ and ‘seriously.’”



The Western March lies on the River Buina, while it borders the Kestrel Mountains to the west. It was the previous intention of the margraves that the border was to shift ever westward, but it was, however, to no avail, for the Kingdom of Hengfors demarcated its eastern border there. There was a dispute over it and the threat of bloodshed. Hengfors, though small, had a powerful protector in Kovir, thus the margraves had to swallow their pride and agree to peace.

The peace, concluded in the year 1225 post Resurrectionem, was called the Peace of Barefield, and the border between the two kingdoms was established on the River Braa, thereby determining the western frontier of the March non plus ultra.

Baldwin Adovardo, *Regni Caedvenie Nova Descriptio*

As usual, it was cats and children that noticed them first. The cats, of which there were masses on the edge of the town, reluctantly got out of the way, looking back as they walked off, hissing. The children fled home crying and howling, discarding what they were playing with—mainly lumps of dried mud.

Apart from the cats and the children, none of the residents of the small town of Spynham paid the slightest attention to the witchers as they rode in. You might have thought that the black-cloaked riders with swords on their backs rode into Spynham so regularly they had utterly stopped attracting interest.

Preston Holt was familiar with the place, and knew which stable to leave their horses in. They continued on foot, along a muddy lane, frightening other cats and other snot-nosed children.

“Noble gentleman,” begged a woman with an infant on her lap, crouching by a wall. “Noble gentleman, give a penny... For milk for the infant...”

Before Holt managed to react, Geralt had untied a pouch and tossed the woman a mark, and she thanked him effusively. Holt kept silent for about fifty paces, but finally stopped.

“You are not a noble gentleman,” he hissed, looking Geralt in the eyes. “You are a big chump, however. You can buy the milk of a dozen cows for a mark. As you will soon find out, they won’t want to pay you much more for killing a monster. And killing a monster is a somewhat greater feat than whimpering for alms and baring one’s rotten teeth. And the baby was probably loaned from a friend who’s sitting in a tavern waiting to give a blow-job to a punter in the privy for half a mark. I warn you, don’t walk down this lane anymore, there’ll be great mirth if you show yourself here again.”

For a moment, Geralt felt like talking back to Holt and cheeking him, suggesting he keep his nose out of it and that he mind his own business. He didn’t, though. Somehow, he considered Holt his senior, as all but his master. Perhaps because Holt uncannily resembled Vesemir. At least in his behaviour and speech. For physically there were very dissimilar.

Ahead of them was the brightly whitewashed colonnade of a temple, in

front of which a veritable army of male and female beggars were hunkered down. The temple had been inactive and empty for years, but the beggars still squatted there. And held out their hands for alms. Out of habit.

Holt prudently pulled Geralt over to the other side of the street.

“Do you know why we’re called witchers?” he asked. “Because we’re the children of witches.”

“Seriously...” Geralt stammered. “You’re making it up. Witchers from witches. Do me a favour.”

“It may seem amusing to you, but it happens to be the truth. The first witchers were the children of women with uncontrolled magical abilities, called witches. They were demented and often used lustful young men as their sexual playthings. The children, the results of those games, were abandoned. Or left to be found. And occasionally, they made their way from orphanages and alms houses to witcher schools.”

“Like hell. You’re making it up. That didn’t happen.”

“It did. All of us witchers descend from mentally handicapped trollops. Doesn’t that amuse you?”

“Not at all. Because it never happened.”

“It did, it did. But long ago! Now you won’t find any witches outside temples. The sorcerers exterminated them all. Ha! Nothing lasts for ever.”

The nearer they got to the town square, the more thronged it became. For Geralt, it was something new. He wasn’t accustomed to crowds, and felt uncomfortable in them. The noise irritated him. He began to feel short of breath, and the stench was becoming more and more unpleasant. The air reeked of smoke, burned fat, rotting fruit, muck and the devil knew what else.

In the town square, they had to walk among stalls and the crowds of buyers. Here again, Geralt encountered nothing but novelties and surprises. And finally felt admiration. Never in his life had he supposed that so many trades existed and that such an abundance of wares could be offered for sale. And that there were so many people willing to buy them. Straps and other leather goods, glazed and unglazed earthenware pots, fur caps, sheepskin waistcoats, moccasins, embroidered headscarves, copper skillets, rakes, pitchforks, mattock shafts—and *obwarzanki*, *obwarzanki*, *obwarzanki*.

Holt didn’t pay the slightest attention to the marvels on the stalls. At a

certain moment, however, he stopped pushing his way through and seized Geralt by the sleeve.

“Eyes down,” he hissed. “Eyes down, don’t stare.”

“Why?”

“Sorceresses.”

Geralt obediently averted his gaze. Reluctantly. Two women at a stall with amber jewellery drew his gaze like a magnet. With their sumptuous attire. And their stunning beauty.

“They usually consider ordinary people as brutes,” Holt explained after they had moved on, “and they detest witchers. They are pugnacious, and might treat staring as a provocation. It would also be better if they didn’t detect our medallions.”

Holt stopped outside a splendid building with a sign above the door. The crude but quite well executed painting on the sign depicted a mermaid with ample breasts. The inscription beneath the painting read: “Lorelei.”

Holt grabbed the knocker and banged it vigorously. Very vigorously.

The heavy door opened and there stood a broad-shouldered bruiser with a jaw like a large loaf of bread. The bruiser glared at the witchers for a long while. Then stepped aside and gestured them in.

Holt, clearly a regular, took the two swords from his back and handed them over to the bruiser without being asked. Geralt hurriedly followed suit.

Now disarmed, they entered an antechamber lit by several lamps. Geralt was finding it hard to breathe, for the antechamber was strongly scented with the fragrances of perfume and incense. On the wall, there was another painting of a mermaid. Also, large-breasted. Without an inscription.

“Master Preston Holt,” said a woman, entering.

“Madam Pampinea Monteforte,” said Holt, bowing. Geralt also bowed. And closed his mouth, which a moment earlier he had opened. In awe.

Geralt, who was ignorant of the art of women’s dressmaking, couldn’t have known that the fabrics of Pampinea Monteforte’s black dress were diaphanous chiffon, muslin and crêpe. Neither did he know that it was a great art to make a dress so that by covering up, it actually revealed. And vice versa.

Neither did Geralt know what the quintessence of femininity was.

But what if he didn’t when he could see it.

“The young man?” asked Pampinea Monteforte, smiling endearingly

and shaking a mass of auburn curls.

“His name is Geralt. He is a young adept of the witcher’s art.”

“I hope,” said Pampinea, and the timbre of her voice altered strangely, “the adept was not brought here... with the aim of celebrating what might be called a rite of passage? I am compelled to remind you, Master Holt, that nothing has changed in Lorelei. Neither Master Holt, who is otherwise most welcome, nor any witcher, may be served in Lorelei. Since—”

“—Since,” Holt gently interrupted, “other customers might not want a girl that has previously been touched by a witcher. But of course I recall that, my dear Pampinea, and it never occurred to me to break the rules here. I don’t in the least come as a customer, only with the aim of meeting a friend and business partner. Timur Voronoff. He gave me word he would be here and arranged a meeting. Is he thus visiting today?”

“As a rule, in Lorelei we are not in the habit,” Pampinea said, pouting her full lips, “of giving out information about our customers. Irrespective of whether they have arranged to meet anyone or not. However, owing to the special relationship I’m aware that exists between you and Master Voronoff... I can inform you that you and he have clearly missed one another. Pan Voronoff was here a week ago. He spent several days here, probably waiting for the said meeting. When it didn’t come to pass, he left Spynham. He is probably now at home in Belvoir.”

“A thousand thanks,” said Holt, bowing once again and gesturing Geralt to do the same. “We offer our respects...”

“Master Holt,” said Pampinea Monteforte in a lowered voice, “you know, I believe, the secret entrance to Lorelei, located at the rear of the building. The entrance for... special and... secret guests. If then, my dear witchers, you were to betray a desire for refreshment... and... special indulgences...”

“I regret,” replied Holt, to Geralt’s even greater regret. “But time is short and duty calls. Another time, perhaps.”

After they had left, Geralt was preparing to reproach Holt. He didn’t manage to.

Voices could be heard coming from a nearby well. The high-pitched

squealing of a woman and the drunken baritone voice of a man. Geralt immediately headed in that direction. Before Holt could grab him by the sleeve, he saw the incident. A large peasant with a belly pouring out above the belt of his trousers was beating a woman cowering at his feet with a stick.

Geralt was already about to join in, but Holt was quicker—and that in spite of his disability. He ran forward, caught the peasant by the arm and jerked it.

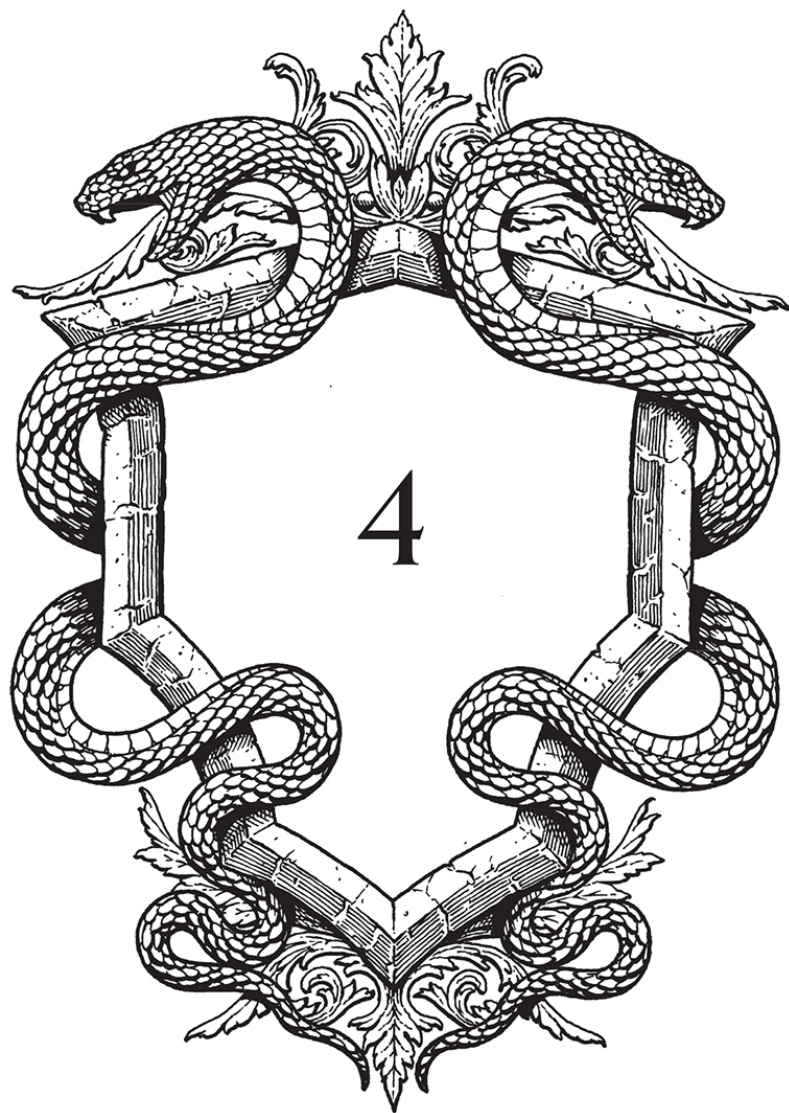
“What do you want, you vagabond!” yelled the peasant. “I’ll...”

He raised the stick, aiming a blow. And then something happened which was simply too fast for Geralt and the gathering crowd to see. Even with his lame leg, Holt spun in a lightning-fast half-turn and engaged the peasant at close quarters, who then went flying, banged his head against the surround of the well and lay sprawled on the pavement.

“Oh, my!” cried Holt. “A man has fallen! Something has happened! Help him, gentlefolk!”

The gentlefolk stood and stared, very reluctant to help. And the two witchers quickly left the scene.

No one stood in their way.



*Now go, for we are thoroughly at one. You are my leader, my master,
and my lord.*

Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy*, translated by J. G. Nichols

“What’s this, young Geralt, why are you down in the mouth? And broodingly silent? Look around. The spring is everywhere, there are catkins on the trees, the birds are singing, a stream is softly babbling. The smell of farming drifts from a village. By which I mean, sour milk and shit. But you, instead of rejoicing along with nature, are somehow out of sorts. Why is that?”

“My belly’s rumbling. We could have stayed in Spynham. Eaten something... That lady invited us...”

Preston Holt snorted.

“I suspect you aren’t missing lunch, but high jinks with a maid from Lorelei. The time will come for that, too, I promise, for Pampinea Monteforte will invite us to the secret annex of her building plenty more times. And there will certainly be a bold girl among them. Now, I’d like to return to my home, Rocamora, as soon as possible.”

“Where does that name derive from? Rocamora?”

“I don’t know. It came with the property.”

Preston Holt told Geralt he had journeyed from the capital itself along with the ongoing construction of the Great Highway planned to connect Kaedwen to Hengfors, and then Kovir and Poviss. The forest clearances were rousing monsters and also attracting throngs of people. The overseers were ready to pay for protection and there was plenty of work and lucrative orders for a witcher. A little over four years earlier, before the roadbuilding had reached the border of the Upper March, an accident had occurred. Holt had sustained serious injuries as well as a comminuted fracture of one of his legs in a fight with a meganeura that he ultimately defeated and killed. The accident cut short Holt’s career as a witcher. It was then that he bought the small grange called Rocamora and went into retirement.

“I occasionally take on jobs,” he told Geralt. “Voronoff chooses undemanding monsters for me, and I head out onto the road again. This time I deliberately travelled northwards in order to meet you. I was already there in February, I made myself known to many people: the Great Highway roadbuilders, the alderman, the soldiers. I must admit that those

acquaintances have paid dividends.”

“Who is this Voronoff? You sought information about him from that lady —”

“Pampinea Monteforte. The brothel keeper. And a lady, indeed, every inch a lady. Timur Voronoff, however, is my agent.”

“That Madam Pampinea said you’d missed each other. And that he’d returned to... Belvoir? But we aren’t going there, are we?”

“No. It’s not on our way. We’re riding south, down the king’s highway. Belvoir is to the west.”

“And that agent... What does he actually do?”

“You’ll find out in due course. If you finally take a decision regarding my offer. Well? Have you thought it over? Can we talk about it?”

“Maybe later.”

“As you wish. Spur on your horse.”

Thatched roofs stood out in a small picturesque valley, among hornbeams, alders and willows. Smoke curled lazily from a chimney. Holt stood up in his stirrups.

“We’re home.”

“You are, you mean,” muttered Geralt.

“You are too. If you agree to my offer.”

“That’s a big ‘if.’”

“You’re a difficult customer. Come on, let’s go in.”

One entered Rocamora, which was girdled by a palisade, though an entrance gate leading to a courtyard. A toft stood there, a sturdy building constructed of pine logs, with a steep thatched roof. Beside it there was a granary, a stable, a barn, a well, a dovecote, a bathhouse and several outbuildings.

One passed through a large hallway into the great hall, and from there to a large common room with a tiled stove, from which several smaller rooms led off. A large kitchen and the servants’ quarters adjoined the house.

The domestic staff consisted of a steward, a gloomy character always busy with bills; an old servant working as an armour-bearer; a young stable boy; and the serving girls from the village who frequently came and went.

There was also a stout, obstreperous and fussy woman combining the functions of cook and provisioner. The woman's shouts and moods could easily be forgiven, since her cooking was excellent. To Geralt, accustomed to the monotonous and rather meagre fare in Kaer Morhen, every meal in Rocamora seemed like a royal banquet. In his entire life he had never seen or tasted dishes such as beef roulades or *golq̃bki*, while the lamb and vegetables was simply an unimaginable feast.

Feasting, idleness and watching the carrier pigeons coming and going didn't last long.

"You must be aware of the fact," Holt began, leading Geralt to the barn, "that in the matter of that deserter you had a miraculous escape from the noose. You killed a man with a sword. No one cares if you acted in the defence of yourself or another innocent victim. Witchers aren't liked. You could have hanged for killing a man, by the verdict of a court or as the result of a lynching. That's why it's better not to draw your sword on people. There are other ways."

"You mean Signs?"

"Not only."

Four posts topped with hard leather dummies of human heads and torsos had been driven into the threshing floor of the utterly empty barn.

"Everything I'm going to show you here," said Holt, removing his jerkin, rolling up his shirtsleeves, putting on thick riding gloves and handing another pair to Geralt, "is meant to serve only self-defence. I stipulate and emphasise: defence and nothing else. You are a witcher, not a ruffian or a rabble-rouser. Keep that in mind."

Geralt nodded to confirm he would.

"No doubt little has changed in Kaer Morhen since my day," continued Holt, "and we regularly fought bare-knuckle. It's great to fight like that, isn't it? It's pleasant and natural; you could probably say: atavistic. In any case, sometimes you can't fight any other way, particularly when emotions are strong, so to speak. When emotion gives way to judicious premeditation, however, you have to consider the possibility of serious injuries to the hands, wrists, fingers or all of them at once. Punching bare-knuckle sometimes has worse consequences for the puncher than the punched."

"Which is why, lad, tools come in useful. Yes, yes, I know, you don't

need to remind me. Each of your swords has a pommel; hard to think of a better tool. It's also worth packing a knife with a solid handle. Brass knuckles are good. They don't take up much room and can be damned effective. It's also worth carrying a stout staff, if only because of dogs. They are much more dangerous than people.

"Passing over swords, knives or brass knuckles, even a stick can be treated as a weapon, a dangerous tool, whose use—even in defence—can have the kind of consequences I mentioned. So, it's worth carrying something inconspicuous on you. A piece of metal. Even a key. I have one here. One like this.

"Take it. From today it's yours. Just to explain: it doesn't fit any lock; I found it on a dust heap.

"Now let's quickly revise what you can find on the human head. These life-like, boiled buffalo hide dummies I had made up specially will serve to demonstrate that for us.

"The bregma!" said Holt, and hit the leather dummy with all his might, raising dust and making the post shudder. "The point where the frontal bone and the parietal bones meet, beneath which lies the frontal lobe and the motor cortex, the parts of the brain responsible for movement. You can overpower anybody with a solid blow. Right, now you. Slam it a few times in the bregma. Splendid. A natural talent. Or perhaps training in the Stronghold?

"The temples, despite widespread belief, aren't the best targets at all. If anything, it's more effective to strike the sphenoid bone, located right here; I've marked it specially with paint." Holt slammed the dummy again. "The temporal artery runs under this bone. A blow here causes haemorrhaging and death. Naturally, my previous comments apply again. The penalty for murder is the noose. And you, let me remind you, are learning self-defence, not assault.

"The orbital bones, you were probably also taught, are sensitive places. The force of a blow transmits to the frontal lobe and the result is loss of consciousness. Now you. Strike!

"The nasion and bridge of the nose, as everybody knows who got into fights when they were young, can easily break and be crushed. A direct punch to the nose causes acute pain and heavy bleeding, which are occasionally capable of eliminating one's opponent from the melee. It won't

eliminate a braver and stronger opponent, it's worth bearing in mind, at most it will enrage him. For that reason, a much better target is—stay with me, this is important—the glabella, which is located half an inch above the bridge. It's an extraordinarily sensitive point. A powerful blow will damage the opponent's frontal lobe, causing concussion and loss of consciousness. Go on, show me a few blows to the glabella. Splendid!

“Below the nose, a quarter of an inch lower, is the so-called intermaxillary suture. A fine target for the fist. A punch breaks the front teeth and nasal bones, which in itself is amazingly spectacular and damned effective. But that's not all. The jawbone is connected to the neurocranium, or brainpan, so the result of a blow is usually concussion. I've also heard—I haven't practised it or experienced it myself—that a powerful and expert punch to the lower part of the intermaxillary suture is capable of damaging the second cervical vertebra, to be specific the odontoid process or dens—whatever the dens is. The result, I've been assured, is trauma to the brainstem. That would eliminate every single aggressor from combat.

“Now a few words about the neck. A punch to the neck can kill if one strikes accurately and powerfully to this point here, below the ear, at the part of the skull called the mastoid process. I've also marked it with paint. A precise and powerful blow to that process, particularly using something like your key, ruptures the vertebral artery, which runs right here, through the transverse foramina of the cervical vertebrae. Such a tear of this artery means an instant loss of consciousness and inevitable death. If it's necessary to take somebody's life, the mastoid process is a decent method. Go on, show me a blow to the process. And again! Good.

“The neck is above all the larynx, though. Among human males it's the protruding Adam's apple, or *prominentia laryngea*. Dwarves and gnomes, as you know, also have this prominence, but elves and other hominids don't. But to the point: a blow to that place results in internal bleeding, and when the soft tissues swell, they block the windpipe. If a person is struck and doesn't receive immediate help, they suffocate. It's also a pretty good way of taking somebody's life. Particularly if it needs to be done quietly. I see you want to ask something.”

“That peasant, in Spynham... The one hitting the woman. I didn't see where you... Did he survive?” asked Geralt.

“Nature can be inscrutable. But I don't see any reason to be concerned.

Or worry about it at all. Let's go on training. Geralt, show me a few nice blows to the Adam's apple. And then we'll stop."

There was braised rabbit with onion and celery for lunch.

It was the turn of staves the following day. Three-foot-long oaken staves polished with use. In place of swords. Holt's crippled leg, it turned out, didn't hamper him in swordsmanship. He was as nimble as a cat.

Holt attacked without warning, and Geralt parried with a quarto passing towards the primo. Geralt then deflected Holt's overarm swing with a high double thrust, pressed forward and struck out, which Holt took on the forte with a quarter-turn of his wrist. Holt then spun around, offered a feint and attacked like a striking cobra. Geralt parried using a primo and, coming out of a half-turn, countered with a powerful side strike, which Holt parried with a high octavo, an atypical move in itself.

The clacking of sticks echoed around the courtyard. They were so loud and the rhythm so rapid they attracted the steward and the stable boy.

"You have a tendency to come out of the volte and cut with a mandritto, young Geralt. Your side strike is powerful, as that deserter found out. Powerful blows, but somehow lacking grace and finesse..."

"Why would anyone want grace or finesse? One cuts in order to kill."

"But in order to kill without falling into a routine, try out the reverse cut for a change. In other words, using Vesemir's terminology, the sinistro. Just as lethal a blow, I assure you. I mean the other way around, passo largo with the right foot, a half-turn, molinetto and roverso. Shall we practise that?"

They practised.

For over an hour, neither managed to hit the other with his stave. They could just have easily been fighting without protective clothing.

"Not bad, young witcher, not bad. Vesemir, I note, hasn't lost any of his prowess and still teaches well. Finis, enough for today. But to finish... Just a little memento."

He attacked with great speed, using a gran passata with the right foot and such a powerful molinetto that Geralt had to parry with a serpentine. Arching his torso, Holt feinted a mandritto to the left temple, a molinetto, contratempo passo largo with his left foot, another molinetto, the brutal

downward slash of the tramazzone and... Geralt saw stars and suddenly found himself on the ground, landing hard on his backside.

Swarms of bees were buzzing and droning in his head. He had been hit hard in the temple. The leather guard had come in useful, it turned out.

“What was that?” he asked, dazed.

“Grace, Geralt. Grace and finesse.”

Holt’s body, when he undressed in the washhouse, turned out to be a map of injuries and a chronicle of casualties.

“This one here is a kikimore.” He pointed to a crescent-shaped row of toothmarks on his left biceps. “It took me by surprise.”

A horrific scar on his shoulder blade turned out to be a souvenir of a sickler’s claws. A scar above his right hip had been left by a gryphon’s talon, while his left shoulder was marked by a vypper’s fangs.

The clash with a meganeura had left the most gruesome lesion. The old witcher’s left thigh was deformed, and apart from the marks of jaws it bore the traces of surgical incisions and sutures, from his hip almost to his knee.

“On top of that,” said Holt, dowsing himself with water from a pail and thrashing himself on the back with a birch besom, “is my calf, look here. Do you know who did that to me? A farmyard cur. I killed the son of a bitch. And there’s my skull, too, I have dizzy spells from time to time. I was hit in the head with a mug in a Novigrad tavern. Yes, yes, young Geralt. A witcher’s hide is a record. In the winter when you return to Rocamora, we’ll take a look at and count up your souvenirs. For you won’t get by without them. I’m not frightening you. Just stating a fact.”

The medallion around Holt’s neck depicted a viper’s head with large fangs.

Geralt hesitated for a long time before asking a question. So long that Holt answered. Himself. Without being asked.

“Yes, I was in Kaer Morhen then, thirty-five years ago. I’ll tell you about it one day. But not today.”

“But—”

“I was using a different name then. It doesn’t surprise me that Vesemir kept it from you all. As I said, our paths diverged. And I went back to my

real given name and family name. For I knew them, you ought to know.

“When my mother gave me up, somewhere in Kovir, apparently,” he explained, seeing Geralt’s enquiring expression, “she put a slip of paper among my swaddling clothes. It happens that mothers who know how to write put a piece of paper containing personal details with their foundlings... usually just the date of birth. Sometimes, the given name, but occasionally also the father’s given name or even family name. The kind womenfolk from the orphanage in Kovir kept the piece of paper and gave it to the witchers who took me from the orphanage. And when I bade farewell to Kaer Morhen—and it wasn’t a cordial goodbye—Vesemir revealed to me my real identity. For Vesemir, like old Byrnjolf before him, has an archive of slips of paper left with the foundlings, but doesn’t allow anyone to look at them. Though at times he makes an exception.”

“He does,” said Geralt, growing animated. “Thus, I know that my pal, Eskel, is really called Esau Kelly Kaminski. But he didn’t like his full name. And no wonder. He invented an abbreviation from the first two names.”

“But about you, did Vesemir reveal your identity to you when you left?”

“No.”

“When will you teach me that feint? The one... with grace? Mandritto, and then twice molinetto and tramazzone...”

“Primo, I’m not running a fencing school. And secundo...”

“Yes?”

“I have to keep a few little secrets from you, don’t I?”

“There, try it on.”

The jacket was made of soft leather, with silver studs on the shoulders and sleeves.

“Quite new, and already I can’t button it up over my belly. But it fits you like a glove, look. Well, it’s yours from now on. And here are some gloves to make up the set. No need to thank me.”

Finally, midway through May, at the beginning of the month of Blathe, it was time to bid farewell to Rocamora. And to punching leather dummies. And fencing with staves. And a palliasse stuffed with dried pea stalks. With beef roulades, *gołębki* and pancakes with honey.

Time to saddle up.

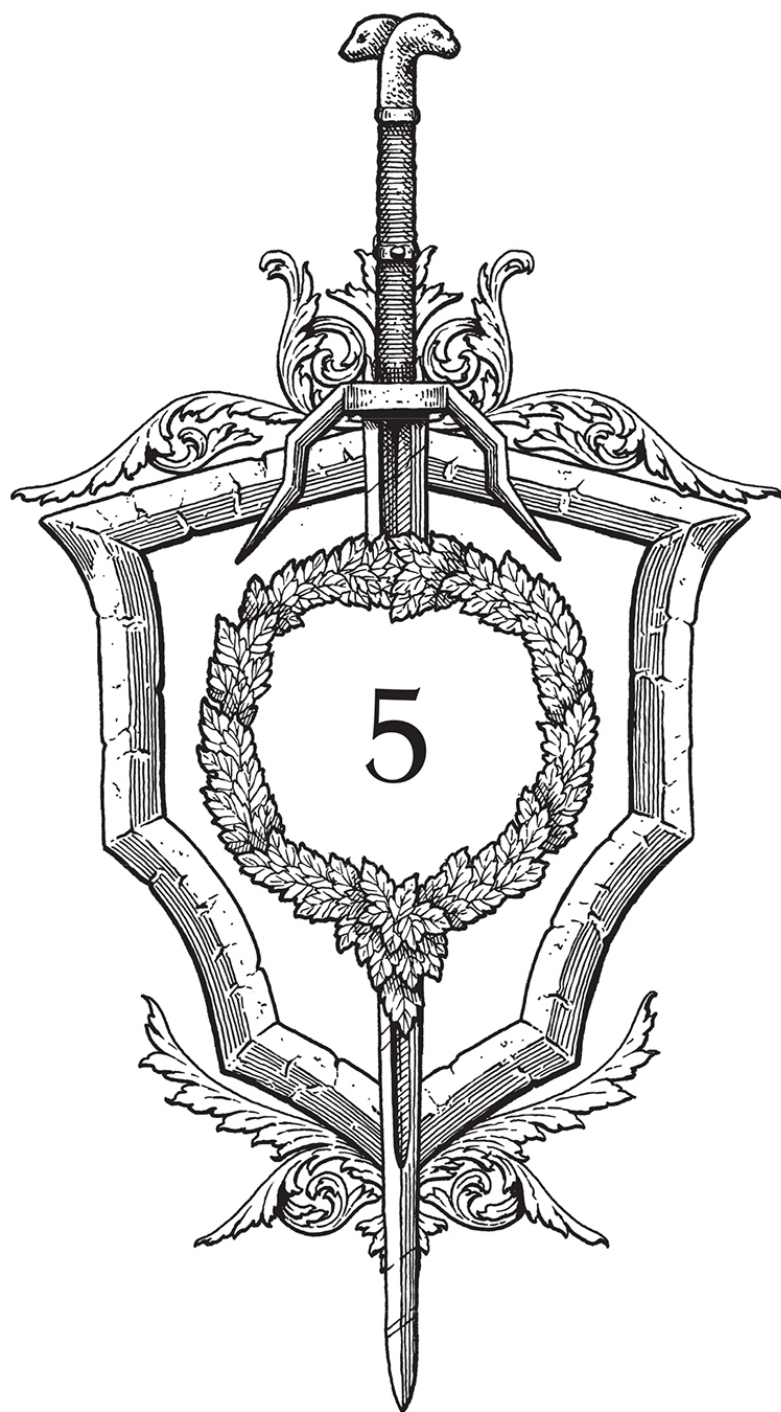
Preston Holt adjusted the straps and fastenings of Geralt's saddlebags. He checked the girth and the buckles on the stirrup leathers. The stirrups.

Then he checked it all once again.

"You haven't given me your final decision," he finally said, "regarding a collaboration. I don't insist, I'm not forcing you, I'm not handing you a chirograph to sign. For now, we operate according to the principle of freedom and mutual trust."

Rocamora's gate opened with a creak.

"Ride off, Witcher Geralt."



The Lower March bordered with the River Pontar to the south. Power was wielded there since time immemorial by the Mansfeld family, wealthy and high-handed lords, in possession of their own army. In the year of 1215 post Resurrectionem they invaded the Kingdom of Aedirn and, having crossed the Pontar, set their marks by the small river Dyfne, proclaiming it the March's new border. King Videmont of Aedirn deemed it a casus bello and struck at the aggressors with all his forces. In cruel battles, the Mansfelds were driven back across the border of the Pontar. From those days forth, skirmishes have occurred without let-up and the border is said to be "aflame."

The Mansfelds have a boar's head in their arms: d'argent, hure de sanglier arrachée de gueules. Such is the emblem of the entire March.

Baldwin Adovardo, *Regni Caedvenie Nova Descriptio*

To His Excellency Prefect of the Guard
Estevan Trillo da Cunha
in Ard Carraigh

*Written: in Ban Fillim, 22nd of May, in the eighth year of the reign of
His Majesty King Miodrag*

Your Excellency Lord Prefect,

I humbly report that in keeping with my orders I placed the property called Rocamora under close surveillance. To my chagrin, I regrettably have to inform you that I no longer have an informer inside the property, since the suspect Witcher Holt smelled a rat and drove my informer thence, having first severely corporally punished him. The suspect Holt threatened the informer, forgive my words, with having his legs torn out of his arse, which in itself proves his wickedness and cries out for punishment. Thus, what was done and spoken about in the property I cannot know nor report upon, however I might wish to, for which I beg forgiveness.

I report, nevertheless, that the other witcher, a youth, who was lying low in the property of Rocamora since early spring, left it on horseback and headed towards the Western March along the highway around the middle of the month of May.

As regards the suspect Holt, he has not taken a step outside the property, but did summon a physician, from which I conclude that things are deteriorating with his infirmity. I humbly report these matters, I assure my undying obedience and I wish all happiness to His Excellency My Lord Prefect.

With utmost respect,

Uger Zolteri, crown investigative agent

The small town of Belvoir lay in a wooded valley. Geralt had a good view of it from the hill he had ridden up. Enabling him to conclude that Belvoir was at least twice the size of the town of Spynham, which he had visited in

March. The town seemed much more densely built-up, and from his vantage point he could see a tangle of narrow streets, a veritable labyrinth. Thus, it was fortunate that the place Geralt was heading for was located at the very edge and he didn't have to fear getting lost in the maze.

The town was surrounded by a ring of vegetable gardens and orchards full of gorgeously flowering apple and morello cherry trees.

A building with a steep, red-tiled roof was the only one in the street. It was surrounded by a high fence, preventing one from seeing what was behind it. There was a double-leafed gate under a small roof in the fence, wide enough for horse-drawn wagons. Deep ruts were evidence that vehicles often passed through it. Beside the gate was a wicket with a brass bell hanging over it.

Geralt tugged on the cord and the bell rang loudly and melodiously. A moment later, the wicket opened and a porter stood in the gateway.

He was a hefty fellow. Wearing a coat of rabbit pelts. One would need thirty such pelts to make a coat for a man of normal dimensions. The difference between the porter and a normal-sized man was about another thirty pelts.

The fellow saw the two sword hilts over Geralt's right shoulder, frowned, but indicated the entrance gate without asking anything. The gate soon opened and Geralt was able to ride inside.

Soon after, two more characters appeared in the small courtyard. They were of average size. They were not wearing rabbit-fur coats, but had they been, thirty pelts would have done just fine. One took charge of Geralt's horse right away. The other silently took both of his swords from him.

The homestead had an elegant porch with a small banister and a gable roof with four carved posts. Leading up to the porch were some steps. In front of which Geralt was ordered to wait.

He went on waiting. Decidedly longer than what Geralt might have considered customary and reasonable. So, it was fortunate that a swarthy man in a burgundy doublet with flowery embroidery and two rows of small cloth-covered buttons finally came out onto the porch. The man was holding a cambric handkerchief with which he would wipe his mouth every now and again.

"Oh, youth," he said, fixing Geralt with black eyes, "how lightly it flashes along, o'er aery cliffs and glittering sands. And bloom, bloomingly.

Ah! Who of us was a child? Almost every one of us.”

Geralt said nothing.

“If only a little experience could accompany youthfulness,” said the man, dabbing his mouth with the handkerchief. “A pinch of seasoning. Of empiricism. But can they co-exist? It is one thing or the other. I trust Preston Holt knows what he’s doing?”

Geralt neither confirmed nor contradicted that.

“So, do you know what you are doing, young man?”

Geralt shrugged. The man sighed.

“I am Timur Voronoff.”

“Geralt.”

Timur Voronoff wiped his mouth with his handkerchief. He leaned against the banister.

“Geralt. Most homespun. Wouldn’t it be worth embellishing your assumed name with a ‘de’? With some kind of noble prefix? Ah, I understand. We don’t like to converse. We prefer to talk with our sword? Admirable and praiseworthy. For it will afford me profit, too. Enter. There are matters to discuss.”

The invitation, it turned out, didn’t extend at all to the house, but merely to a large—though extremely sparsely furnished—anteroom. Timur Voronoff indicated a chair at a small table for Geralt, while he sat down opposite him.

From elsewhere in the house came the sound of children’s voices, at least three of them. From there also drifted the pleasant smell of scrambled eggs. Cooked with bacon. Or ham.

Voronoff finally folded up the handkerchief and stowed it away into his doublet.

“It is matters of organisation and finances which need above all to be talked through,” he began. “I presume your agreement with Holt is valid? For you have concluded a contract, haven’t you?”

“We operate according to the principle of freedom and mutual trust.”

“In other words, it’s a verbal agreement. Which doesn’t change the fact that you are setting off on the witcher path as his *per procura*.”

Geralt didn’t know what *per procura* was, but guessed at the meaning. And confirmed with a nod of the head.

“Thus, as it were, automatically,” Voronoff continued, “in other words

per facta concludentia, Holt's contract with me applies to you. I am from today, that is from the twenty-first of May of the year one thousand two hundred and twenty-nine, your sole agent for the territory of the Kingdom of Kaedwen and its four marches. My fee is ten per cent. From each of your witcher undertakings."

Geralt confirmed with a nod of the head.

"Now the financial aspect. Did Holt equip you with any ready money?"

"I have fifty marks."

"You will receive a further fifty, and three travelling allowances of two hundred marks each for unforeseen circumstances. You will account for such circumstances, should they arise, on the basis of receipts, so don't forget to insist on such a receipt each time. Whereas the *per diem* for your upkeep and minor expenses will be five marks, paid in a lump sum, beginning from today. You may, naturally, deduct this sum from your earnings.

"How much you demand for your witcher services I leave in principle to your discretion. You possess, I presume, sufficient knowledge to be able to convert the risk into the sum to be paid. But you shouldn't spoil the market. By no means. Holt has never taken less than fifty crowns. Neither should you charge less.

"To remind you: the official currency of Kaedwen is the mark, but Novigradian crowns are in common circulation and prices, particularly high ones, are often calculated in crowns. The average and reasonably stable exchange rate is five marks to the crown.

"Don't encumber yourself needlessly with cash, deposit everything in my sub-accounts in the dwarven banks or at currency exchanges, with the Vivaldis, Cianfanellis, Mantovanis or Bonis. I have opened accounts in all of them, it will suffice to give my name when making a deposit. Should you be hired by a public office, let us say a local government, clearance should usually be possible at once by the bank, cashlessly. Is that clear?"

Geralt confirmed with a nod of the head.

"While we're on the subject of cashless transactions, don't ever accept barter. It may be that you will be offered for a service a side of pork, a coop of hens or a night with a local belle. The last of those in particular may entice you, but, I repeat, never accept it. And the point here is not just that it is difficult for me to calculate my commission from such barter. Don't spoil

the market. Or your reputation. It's easily lost, but difficult to reclaim."

The children inside the house had fallen silent. They were evidently eating.

"As you probably know," Voronoff continued, "the Kingdom of Kaedwen consists of the central—or 'royal'—district, surrounded by the Marches. The name 'march,' as you also probably know, comes from 'marks,' or border signposts..."

"I know that."

"When Kaedwen was being founded," said Voronoff, unconcerned with what Geralt did or didn't know, "the intention was not to possess strictly delineated borders, rather the task and rationale of each March was to set its marks further and further and to extend its frontiers. Indeed, it was initially thus, though today the kingdom's borders have in the main become stable. But the expansion, though on a considerably smaller scale, continues, with settlers diverging in all directions and penetrating borderland wildernesses. And wildernesses, as you'd expect, teem with monsters. I believe you should never complain of a shortage of work.

"Thus, let us speak *ad rem*," said Voronoff, thinking nothing of using words which were foreign to Geralt. "I suggest you head north, to the Upper March. The Great Highway is being constructed there, forging a way through the Kestrel Mountains. They have been hoping for the arrival of a witcher there for a long time. It has, indeed, reached my ears that you and Holt have made enemies in that region, but don't worry, I have endeavoured to ameliorate the situation.

"On your way, contact the local administration and keep a look out for notices on posts at crossroads. It is the accepted way of indicating that they are seeking help and that a witcher is needed somewhere. At one time, such notices were not put up, and witchers weren't welcome anywhere in Kaedwen... You know about that, don't you?"

"I do."

"Just to clarify," said Voronoff and raised his head. "I am not instructing you or testing your knowledge. I carry out the duties of an agent, and it's an agent's duty to inform. Thus, I continue to inform. The bad time for witchers of which I was speaking quickly passed. Folk understood that if there were monsters or spells, they could only expect succour from your kind, and no one else. You won't ever be loved here in Kaedwen, they

won't fall on your necks, or strew blossom at your feet, but when there is terror, they call for help and are prepared to pay for it."

The children inside the house had apparently dealt with their breakfast, because they had begun to make a commotion again. Voronoff looked back several times, making it clear that the audience ought to be ended.

"Do you have any questions?"

Geralt said nothing for some time. He pondered.

"That bad time for witchers," he asked, "was it more or less the year one thousand one hundred and ninety-four?"

"More or less," said Voronoff, squinting his eyes. "Indeed."

"Holt was in Kaer Morhen then, was he? What happened at that time?"

Voronoff eyed Geralt for a while. And then wiped his mouth with the handkerchief.

"I conclude from that question," he said finally, "that Holt himself didn't tell you anything. Why then, should I?"

"An agent's duty is to inform. Well, then inform me."

"I inform you," responded the agent after a moment's silence, "that I don't possess anything in the matter under discussion about which I might inform you. And now farewell. Hop up into the saddle and be on your way."



You study bestiaries in order to acquire knowledge about what you will have to fight against. Remember, however, that knowledge is not everything. Books will teach you about known facts—about monsters that are familiar to us. Books will also permit you to understand that known unknowns exist—monsters which we know must exist, but which we do not know. But no bestiary and no book will prepare you for the unknown that we know not. For monsters about which we have no knowledge, nor any comprehension of their existence.

Vesemir of Kaer Morhen

The village—containing a good thirty cottages—lay in the bend of a small river with flat banks covered in sweet flag. Nearby, the surface of a small pond, surrounded by a ring of willows, glistened in the sun. Beyond the village was a forest, a dark wall of thicket and mature trees.

A bumpy road led straight to the village green. Access to it, however, was guarded by one isolated homestead, about a furlong away. From there, in spite of the distance, came the melodious ding-ding-ding of metal against metal.

He was first noticed by some pearl hens foraging among the nettles, which raised an indescribable racket. It was common enough, almost all peasants kept pearl hens, for nothing raised the alarm about intruders like them. Only after them—when he had almost reached the farmyard—did the dogs wake up. And bark ferociously, so it was fortunate they were tied up.

The metallic sounds were coming from an open-ended, roofed shed. Fire was flickering inside. And steam rose occasionally.

Geralt dismounted and tossed the reins over a picket.

Inside, in bursts of flame, a teenaged boy was working a bellows, hanging on the ropes that operated the contraption. A halfling in a leather apron stood beside an anvil, striking a horseshoe held in tongs with a hammer. He saw Geralt, but even so, continued working. Geralt waited without going any closer.

The halfling stopped hammering and plunged the horseshoe into a pail. It hissed and belched foul-smelling steam.

“Well?”

“The notice board at the crossroads. ‘Witcher wanted.’”

The halfling tossed the horseshoe onto a pile of other horseshoes. He put down the hammer and wiped the sweat from his forehead. Covered in soot, in the flickering flashes of fire, he looked like a little devil.

“Perhaps that is so,” he said, not even looking at Geralt. “And what of it?”

“I am a witcher.”

“Really?” The halfling looked on in disbelief. “You? A witcher? Since yesterday, I should think.”

“Longer than that. A little.”

“Oh yes, I see, it’s but a little. No offence, for though your hair is white, you have a child’s face. And hardly any beard. It would be easy to make a mistake. Thus, I wanted to be sure.”

“May I assure you. Who’s the elder in the settlement? And where will I find him?”

“No point looking. And no point going into the village.”

Geralt said nothing for a while. He was wondering if using coarse language would help or hinder him.

“If I don’t go into the village,” he finally asked, “then how do I find out what’s what? From who?”

“From me,” said the halfling, indicating for the boy to finally set down the bellows. “Name?”

“Geralt.”

“And I am Augustus Hornpepper. The village blacksmith. The signpost at the crossroads was accomplished using my art. For I’m lettered. I’ve been schooled. So, the elders of the community entrusted me with the task: meaning to write a sign and greet a witcher, if one shows up. Thus, I greet you.

“And you don’t need to enter the village,” he continued, seeing that Geralt wasn’t returning the courtesy. “They insisted it wasn’t necessary. Not at all, understand?”

“No.”

“They don’t want you there!” the village blacksmith blurted out. “And that’s that. I was entrusted with the matter, so talk and bargain with me. With me. For not only am I a halfling, I’m also a blacksmith. No witchcraft works on halflings, and no devil can touch a blacksmith. Witchers don’t frighten me.”

“Are the folk in the village so timorous?”

“You jest. It is well-known that a witcher bears along with him all sorts of evil and foul miasmas, that they always carry some sort of affliction with them, even the plague. And then what? Must one burn everything he touches? Moreover, there are plenty of young maids in the village. So who’ll keep guard over the witcher? He’ll put a spell on them, fuck them and then we’ll be in a right mess. Try marrying a girl off after that.”

Saying that, the blacksmith grinned. The lad, however, was looking at Geralt with his mouth wide open and eyes full of fear.

“Very well, that’s enough frivolity,” said the halfling, growing serious. “Sit down here, on the bench.”

“Won’t it spoil the bench? For you’ll surely have to burn it?”

“I fear not. This is a smithy; witchcraft doesn’t work here.”

Geralt sat down. Augustus Hornpepper settled on a stool facing him. The servant boy also sat down. On the dirt floor in the corner.

“It’ll be around a twelve-month ago that a pestilence visited the village,” began the halfling. “The animals began dying. Heifers and bullocks. Hens stopped laying. A fellow was mowing the hay and cut himself with his scythe. A woman miscarried. A hired hand fell from a roof, breaking his leg. The headman got the shits, never left the shithouse all day and night. Put simply, innumerable calamities. Folk wondered and wondered, until they came up with something. That it was witchcraft.”

Geralt stayed politely silent.

“An old woman lived in the village,” Augustus Hornpepper continued a moment later. “An old crone, as bent as a dog’s hind leg, with a wart on her nose. She dealt in herbalism. She was spotted hanging around the henhouse, the one where the hens had stopped laying. And she’d been spitting into the fishpond and soon after the fish were floating belly up. Well, they took that crone and into the pond with ’er. Splosh! They looked—she’s not drowning. Which means she was a witch. Pulled her out—”

“And burned her.”

“Aye. After first breaking her neck.”

“Go on.”

Augustus Hornpepper hawked and spat into the pail of water.

“The crone had a cat,” he continued. “A great big black bastard. Everyone knows what a cat like that is doing with a witch. They wanted to catch it and burn it too, but it gave them the slip. Disappeared into the trees and that’s all they saw of it.”

“And?”

“And then it all started. A lad went looking for firewood and vanished. They found him after three days. The skin on his face gashed down to the bone, one arm half bitten off, belly slashed open, guts pulled out. Then another one. Likewise: ripped up by claws, bitten, innards on the outside. Then one more, likewise. You could see right away: a cat was behind it. And that was confirmed.”

“What was? And how?”

“One fellow survived. It’ll be about a month since. He was holding his guts in both hands, but somehow dragged himself back to the village. Before he expired, he confirmed it. It was a cat. A black cat. A huge one. As big as a calf. So, it was clear, they said. It was the witch’s cat. It had magically grown and was avenging its mistress.”

“Do go on.”

“No one goes into the woods now, only as a group. And in any case, it’s hard to put a group like that together, because everyone’s frit. And there are meadows in them woods, they need mowing, or we’ll run out of hay. Well, the elders resolved to call a witcher. They had a whip-round. Instructed me to make a notice, so I did and nailed it up. I’m glad to see you so soon. You bear swords, I see. And I have their money in safe keeping. Once you’ve killed the monster, I pay you.”

“You want me to kill the cat. The witch’s cat?”

Augustus Hornpepper said nothing for a while.

“I’m a blacksmith,” he said finally, looking keenly at the witcher. “I’m not afraid of any witchcraft, for I work magic here myself. Why, how do you think I use my hammer to make hard iron soft and take on any shape I desire? It’s fire magic and a devilish power, naught else. On top of that I’m a halfling. Impervious to everything.”

Geralt didn’t comment. The blacksmith hawked and spat again.

“I’m impervious to everything,” he continued. “Including bullshit about witchcraft, too. For since the dawn of time, livestock have dropped dead and hens have stopped laying. Fish die when a pond blooms. Mowers cut themselves when they pick up a scythe drunk. And the headman’s shits? Was that really supernatural? Show me something, my good fellow, more natural than the shits. The conclusion is simple: there was no magic, no witchcraft, no devilry. They wrung the neck of an innocent woman, they did. I see what I’m saying doesn’t move you at all.”

“I’m impervious too.”

“You have to be in your trade, sure. Well, each should look after his own. For me it’s a hammer and an anvil. An innocent woman murdered is a matter for the shire-reeve and the courts. And your matter as a witcher is to deal with whatever is killing folk in the forest. For *something* is killing them. Although I’d bet it isn’t the old crone’s cat. So? Young witcher? What

do you think?”

“To keep it simple,” said Geralt a moment later, “let’s assume it is a cat. It’s a name as good as any other. So, let’s get to the details. How much do you have in escrow? How much will the village pay me for the cat?”

The blacksmith again said nothing for a while. Then clicked his tongue.

“They told me to drive a hard bargain,” he finally said. “To start from two hundred... Wait on, don’t shake your head, let me finish. They, although they’re poor, don’t deserve to have the fee knocked down. They’re willing to give five hundred marks, tops, that’s how much they scraped together. So, let’s agree to that, without haggling.”

He rightly took Geralt’s silence as agreement.

“Naturally, I can’t pay you up front,” he added casually. “You won’t even get a down payment. I understand their fears. If, for example, the village folk, who murder innocent women, thought me a repugnant freak who spreads plagues and miasmas and a pervert lusting after maids, if they found me as revolting as they do you... I wouldn’t consider it particularly unethical to take the money in advance and run. Let them have it their own way. Did that occur to you?”

“No. Not for a moment.”

“I thought not. I was actually certain. What, mayn’t a fellow ask?”

The edge of the forest was around a furlong from the smithy. Halfway along was something that in the autumn had probably still been a wain full of hay but which had now been transformed into an overgrown ruin. All that remained of its former glory was the underbody and wheels made by a wheelwright from better material than the rest of it. Three wheels were intact, the fourth broken. It wasn’t difficult to guess that the damaged wagon had been abandoned in panic after the horse had been unhitched, in order for them to flee more nimbly. And no brave souls could be found later to go back for the wagon.

Geralt stopped beside the wagon and observed the edge of the forest for a while. Then he proceeded to make his preparations. According to the principles they had instilled in him at Kaer Morhen.

He drew his sword. The weapon differed quite fundamentally from

typical combat swords of that type. The full length of a witcher's sword, forged from meteorite steel, was forty and a half inches, of which the blade measured twenty-seven and a quarter. The blades of ordinary swords were either an inch shorter or an inch longer. A witcher's sword weighed thirty-seven ounces. Ordinary swords, even if they were shorter, were typically much heavier.

He checked the sharpness of the edge. In principle needlessly, for he had checked it only the day before. But such were the rules.

He took a small casket from his bag. He depressed the secret catch that opened the lid. Vials of dark glass were packed tightly inside in lined compartments. Their stoppers were arrayed in even rows, like soldiers on parade. Geralt closed his eyes. He was—had to be—able to identify the vials by touch, their positions in the casket and their stoppers: each one different and easy to recognise with the fingertips. He touched the vials, discerning them in turn. Healing elixirs: Golden Oriole, Black Gull and Lapwing. Morphing elixirs: Wagtail, Blackbird and Heron. Metamorphosing: Nightjar and Rosefinch.

He took a sip from two: Blackbird and Heron. He deemed it would suffice.

He set off briskly towards the forest, through the thigh-high grass.

The sunset was the colour of smoked salmon.

Much later—very reluctantly, in fact—Geralt thought back to that incident. And always concluded that he had actually survived by chance. That his own contribution to surviving was minimal. Firstly, it was the season that had saved him. And secondly, the cat he was supposed to have killed was not a cat at all.

It was spring, so the forest was barely in leaf and bright in the moonlight. And typically for spring, was covered in a carpet of rotting leaves and the previous year's fallen branches. In spite of that, had a cat attacked unexpectedly, the ambush would have been soundless. But it wasn't a cat, its claws weren't retracted between the soft pads of the paws. And it was

betrayed by the crack of a dry twig. And the reactions of the witcher after taking the elixirs were quick enough to avoid the treacherous assault.

He dodged, or actually threw himself vigorously to one side, dropped to his knees, the great body of the attacking monster only brushing against him, the talons barely grazing his shoulder. The monster curled itself like a ribbon in its leap and attacked again before it had even touched the ground. Geralt didn't have time to get up from his knees, but managed to draw his sword. And slashed.

The blow was inaccurate, the sword blade just skidding over the creature's flat head and shaving off part of the scalp along with a bunch of feelers growing out of its head. The zorril—Geralt now knew that it was a zorril—flattened itself to the ground and thrashed its head from side to side, showering blood all around. It looked more like a lizard than a large cat, although the bunches of feelers on its head might indeed have resembled a cat's ears and the white fangs were also somewhat feline. The creature also used its long tail—which was lashing the dry leaves like a cat's—as a rudder to maintain its balance when it jumped.

In one great bound, the zorril was upon the witcher. Once again, Geralt dodged the charge, but this time again inexpertly, with a leap that was more desperate than graceful. Again, he managed to cut, broadly and chaotically, but accurately, almost hacking off one of the zorril's taloned forelegs. In spite of this, the monster was able to snag the witcher with the claws of its other leg, but the claws, rather than lacerating his body, only scraped against his jacket's silver studs. The zorril dropped to the grass, and the witcher hacked from above with all his might. Blood spurted out in a fountain, the monster howled dreadfully, but despite its mutilated belly it was already preparing to spring again. Geralt leaped forward, swung, the blade struck the spine, the zorril curled up, screamed terribly, with an almost human sound, and the witcher hacked again, the blade penetrating to the dorsal ganglia. The zorril thrashed about, tearing up the ground with its claws. Geralt swung once more, cutting through the vertebrae in another place. The zorril screamed and writhed, and Geralt hewed. And also screamed. The zorril howled. Geralt hewed. Over and over, like a woodman with his axe. The zorril was no longer howling, only croaking.

This continued for a while—and further blows were needed—before it stopped moving.

The moon emerged from behind the clouds and shone through the bare branches of the trees. In the moonlight, the blood spattered around was as black as pitch.

Geralt dropped to his knees and vomited. And kept on vomiting. And since he had almost nothing in his stomach, the process was very, very unpleasant.

The regurgitated elixirs burned his gullet like fire.



The discovery of a new dish confers more happiness on humanity than the discovery of a new star.

Jean-Anthelme Brillat-Savarin

The monthly gathering of the Noble Fraternity of Gourmands was being held—as was customary—on the first Thursday of the month, which fell on the third day of July. The gathering was being held in the knights' hall of the royal palace in Ard Carraigh. The entire membership of the Fraternity—numbering twenty-three men—was seated at a table arranged in a horseshoe. The gossip and chit-chat over a glass of wine from Toussaint and salted almonds were interrupted by the ceremonial entrance of the Fraternity's twenty-fourth member, the king of Kaedwen, His Majesty Miodrag the First.

The king entered the hall alone, without splendour or fanfare and was also greeted without pomp or ceremony, with no one rising from his seat or applauding.

“Greetings, esteemed comrades,” began the king, soon after taking his honorary place at the centre of the table.

During the gatherings of the Brotherhood, its members were known as comrades, regardless of title or rank. On those occasions, the king himself was not the king, but the president.

“We owe the dish, a genuine delicacy, which we shall be delighting our pallets with today,” continued the president, matter-of-factly, “as we have many previous dishes too, to our esteemed Comrade Metzgerkop, the proprietor of many restaurants familiar to us. And here is that dish! Bon appétit!”

The speech was rewarded with toasts. The wine from Toussaint quickly vanished from the flagons, servants ran to and fro to replace them with more.

The royal head chef, *praefectus culinae*, walked into the chamber, proudly upright. Behind him, marching like soldiers, entered four pot-bellied under-chefs in snow-white aprons and chef's hats, armed with long knives and cleavers as big as bardiches. Behind the under-chefs came four kitchen boys, bent over under the weight of an enormous wooden carrier. On the carrier, in a wreath of roast apples, lay...

The comrades oohed and aahed in unison.

“By the gods!” cried Immergut the priest. He often swore by the gods and called for their intercession. Reasonable doubts existed as to whether he

actually believed in them. “By the gods! Honourable President! What is that?”

“A bird,” announced Abelard Levesley, the chief prosecutor of the crown, taking a sip from a goblet. “It is clearly a bird. I mean a fowl.”

It would have been difficult to refute the prosecutor’s words. To a certain degree. The something lying on the carrier had golden-brown skin after having been roasted, dotted with bumps after having been plucked of its plumage, as well as wings, thighs, a neck and a rump, in which the under-chefs had decoratively stuck a dozen or so green feathers, shimmering like a peacock’s. Regarding its neck, however, that one, sticking up like a ship’s mast, was more or less six feet long, and ended in a head—a skull—the size of a watermelon, armed with a massive beak at least a cubit long.

The entire fowl, meanwhile, smelling deliciously of roasted meat and marjoram, weighed, at a guess, a good three hundred pounds.

“That there weighs a good three hundred pounds,” said Rupert Mansfeld, Margrave of the Lower March. “At a guess.”

“It is a Roc Bird,” announced Akteon de La Milleraie, Marshal of the Royal Heraldic Authority and Secretary of the Brotherhood. “Without doubt it is the legendary Roc Bird.”

“Legendary, indeed,” said Sirius Vaikinen, Margrave of the Lakeland March, in a deep bass voice. “The Roc Bird is a mythical bird. There are no such birds!”

“Oh, but there are,” said Vlastibor of Polana, Ambassador of the Kingdom of Redania. “They can be seen on the Isles of Skellige, seldom, true, but they are seen. But rocs look different. This one here is something like an ostrich... An enormous ostrich?”

“It isn’t an ostrich,” said Mansfeld. “Just look at that beak. This is some kind of fucking freak.”

“A freak indeed,” said Jan Eychenholtz, Chief Huntsman of the Crown, smiling evilly. “I say! Honourable President and you, Comrade Metzgerkop! Is it some kind of hoax? An artificially constructed assemblage of various parts of various beasts?”

“I refute that,” refuted the king, before the outraged Ezra Metzgerkop had managed to jump up from his chair. “I refute the assertion that is a hoax or an assemblage. In any case, let science have its say. Comrade Croft!”

“I surmise,” surmised the venerable Euclides Croft, Rector of the Academy of Magic in Ban Ard, “that it is one of the so-called ‘birds of terror.’ Probably a mamutak, *Aepyornis maximus*. But those birds are extinct...”

“Let them be extinct, to hell with them,” called Mansfeld. “The main thing is that one is left and has been roasted. It looks tasty! And smells wonderful! Come on, master cooks, carve up the pyordniss!”

“Before the bird is apportioned,” said King Miodrag, “the honourable Comrade Metzgerkop will regale us with a story. We shall learn how this aepyornis found its way to our table. Comrade Metzgerkop, if you please!”

Ezra Metzgerkop took a sip from his goblet and cleared his throat.

“You probably know what witchers are, honourable comrades,” he began. “Well, about a week before the Solstice a certain witcher showed up in the town of Berentrode, in the Western March. And what happened then...”

Illustrissimus

Estevan Trillo da Cunha

Praefectus vigilum

Ard Carraigh

Ex urbe Berentrode, die 23 mens. Junii anno 1229 p. R.

Illustrissime M'Lord Prefect,

Soon after receiving notice regarding the incriminated witcher, as the gravity of the case demanded, I took steps *statim*. I sent my observers off as soon as possible *non neglexi*, such that they could hound him at every step. For could I have inadequately striven to take care of law and order, he on whose shoulders rests this obligation? I am *semper* at the service of Your Excellency the Lord Prefect, and ready to carry out every order *statim*.

And what the observers informed me was that the said witcher is either like a *vulpes* which is able to cover up its misdeeds with its tail, or is indeed an innocent simpleton, which would be difficult to believe. Thus, I dare observe that this witcher, N.B. called Gerald, made a significant contribution to the good of the vicinity by killing a man-eating monster on our peat bog. He cast no spells on anybody, didn't steal and played no tricks, nor did he lead any maids astray. He did not get inebriated in the taverns, nor did he take part in any affrays, although, from what I hear, the local miscreants endeavoured to provoke him.

My special observer tried his best to *investigavit* at night in the stables in order to catch the said Gerald *in flagrante*. But he caught him not. Thus, it ought to be understood that it is *probabiliter* an untruth and a lie that witchers are in the habit of copulating with mares, goats and other beasts.

Nevertheless, I shall not rest in my efforts and will continue to *invigilare* the Witcher Gerald, while he resides in Berentrode. And it is said that he means to head towards the Upper March, where they are building the Great Highway. About which I shall not hesitate to

inform Your Excellency the Lord Prefect.

Iterum your servant and minion, Didier Hahn, assures Your Excellency the Lord Prefect about my constant readiness to serve and I wish you success etc. etc.,

Didier Hahn, magister civium

The cries of women and the thudding of sticks carried from the swift little river, burbling over boulders. About twenty washerwomen were working on the bank. Some were doggedly bashing items of clothing stretched over wet stones with laundry paddles. Others were hanging the clean laundry on bushes. Still others were working in pairs to fold up the dry garments and place them in baskets.

All of them, without exception, were yelling, outshouting one another. On top of that, children—probably the washerwomen’s progeny—were poking around in the riverside undergrowth. The children were also yelling. Unrelentingly.

Geralt urged on his horse with his heels, rode at a walk towards the mill, a building partly obscured by dense and already beautifully green willows. He passed a small group of teenaged boys sitting on the high bank, hoping for one of the washerwomen—whose clothes were well hitched up—to lean over the laundry and give their eyes a pleasant treat.

Geralt was ashamed of himself, but also stared for a while.

The mill wheel was turning, thudding, the water was foaming, falling from the paddles, and roaring through the sluice gate and the mill race. There were several wagons on the embankment, probably with deliveries of grain or waiting to collect the meal.

Two wagons, pulled by Percherons, were also standing by the mill stream and millpond, which spread out widely among willows and alders. Some activity was also occurring in the pond. Geralt rode up closer.

Four peasants in straw hats, waist-deep in the water, were prodding the bottom of the pond with poles. They then lifted the poles, and the witcher saw that a fish trap woven from withies was attached to each pair. The peasants were transferring the catch taken from the traps to sacks hanging around their necks, after which they resumed dredging the pond bottom.

“It’s crayfish,” explained a corpulent and quite richly attired gentleman

in a fox-fur cap, seeing Geralt's interest. "They're fishing for crayfish, of which there is an abundance, and which are unusually large. Oh, I beg you, my dear sir, take a look. Please go closer, closer."

Encouraged, Geralt rode over to the wagon. Indeed, there were about a dozen wicker baskets, in which, rustling among nettle leaves, numerous crustaceans were moving languidly.

"They are for my auberge," explained the gentleman in the fox-fur cap. "I am, as you see, a restaurateur. My establishment is famed for its crayfish, in season, I mean. Nowhere in the world will you taste crayfish soup the like of mine. Do you believe me?"

"I'll take your word for it."

"Visit my eatery, and I shall prove that my words carry substance! My auberge, the Crayfish and Snail in Ban Fearg, belonging to the chain of celebrated restaurants of Mr. Metzgerkop of Ard Carraigh. From here in Berentrode it is thirty miles to my restaurant. That's far, but you won't get your hands on so many crayfish any nearer. I invite you... Hey! Are you not, my dear sir, by chance that very same witcher, about whom so much is being spoken in town?"

"It is I," said the witcher. "And by chance indeed."

"Ho, ho," said the restaurateur with arms akimbo. "So young and already such fame! Everybody is talking about the monster killed on the bogs outside town. Now at last it's safe there, before that they had stopped digging peat out of fear, for the monster was always killing somebody. They feared it like the devil, and no surprise, for apparently it was terrible, a veritable horror. But you, my dear sir, boldly killed it, they say! Ho, ho, and so young?"

Geralt couldn't hold back a smile. He'd dealt much better with the kikimore on the peat bog than the zorril. Better. And cleaner. Still lacking finesse and grace, perhaps, but definitely cleaner.

"And now you, my dear sir, are here, at the mill," continued the restaurateur. "Does that mean it's dangerous here, too?"

"Somebody reportedly saw a monster," said Geralt. "Reportedly, I repeat. But it was at night. They say. Nothing will appear here, during the day, in this commotion and throng. I'm simply checking the area, in order —"

He didn't complete his thought. Ear-splitting screams came from the

river and the washerwomen. Screams of pain and terror.

Geralt, without waiting, reined his horse around and spurred it.

The first thing he saw from a distance, were bright spatters on the drying cloth. And several bodies.

The screams moved to the embankment. And then he saw it.

The huge bird was similar to an ostrich, but had a large head and an enormous beak. And it was easily fifteen feet tall. No ostrich existed with such dimensions. The bird bore an erect crest on its head, its wattle was blue and it had a large tuft of green feathers on its rump.

The bird reached the embankment in great bounds and fell on the fleeing people. It pecked one of them in the head and threw them to the ground, and kicked another, wounding them with the talon of a three-toed foot. It saw Geralt and opened its beak so wide its gullet was visible. And squawked. Like a peacock—but ten times louder.

The witcher's horse was startled by the cry, thrashed around and reared up. The witcher fell to the ground and was winded as his back hit a large stone. The horse kicked and galloped off into the distance.

The bird reached the winded Geralt in huge bounds. Geralt was lying on his back and couldn't draw his sword, but extended a hand and unleashed a Sign towards the huge bird. Plumage flew. Deciding that the witcher was too large a mouthful, the bird leaped up, squawked once more and in outlandish hops attacked the people fleeing towards the wagons loaded with crayfish. The Percherons of the first wagon struggled in their harnesses, almost overturning the vehicle. The bird pecked the offside lead horse in the head and blood spurted upwards. The waggoner jumped down from the box seat and tried to run away, but the bird caught him, pecked and kicked him. It saw the restaurateur and squawked. The restaurateur also squawked. Possibly even just as loudly. He fled behind the wagon and then dashed towards the mill. And Geralt. The bird bristled its comb, squawked and raced after him.

Geralt was already running, sword in hand.

"Get down!" he yelled to the restaurateur. "On all fours!"

The restaurateur, astonishingly, obeyed at once. He dropped to his hands and knees. Geralt used his momentum to jump on his back, push off and thrust fiercely. Straight in the blue wattle.

The bird's head flew towards the pond. The rest of it, blood spurting

from the neck, hurtled along the bank of the mill stream. It ran for around fifty steps until it crashed into the bulrushes. And for a good few moments its taloned feet went on kicking.

“And you said...” panted the restaurateur, as Geralt was helping him to his feet. “You assured me that nothing would appear here... And what luck... I barely escaped with my life, indeed, thanks to you, my dear sir... And my waggoner...”

“I think he’s still alive. He needs help.”

The driver’s head was cut open and bleeding heavily. He had also been jabbed in the back, deeply, for the monstrous bird, it turned out, had powerful spurs on its legs and knew how to inflict damage with them. Geralt did his best to dress the driver’s wounds with strips of linen.

A small crowd had already formed, the people were looking at the huge body. One of the crayfish catchers dragged the severed head over.

“Oh, my life...” groaned the restaurateur. “What is that? I mean what was it...”

“A mamutak,” Geralt replied. “Also called an aepeyornis. It’s very rare. How did it end up here? And why did it attack? With such rage?”

“Two killed!” shouted somebody from the crowd. “Six wounded!”

“What a diabolical monstrosity!”

“Bring its head here!” demanded Geralt. “It’s my booty. As is the entire aepeyornis. Leave the body alone, call off the dogs!”

“Aha,” said the restaurateur, guessing and scratching his chin. “You’re a witcher, after all. You mind to earn something for the bird, don’t you?”

“Indeed.”

“Ha. Then, hmm... I would have a proposal. I shall pay you for the bird, along with its head, let’s say... Two hundred... Why, very well, my dear sir, two hundred and fifty Novigradian crowns...”

“Do you want it for... the auberge?”

“Precisely. A fowl is a fowl, never mind how large it is. Well, what will it be? The burgomeister of Berentode won’t give you more, I know him, he’s thrifty with municipal funds, for he profits from them himself, he and his entire family. And I will pay you in cash. Let us ride to the nearest bank, my dear sir...”

“Indeed. Let us. Where is my horse? Has anyone seen it? A dun mare? Saddled up...”

“We saw it, so we did! Your servant was leading it. Over yonder, towards the town!”

“What bloody servant?”

Decorating the façade of the town hall in Berentrode with a large banner reading “Get to fuck with your petition” would have been very reasonable. It would have allowed supplicants to save plenty of time and effort that could have been used to the greater benefit of the community.

And neither was Didier Hahn, the town’s burgomeister, wearing around his neck a gorget with the words “nasty cunt” engraved upon it. But he ought to have. It would also have saved a great deal of people some unpleasant experiences.

“Beware of spreading slander, witcher,” he said coldly, after having listened to Geralt’s grievances. “There are no horse thieves or thieves in general, in Berentrode. It is a law-abiding *urbium*, inhabited by honest folk. No one steals anything here.”

“Do you mean my horse stole itself?”

“I don’t know. I am not your horse’s keeper.”

“Will there be no investigation?”

“There will not. I don’t have the resources or men for it. My men are busy investig—Are busy with other matters. And your tales of a stolen horse are not only calumny, but smell of fraud. Want to wheedle a few pennies out of the town purse, do you? Careful, before I have you tossed in the clink!”

“On the strength of the titulary edicts of Dagread, King of Kaedwen, witchers are permitted to be exempt from the jurisdiction of local powers —”

“I’ll shove you in the clink and we’ll see if King Dagread gets you out! Enough of this talk, I don’t want to hear any more about it! Begone! I mean, get out of the town hall! And the town, too!”

“On foot?”

Didier Hahn panted angrily. He got up from his desk and walked across the chamber.

“Very well,” he said. “Have it your way. Although you are a witcher, and

for me a common vagabond and good-for-nothing, although you are trying to slander the people of my town, although I ought to chase you away from here with a whip... In acknowledgement of the beast you killed on the peat bog. And for the folk you saved from the devilish bird at the mill, I shall make a *consilium*. We have a stud farm here, run by my kinsman, his name is Benjamin Hunnicut. He has gorgeous horses. If you report to him on my recommendation, he'll give you a discount. Don't thank me."

Geralt didn't.

"And that big fowl, from the mill," the burgomeister suddenly asked, curious. "Where is it? Its carcass, I mean?"

"On the way to Ban Fearg, covered in ice."

"Really? Pity. I'd have paid for the head... Would have added it to my collection. Take a look."

Only then did Geralt notice the cabinet and display case. The display case contained various wonders, mainly bones. In the central, honourable place, on a small stand, stood a huge egg. A blown egg.

"They brought it here the day before yesterday," boasted Didier Hahn. "Hunters. They found a nest and an egg. A collector's item, isn't it? Pity, pity you don't have the head. I have the egg; I could have had the head too. Pity, pity."

"Do I have horses? By the non-existent gods, you ask if I have horses. Ask me right away, how many of them I have. Come, young witcher, come this way. Carefully, so as not to tread in the shit, ha, ha. I said carefully. And now look at this enclosure.

"Do you see what foals there are? What little stallions, as pretty as pictures? They are hot-blooded thoroughbred Novigradian jennets, the dream of every cavalryman. Tails like silken veils, and rumps? Show me a woman with such a shapely rump. Each of them is a dream, not a rump, ha, ha. Any knight, I tell and assure you, without batting an eyelid would let someone fuck his wife, ha, ha, or his daughter for such a lovely horse, I tell you, or both of them. What? You say you're not a knight? And you don't have a wife or daughters? Ha, as they say: too bad and *c'est la vie*, ha, ha. Thus, there's no choice, you'll have to shell out, ha, ha, lighten your purse. I

usually take two hundred and fifty Novigradian crowns for each of my little stallions, which when converted into the local currency will be one thousand two hundred and fifty marks. But since you're a witcher, a noble profession, and you're on the recommendation of Master Burgomeister Hahn, I'm prepared to knock off... Well, now then... ten per cent. That's all I can do. So that it will be known far and wide that a witcher is riding a horse from my stud farm. That it's a little stallion from Berentrotte, from me, I mean from Benjamin Hunnicut...

"What's this? Not a little stallion? The little chestnut mare, that's sticking her head out of the stable over there? Aye, certainly she's for sale, how could it be otherwise, for this is a stud farm and not a picture gallery, they're for buying, not just admiring, ha, ha. How much for the little mare? Well, I'll be making a loss, I'll just tot it up... two hundred crowns. Same as I would for my brother, ha, ha.

"But what is this, a witcher on a mare, not a stallion? It's somehow dishonourable. What do you say? That's your least concern? Ha, the customer is always right, he wants a mare, he gets a mare. But with horses, ha, ha, m'lord witcher, it's like it is with fish. I'm offering these jennets like lusty pike, and you've chosen a little roach. What are you laughing about? Did I say something comical?"

Ingo Xmutt was riding along the Great Highway, whistling blithely. The hooves of the stolen dun mare were thudding jauntily on the timbers the road had just been lined with. Xmutt was in good spirits and in the money—he had sold the contents of the saddlebags acquired along with the mare at a market he passed soon after the successful expropriation of the horse. Now he was heading briskly north. He wasn't planning to ride far along the Great Highway, because he wanted to avoid an encounter with the roadbuilders constructing it. He planned to turn north-west down forest tracks leading towards the Hengfors passes. To cash in the horse in Hengfors, and use the cash thus obtained to hunker down temporarily in one of the villages in the region of Barefield. And possibly winter there, too.

He rode onto a bridge over a forest stream with nettles lining its banks, with a clatter of hooves. And was suddenly no longer alone. For two days

and nights he had encountered perhaps three carts and three people on the new road. And now it turned out he was suddenly surrounded by ten men. To make matters worse, the men were mounted and armed. To make matters *even* worse they were hemming him in tightly from all sides.

“Oh,” he said, trying to sound carefree. “Gentlemen soldiers! And I was fearing it was brigands... If I may, I’m Raul Azevedo... In the margrave’s service...”

He was worried he might have exaggerated with the noble surname, for by no means did he look like a nobleman. But soldiers, he thought, weren’t endowed with brains...

“In the margrave’s service,” repeated the commander of the troop in a drawl. He was a moustachioed man in an elk-hide jerkin, with a gilt pendant, wearing a hat with a plume of ostrich feathers. “A nobleman, judging by the name. And the dun mare, I presume, comes from the margrave’s stable? Does it?”

“It does, it does,” Ingo Xmutt hurriedly agreed. “From the margrave’s stable, indeed. Verily, sir knight, you know your horses...”

“I do,” said Captain Reisz Carleton, dispassionately. “It’s enough for me to glance at a horse to register it and not forget it. That’s how I know whose horse you are astride, Honourable Azevedo, and what you are really called. And I also know that the rightful owner of that horse wouldn’t sell it, hock it, lend it or give it away.”

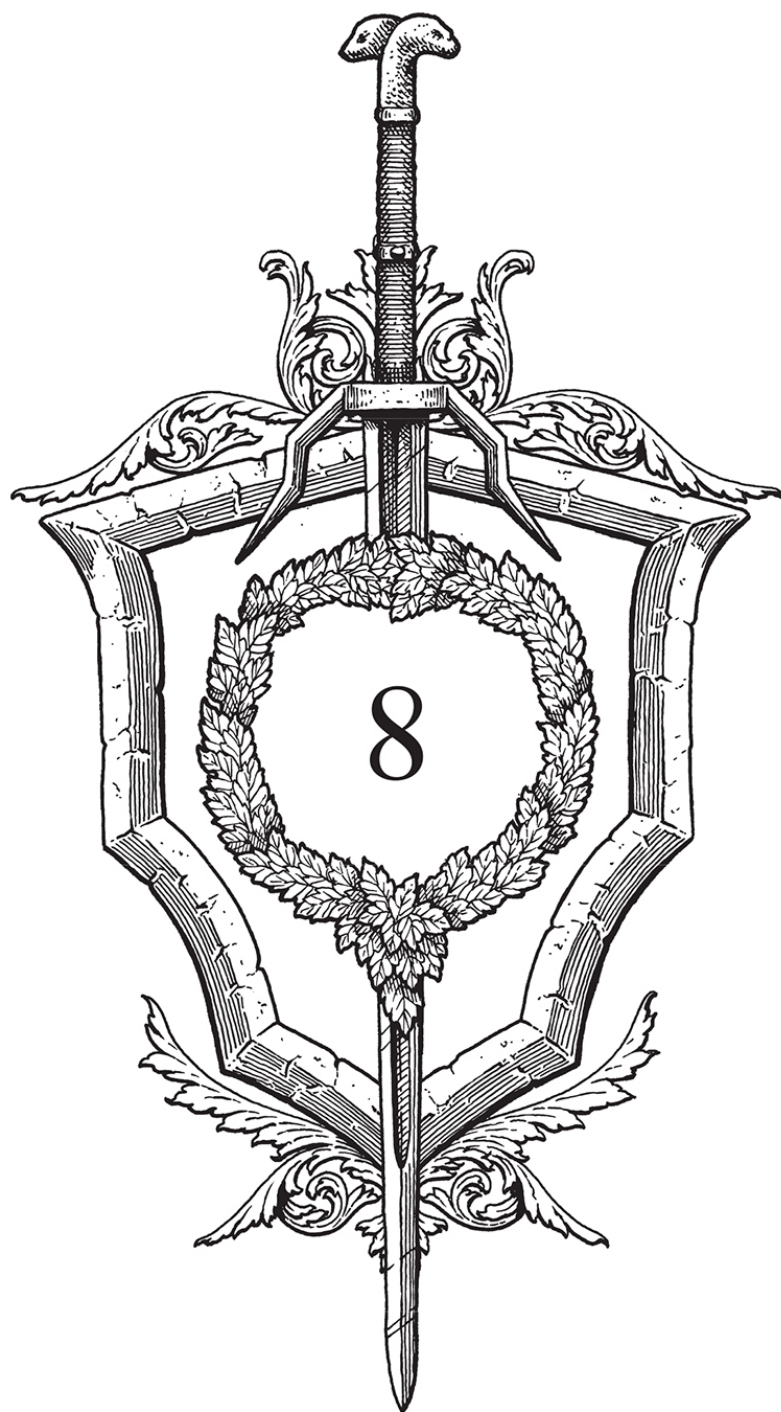
The horse thief licked his lips. And glanced around nervously. There was no way of running, or anywhere to run to; he was ringed from all sides by mounted men. And at a sign from the commander, his arms were suddenly caught in an iron grip, almost lifting him up from the stolen horse.

Captain Carleton looked around.

“Master Aelvarr!”

“Captain, sir?”

“Do you see that oak over there? With that nice bough? Please toss a noose over it.”



These are the words of the Prophet: yea, do I tell you that chaos will occur in many places and fire will often burst forth. The sun shall shine in the night, and the moon during the day, while stars will begin to fall. Blood will flow from wood and stones will speak. Savage beasts will strike and expectant womenfolk will give birth to monsters.

And thus, the prophecy came to pass before our eyes: women issued monsters. Those monsters are witchers, harbingers of chaos and doom.

Anonymous, The Description of a Monstrum or a Witcher

Illustrissimus Praefectus vigilum
Estevan Trillo da Cunha
in Ard Carraigh

Datum die 26 mens. Iulii anno 1229 p. R.

Your Excellency Lord Prefect,

I humbly report that in the month of July the witcher called Geralt came to the place of the Great Highway's construction, where I soon employed him to render protection. He at once proved useful by killing two sylvan monsters called leshens which had greatly plagued us on the construction site.

According to M'Lord Prefect's order, I twice tackled him about the year one hundred and ninety-four and that incident, as M'Lord Prefect had instructed. Seeming to feign great outrage, I said to him that the crime committed then was dreadful, that it was a horror and a heinous crime, demanding retribution. The witcher listened, but did not utter a word, would not be drawn into any discussion and in general gave the impression that he cared not at all about the matter.

The second time, during a conversation, I brought up the specific names that M'Lord Prefect had instructed me to: Margulies and Chwalba. But this time, too, the witcher was not to be provoked, did not evince a modicum of interest, asked about nothing, and did not contribute a single word to the conversation.

From which I conclude that the said Witcher Geralt knows nothing specific about those events. It is difficult to guess the true age of witchers, but in my reckoning the said Geralt is no older than *decem et octo*, thus in 1194 he was not yet born.

At the same time, I report that the witcher is no longer working for me. My roadbuilders meant to hire him to track and kill some sylvan elves, who had become overly audacious, but the witcher declined, saying that elves are sapient beings and that he had no intention of killing them. Thus, I dismissed him and ordered him to be gone. Whither he went I know not.

Pax vobiscum,

Michaelides Blaufall, *praefectus stratificum*

The walled temple of the Goddess Melitele was located near the small town of Frankthal, set in a valley of the same name. The valley was extraordinarily picturesque, curving among steep hillsides. The northern slope was completely covered in pine forests, while the southern was dominated by white-barked birch, beech and oak. The southern slope also contained the source of a small stream, tumbling downwards in cascades finally to meander along the valley bottom.

Geralt spurred on Roach and forded the stream. The temple of the Goddess Melitele, one of the few surviving, was located in a small, former elven palace called Elsborg, situated more or less two furlongs from the town of Frankthal, in a bend in the stream, among tall weeping willows. The area was usually pretty empty, so Geralt was somewhat surprised to see a small throng of people at the temple gate. He gave it no thought, but rode closer.

“What does this one want?” said a voice. “What stray is this?”

“Drop it, friend. For it is not a woman, and we are only to chase away womenfolk, aren’t we?”

The witcher dismounted. The temple gate was too low to be able to ride in. He knocked.

“Hey, you!” came a voice. “What do you seek here? Are you in league with those whores? With those child-killers? Perhaps you are of their ilk? Hey! I’m talking to you!”

The peasant trying to grab him by the sleeve was quite large, but not so large, Geralt judged, as to stay on his feet after a punch. He felt in his pocket the key that Holt had given him. He wondered what would be a better target—the orbital bone? Or perhaps the glabella—located half an inch above the bridge of the nose?

The peasant must have read something in the witcher’s eyes, because he took a step back and swallowed. The witcher was now almost decided, was already squeezing the key in his fist, when the gate opened and a tall priestess stood in the doorway. He remembered her, she had always been quick-witted. She understood right away.

“Come in,” she said sharply. “Quickly. At once.”

She closed the gate behind him and bolted it shut.

“Greetings, Nenneke.”

“Greetings, Geralt. You’ve grown up. I remember you as a little boy. Your head barely reached above the waistband of my skirt. And now, my, what have we, a strapping lad, swords on your back... A fine witcher.”

“And I recall you as a novitiate. Now you’re a priestess...”

“What you were meaning to do outside the gate,” she said, glaring witheringly at him, “would have been very stupid.”

“But I didn’t do anything.”

She sighed. “We do our best to teach you, but you still do as you please.”

“You didn’t teach us everything,” he responded sourly. “So I keep making a fool of myself. I don’t know what an orbit is. Or a chirograph. I don’t know what sustain means. Or what *pair pakora* is. Or what, in the end —”

“In order to complete your education,” she interrupted him harshly, “enrol in the winter for a degree at Oxenfurt. As an auditor. Read in your spare time.”

“Forgive me. I didn’t mean to—”

“Yes, you did. Take the horse over there, to the stable.”

They went out to a pathway leading to the main building.

“Have you been long on the road? When did you leave the Fastness?”

“In March. A day before the Equinox.”

“Have you travelled far?”

“Actually... Just within Kaedwen.”

“Only Kaedwen?” she said in surprise. “And you so wanted to see the ocean, I recall. Arcsea, Novigrad, Gors Velen...”

“Maybe one day. I killed a few monsters in Kaedwen...”

“Big head. Is that the only reason you came here? To boast? To complain about our teaching? Or is there something more? Elixirs? For I believe you are neither wounded nor sick? You don’t look it.”

“Elixirs would come in useful; I’m getting through them at a rate of knots. But most of all... I’d like to talk to the Mother Assumpta.”

“Aha.” Nenneke wasn’t looking at him. “You must have important business. And the Mother Assumpta is very occupied. I don’t know if she’ll

see you.”

“We won’t know until we try.”

“Know-all.”

They passed the garden. The priestesses and novitiates toiling in the vegetable patch watched them pass. Some of them waved, but he didn’t remember them. Unsurprisingly, since they’d been little girls the last time he’d seen them. And after all, nothing in the world changes as quickly as little girls.

They walked on.

Beneath a canopy, open on all sides to allow for air circulation, several novitiates wearing masks and long gloves were busy making soap, stirring lye, soda, oils, and some strongly smelling perfumes in vats. Geralt knew that the soaps from Elsborg enjoyed a well-earned reputation even beyond Kaedwen’s borders. He himself had been forced to use such soaps when he was a pupil in the temple. Only unscented, hard soap was used in Kaer Morhen. It wasn’t just—at least not just—because of the witchers’ contempt for perfumes and the effeminacy associated with them. A significant majority of monsters had a very sensitive sense of smell—some unimaginably sensitive. A witcher smelling unnaturally wouldn’t have stood a chance against them.

“They’re throwing us out of here,” said Nenneke abruptly.

“What?”

“They’re throwing us out,” she repeated, squinting her eyes. “One of the reasons... not the only one... is you, the boys from Kaer Morhen. News got around that we were teaching you.”

The priestess knocked at an oaken door. They were invited in and entered.

The Assumpta of Rivia, the temple’s high priestess, was sitting at a desk strewn with parchments. The last time Geralt had seen her was eight years previously. She had put on weight since then. And had much more grey hair.

She was accompanied by two priestesses and a novitiate. The priestesses smiled at him. He knew them both. Flavia taught history. Ailidh the Elder Speech. He didn’t know the novitiate. She was too young for him to know.

“The Mother Assumpta,” said Nenneke. “This is Geralt—”

“So, I see. Flavia, Ailidh, Zdravka, if you would. You too, Nenneke. Sit

down, Geralt.”

Outside in the garden, magpies were screeching. Horrifyingly. They had seen a cat somewhere.

“Your face has changed,” the priestess finally said. “And your eyes, irrespective of the mutation. You never curled your lip like that, either. You don’t have to say anything. I see and I know.”

“Apparently...” he said, clearing his throat. “Apparently, they want to expel you from here, Mother. And apparently, we’re to blame.”

“Who told you that? Nenneke? No, Geralt. None of you—the youngsters educated here—is to blame and I bear no ill will towards any witcher. And the fact that ignorance and stupidity are flourishing, that obscurantism is rife, is certainly also our fault. We taught you all badly. We raised you badly. Indeed, it is our former pupils who are driving us from here today. According to a law they have enacted.”

“Those men at the gate were saying... they were talking about driving women from the temple. It was about—”

“I know what it was about. It also concerns the law. Which says that medical aid given to women is illegal and punishable. Of course, it was drawn up by men. Ha, were they to become pregnant, a termination would be proclaimed a sacred mystery and would be accompanied by prayers, incense and choral singing.”

“People are strange,” the Assumpta of Rivia continued after a moment. “They deride our goddess, ridicule our prayers. For being superstitious. While in the west and north various sects and creeds are springing up in the wilderness. Spiders, snakes, dragons and other monsters are worshipped. People whisper about crimes and human sacrifices. But somehow no one is willing to fight against it. Nor trying to drive away members of sects.

“We are relocating to the south, beyond the Pontar,” she said, anticipating his question. “To be precise, to Ellander in Temeria. There is an abandoned temple there, and the local ruler is graciously allowing us to move in. Naturally, we will also give help to women in need there, irrespective of whether it bothers anybody or not. Well, that’s too much about our affairs. How are things with you, tell me.”

He told her. But only about his witcher missions. He didn’t mention the marauder he eviscerated near the village of Neuhold. Nor the ravens at the crossroads, nor what resulted from it. The Mother Assumpta listened

patiently. And summed it all up, concisely and aptly.

“I sense and know what you need.”

“You do?”

“Certainly. For, after all, I can’t help you any other way than with my knowledge. What do you want to know, my boy? Forgive me: *Witcher Geralt*.”

He said nothing for a long time.

“What really happened at Kaer Morhen? In the year one thousand one hundred and ninety-four?”

“You are asking me?” she said and raised her head. “You? Who has looked at the bones in the moat since your early childhood? And the names of the seven fallen heroes who died a witcher’s death, carved in the wall? Who was raised on tales of heroism?”

“Those are the tales I mean. They’re so heroic, they—”

“They are *too* heroic? That’s how they ought to be, my boy. Heroes should be heroes. And tales are meant to make them heroes. And one shouldn’t doubt either the former or the latter. But well, we can’t change the fact that time inexorably obliterates everything, heroism included. And tales and legends exist to resist that, even at the expense of so-called objective truth. For the truth is not for everybody. The truth is for those who can shoulder it. Can you? Don’t make faces. You cannot. Had you been able to, you’d have demanded the truth from Vesemir. From the elders. But you turn to me.”

“Because you’ve never lied to me.”

“Can you be certain? Or perhaps I lie so well no one sees through my untruths. Neither a child, nor a precociously grown-up eighteen-year-old. You aren’t telling me everything, my boy.”

This time he told her everything. Though he occasionally faltered.

“Ah, so there’s the rub,” said the Assumpta of Rivia. “Preston Holt.”

There was a long silence. The magpies outside were quiet.

“Round about the spring of the year one hundred and ninety-two,” said the priestess, bringing her hand to her forehead, “that libellous text, *The Description of a Monstrum or a Witcher*, appeared. Written anonymously, as is usual, but printed, at a time when printing houses could be numbered on the fingers of one hand, so there weren’t many under suspicion. Much pointed to the sorcerers of the Ban Ard academy, who had their own

printing house, but there was no proof; unsurprisingly, since it would be hard to find anyone as accomplished as sorcerers at covering their tracks.

“The anonymously published text was disseminated widely, in numerous copies, and travelling emissaries read that work of doubtful quality to unlettered people at village moots and gatherings. And the idea began to circulate around the marches and spread like wildfire. The abominable witchers were to blame for contagions, diseases and ailments, afflictions of livestock and poultry, miscarriages and stillbirths in women, failures of crops and harvests, infestations of vermin—all misfortune and misery. The spider’s threads of every crime and conspiracy led to Kaer Morhen. Thus, Kaer Morhen, I quote, ‘the hotbed of the witchers’ had to be wiped from the face of the earth and sowed with salt. In the summer of the year one hundred and ninety-four, somebody finally managed to gather together and organise a mob. A force set off into the mountains, something around five score armed men. Less than one third returned—in disarray, to boot. The rest were left to rot in the moat of your stronghold; their bones lie there to this day.

“You will ask, how on earth did a handful of witchers overcome a hundred fanatics? I shall tell you. As you know, the most able and best instructed sorcerers are capable of acting as a team, can combine their powers when casting spells, resulting in a powerfully concentrated effect. Witchers are unable to and cannot do that. Your witcher Signs are a very individual matter, only synchronised with a given, specific individual. And back then in Kaer Morhen, when the rabble stormed the embankment and the outer bailey had gone up in flames, the four remaining, surviving witchers linked arms and joined forces. And cast a Sign in unison. With fatal effect, a combined onslaught. Unfortunately, they themselves didn’t survive it.

“But it had its effect. Although Kaer Morhen, without its defenders, was at the mercy of the surviving assailants they didn’t dare to force their way into the Stronghold, and fled in panic.

“News of the attack spread. The young King Eoin, a reasonably enlightened fellow, who was reigning in Kaedwen at that time, was somewhat annoyed, and the margraves were none too pleased, either. The latter weren’t at all fond of witchers, but had no intention of tolerating grassroots initiatives or the lawlessness of an emboldened rabble. They had

to be taught a lesson. The executioner beheaded two of them on the scaffold at Ard Carraigh, and four were hanged in their home villages. Regrettably, that half dozen was the least guilty of them all. Justice wasn't served to the chief ringleaders—and guiding spirits. At least not immediately.

“And now time for your coveted objective truth, Geralt. There are seven names carved into the wall at Kaer Morhen. The heroic tale speaks of seven killed in action. But there were *eight* witchers defending Kaer Morhen.

“When news of the attack got out, I and several novitiates went to Kaer Morhen. We were there a long time before Byrnjolf and Vesemir showed up with their youngsters. We found corpses. Many corpses. And one person alive. But barely.”

“It was Holt.”

“He didn't introduce himself that way then. He was known as Reyndert. And they called him Reyndert the Wraith. And now listen. We didn't find Reyndert in the keep, but some distance away from it.

“Reyndert himself maintained later that he couldn't remember anything. But he was delirious. And I... Perhaps I behaved rashly and hastily, but at that time I was... well, a little younger than I am today... Emotions took over. I let slip to Vesemir what Reyndert had said in his ravings.”

She said nothing for a long time. Geralt didn't hurry her.

“It turned out,” she continued, “that Reyndert hadn't been wounded in the defence of Kaer Morhen, but during the flight from it.”

Geralt said nothing.

“Time passed. Time, which changes everything. The so-called ‘objective truth’ vanished in the mist. Vesemir remains obstinate, while I... I try not to be. I want to forgive... No, not forgive. Forget. Reyndert—now Preston Holt, for he returned to his real name—has been selflessly saving people from monsters in Kaedwen for years, removing curses and spells. He visits our temple. We often replenish his elixirs; we've tended his wounds several times. Which at the same time heals mine. Even the most painful. The ones that come from memories.

“But enough of that,” she said and jerked her head up. “I've said enough. Perhaps even too much, we shall see. And now listen to some advice. I don't like the thought of you being employed by Holt as an apprentice.”

“I'm not employed. I'm acting according to the principle of freedom and

mutual trust. I'm *perpro*—”

“*Per procura*. It means ‘in place of and on behalf of.’”

“I know.”

“And do you also know you ought to winter in Kaer Morhen, and not with Holt at Rocamora? Or that it's very bad for you to be associated with Holt?”

“Why?”

“Holt...” said the priestess, bringing a hand to her forehead. “Holt is not the right preceptor for you. You should search for your own way. Literally and metaphorically. Promise me you'll abandon Rocamora. And Holt.”

He said nothing. The Assumpta of Rivia looked enquiringly at him. Finally, she sighed heavily.

“You came here, Geralt, don't deny it, to obtain information and advice. You've received both. It's up to you what you do with them. We taught you what we could, and that's that, your education is complete. Now, if you make a mistake or get up to mischief, if you listen to wrong advice, it won't be Nenneke who raps you over the knuckles. It'll be life.”

They sat in silence for a long time.

“Where are you bound for now?”

“I'm...” he stammered, but decided not to prevaricate, “going to Spynham. Then to the northeast, to the border of the march. The settlers need help.”

“Indeed. You're a witcher.”

The magpies in the garden were still squawking.

“Mother Assumpta?”

“Yes?”

“Somebody lately declared to me that the name Geralt is... unrefined.”

“And what if it is? It's still your name.”

“Well, yes, but... Perhaps I could add something? An ‘of somewhere,’ like you have? Some kind of noble premonition?”

“Preposition. But you aren't a nobleman, Geralt. Why shine in borrowed feathers?”

Zoë, Fervida and Hippolyte, the girls from Lorelei, had nothing to do. It

was a weekday morning. So, they were amusing themselves by doing what they could and what they enjoyed. Zoë was knitting a beret for her little girl. Fervida was reading a manual for growing herbs in pots. Hippolyte was staring out of the window, watching swifts flying around the tower of Spynham town hall.

They all heard the stairs creaking, but none of them reacted. The sight of Pampinea Monteforte entering the chamber didn't shock any of them either.

"Something's come up," announced Pampinea. Her bust was heaving arrestingly. "We have a customer. But I warn you: it's to remain a secret."

"Master Burgomeister again?" asked Zoë, looking peeved. Hippolyte rolled her eyes.

"No," said Pampinea. "It isn't the honourable burgomeister this time. It's someone even more secret. Which is why I'm coming to you. We've experienced a thing or two together and I trust you. Because the young ones, well, I don't suspect them of informing, but they're silly geese, and might simply blab..."

"So, who is it? Tell us, Madam Proprietor. We're dying to find out."

"A witcher."

"Master Holt?" asked Fervida, giggling. "Does that mean he's ageing backwards?"

"Now, now," said Pampinea, wagging an admonishing finger. "Leave out the jokes! Master Holt is a respected customer. But it's not him. It's the young witcher. Young indeed, I'd say. And likeable. Well, reasonably so. Which of you isn't afraid? And will take him on?"

"And the one that takes him on," Zoë asked after a moment's silence, "what'll she get for it?"

Pampinea Monteforte didn't ponder for long.

"She can keep three-quarters of the fee," she said.

The girls looked at each other. And at Madam Proprietor.

"Very well," said Hippolyte, with a smile, "we'll have to draw straws. The short straw wins the witcher."

"Perhaps," said Fervida, also smiling, "we'll shorten two straws?"

"And I think," said Zoë, "we can do away with the straws altogether."

Honourable Master
Preston Holt
Districtus Ban Fillim
Oppidum Rocamora

*Datum ex urbe Belvoir, die 6 mens Augusti anno 1229 post
Resurrectionem*

Dear Preston, *salve*,

In accordance with the spirit of our agreement, I hereby announce that since the day of the visit by young master Geralt to me until the day this letter was sent sums amounting to a combined total of 4,885 Kaedwenian marks—written in words: four thousand eight hundred and eighty-five—has been deposited in my account in the form of orders from various banks.

After deducting my commission and paying tax, I am transferring the due sum to your usual account.

It has undoubtedly caught your attention, my dear Preston, based on a rough calculation, that since the time of his visit to me in May, the young witcher must have exterminated a good deal of monsters. I mean he has either killed plenty, or killed fewer, but bargained effectively—indeed, both the former and the latter attest in his favour. Congratulations for choosing him, there will be consolation from your *per procura*. Although the young witcher probably doesn't know what that word means, it turns out yet again that it's more important to do a good job than to know the scholarly term.

Judging by the bank orders, the young witcher's activities have embraced part of the Western March and the Upper March. I also know he has visited the temple of the Goddess Melitele in Elsborg. Interestingly, immediately afterwards he dropped in to Lorelei in Spynham. And spent some time there. But well, youth has its own prerogatives, and it's his business what he spends his *per diem* on. As long as he doesn't skimp too much on food, or he'll grow weak.

I am only concerned by the activities of various informers sniffing

around the youth. I have reason to suppose, dear Preston, that it is not the youth, but you they are interested in. Augment your caution.

Saluto te,

Timur Voronoff



*May your fields be overgrown by hemlock and choked by thistles;
may your fallow land be beset by blackthorn and poisoned by fool's
parsley! You shall know no joy, ravaged to the core, to the depths of
your soul by this curse! I will grind you to mouldy, rusty, putrefying
decay!*

Stefan Grabiński, *The Curse*

The first thing Geralt saw as he rode into town through a gate with a turnstile, was a hanged corpse. To be more precise, the corpse of a young, fair-haired woman in torn clothing. She was hanging from a well sweep, swinging and turning in the wind. As he passed, he made out details—the swollen face, the unnaturally extended neck, the bruises on the thighs, the feet black with congealed blood. The town was empty, seemingly abandoned, there wasn't a soul in the lane, no dog even rushed out from behind a fence to bark at the horse's fetlocks. The closed shutters and doors reeked of malevolence. A sign of evil things that had already happened. And a portent of worse ones that were yet to happen.

He noticed a few people nearer to the town square, and he too was noticed.

"A witcher, is it?" panted a youth in a beret with a pheasant's feather, running over to him. "Ah, why I see that you are. The news reached you then? Our call for help? Are you responding to it, then?"

"I met a messenger. He was galloping all over the place. With a plea. With news that a witcher was urgently needed in the town of Glass Mountain. Well, here I am. Responding to the call. For this is Glass Mountain, isn't it?"

"It is. Oh, it's grand, it's grand that you're here, sir... For misfortune has descended upon us... Dreadful misfortune... But please, come with me to the square, you can see with your own eyes. This way, this way..."

"A witcher, is it?" A well-built, grey-bearded gentleman left a small group of people in a gateway in the town square. The buttons of his jerkin were as large as ducats. And also golden. Well, actually gilt. "I mean do you know witcher magic? Can you reverse curses? Well, we shall see, we shall see. Dismount, sir, come over. Closer, closer."

There were about ten people in the gateway, who retreated from the approaching witcher in terror, averting their gaze.

"This way," said the grey-bearded man, indicating the way. "Follow me."

They entered a courtyard, then went up some creaking stairs to a gallery. The grey-bearded man stopped there and covered his nose with a sleeve.

"There, inside," he said indistinctly from behind his sleeve, gesturing.

And fled, almost falling down the stairs.

Even at a distance, the witcher could smell the foul, sickening odour of decaying flesh, so he wasn't surprised by the sight of a physician in the room. The leather mask with a long bird's beak and the glass openings for the eyes unmistakably betrayed his profession.

On seeing him, the doctor said something completely indistinct from behind the beaked mask. Understanding the situation, he went out onto the cloister, indicating for Geralt to follow him. Once there, he removed the mask and wiped his sweaty face. He was very young.

"Medicine is of no use," he said, exhaling and waving a hand. "Sprinkling vinegar is of no use, neither is disinfecting with sulphur. Black magic is at play here. A curse, there's no doubt."

"Could you be clearer?"

"I may," said the physician and squinted his eyes. "I most certainly may. Thus, I shall explain more clearly, as follows. In the chamber is our burgomeister, his wife and three children, one still in a cradle. They were infected with black magic three days ago. In a quite dreadful way. Some sort of slime, something like living tar is crawling all over their bodies. The infection is progressive and slowly killing them. Perhaps it has already killed... You are a witcher, I see, sir. But what do you mean to do? What do you mean to do with your swords?"

"I shall tell you when I see it."

"Really? You wish to go in there? Into the chamber?"

"I do."

The physician snorted, waved his arms, looking as though he was about to protest, then changed his mind.

"Come," he droned from under the mask which he had donned again. "This way."

It was dark in the chamber, the odour of rotten flesh was stifling, making the eyes smart. The sound of children crying and the regular wailing of a woman could be heard.

Geralt's medallion began to vibrate powerfully.

He almost tripped over a cradle which stood in his way. In it lay the tiny corpse of a child. It was covered all over in a rough, black crust, some kind of dried slime. Like a black doll.

The burgomeister—for it must have been him—was sitting in an

armchair with a backrest. Half of his body was covered in the substance, from his feet to his waist. The slime seemed to be moving. Geralt went closer. Indeed, the ooze was pulsating and trembling, extending twitching tentacles.

The woman was lying some way away, in a corner, hugging two weeping children. She was also sobbing. The black slime was visible on both her and the children.

Paying no heed to the physician's warning rumbling, Geralt went even closer. He knelt beside the burgomeister.

"Save us," the burgomeister blurted, reaching out his hands. Geralt cautiously retreated. "Save us... The children..."

As though hearing or reacting to movement, the black slime became animated, pulsated and expanded, rising a few more inches up the burgomeister's body. The burgomeister moaned loudly. The woman in the corner wailed, the children screamed.

Geralt took out his dagger and gathered a drop of the ooze on the tip of the blade. He stood up and stepped back. He and the doctor exited.

"You saw, master," said the physician, removing the mask and wiping his face. "You saw with your own eyes. It's a supernatural force, black magic, or worse still, some kind of demonic power, or something like that... Did you see my cane and gloves on the floor? I had to take them off, discard them, for the slime passed onto them and was growing, growing, I barely managed... In any case, I needn't... Look at your knife."

The drop of slime gathered on the very tip of the dagger had now covered almost an inch of the blade. The slime was alive, swelling, sprouting writhing appendages.

"When it completely covers and strangles those people," the physician said bleakly, "it may move on. In search of new victims."

"No," said the witcher, shaking his head. "For it indeed looks like a spell, curse or charm of execration. Only cast on these people here. The spell will kill the people here and then lapse."

"But it will kill them, you say, master. You mean there is no hope for the burgomeister and his family. Well, in that case, I would advise burning the house down."

They went out into the courtyard.

In the gateway, they encountered a commotion. And a bound girl with a

broken nose being dragged on a rope. She looked not even fifteen years old.

“It’s obvious,” sermonised one of the burghers, the one holding the girl at the end of the rope, “only the death of the person who cast the curse will put paid to it. There must have been a mistake with the wench what we hung, for she is hanging, but the curse is still active. But since the wench was a healer and a herbalist, no great harm was done, nothing to shed a tear over. Now, here we have another, a relative of the healer, She is undoubtedly guilty—for who is, if not her? So, string her up! You’ll see, her death will remove the curse.”

“And if it don’t? If we hang an innocent girl again?”

“We must burn down the house,” interjected the physician. “Burn it. It’s our only salvation.”

“Bollocks! It’s in a row; half of the town will go up in flames!”

“So, what to do?”

“Well, there’s a witcher here,” called the grey-bearded man. “That’s why we sent that messenger, wasn’t it? To fetch a witcher, wasn’t it? Well, now we have one! He knows magic! Let’s hear him out—”

“The witcher seems young,” interrupted a skinny individual in a black robe. “Not blessed with experience, I venture.”

Geralt didn’t judge that worth responding to.

The individual in the black robe walked over to Geralt, very close. He was wearing some sort of sacred symbol on a chain around his neck.

“We don’t need a beardless witcher here!” he said, his breath smelling horribly of alcohol, both long since digested and recently drunk. “What we need is prayer!”

“You’ve been praying since this morning, honourable priest,” said the grey-bearded man, angrily, “and you’ve achieved nothing. Master Witcher, what do you say? Will you undertake this deliverance?”

“He is to save them?” said the priest, breathing out alcoholic vapours once more. “He? I wonder how. But actually, I don’t wonder, for what’s the point of wondering. Prayer. Nothing but prayer, I tell you. But first, hang the wench!”

The grey-bearded man, evidently a high-ranking councillor, whispered with other men.

“We hire you, young Master Witcher,” he said finally. “We, meaning, the town authority. For three hundred marks. But only payable if you succeed. I

mean, if you are effective.”

“Of course. I will accept the job.”

“If any help be needed, we shall help, we shall give it to you at once, we shan’t refuse anything. Just say, what do you need?”

The witcher pointed at the girl.

“I need her.”

He didn’t have to search long or far, for he was helped by the elixir called Wagtail which was helpful in such situations. And observation of the small quantity of slime on the dagger blade.

“Over there, by the stream,” he said to the girl who was still following him. “Whose abode is it? Speak louder, I can barely hear.”

“The dyer... At one time—”

“Thank you. Now be off home. And don’t let them catch you again!”

The cottage stood at the very edge of the town, the poorer part, by a stream, among alders. If it was supposedly a dyer’s house, that “at one time” was very apparent. No drying skeins of wool or yarn could be seen, the streaks of pigment on the rows of long-unused vessels on the porch were dry and faded.

He went in. The door creaked. In the hall, a cobweb settled on his face, and it was obvious few customers had recently passed that way. There were many pots, kettles and other utensils used for dyeing. There was a smell of vinegar.

It was bright in the main room and astonishingly tidy.

A woman was sitting in a rocking chair with a wicker backrest. She was around forty, he guessed. He might have been wrong.

They looked at each other in silence for some time.

“Death is written on your face,” said the woman.

“I wasn’t mistaken,” she went on, slowly rocking the whole time. “I knew that somebody like you would come. The townspeople might also have finally tracked me down... So perhaps it’s better it’s somebody like you.”

He didn’t respond.

“The burgomeister killed my son,” she said after a longer pause.

“Trampled him with his horse, drunk. And then threatened me, forced money on me. I took it, so he thought that was the end, that it was sorted. I waited a long time. I finally obtained—and not cheaply—the knowledge and the means to truly sort it. It wasn’t cheap, but it was as easy as anything to work... A wave of the hand and a word... There was despair, so the means were desperate. But I didn’t know the results would be so dreadful... Nor that his wife would suffer, and his children... Children! And that innocent girl hanged. Now I’d like to reverse it, revoke it... Save them. But... I’m guessing how it will be.”

“There is only one way.”

“I knew,” she said, nodding. “I knew that only my death... But I didn’t want to fall into their hands, let them torture and hang me... I wanted to end it all myself. I bought poison, look. But I was afraid to take it... Perhaps now I’ll dare, while you’re here...”

“That’s not how this works.”

“Ah. So, the sword. The one on your back.”

He said nothing, there was no point in confirming it. She also said nothing.

“Will you execute me quickly, with one blow?” she finally said, “So I won’t feel—”

“That’s not how this works.”

“Ah,” she said and swallowed. “Well... If I must... If it will save the children...”

“It will save two. The older ones. It’s too late for the youngest.”

She sighed aloud. He saw a tear on her cheek.

He drew the sword. She winced.

“Bare yourself. Just slide your blouse off your shoulders.”

“Should I stand?”

“No.”

He placed a foot on the rocker of the chair and stopped its motion. He seized the woman firmly by the arm, digging his fingers in. He aimed the blade of the sword at the centre of her breast. At the height of the costochondral joint of the fifth rib.

“I’d like to—”

He didn’t let her finish.

He thrust powerfully and felt the blade smoothly penetrate the

breastbone. The dyer screamed and struggled, but it was too late. Pressing his fingers on her shoulder, he leaned in and thrust, hard, the blade crunched right through, the openwork backrest of the rocking chair didn't resist either. He leaned on the sword even harder, with all his strength, until the entire blade passed through her back, right up to the ricasso. The woman wasn't screaming now, just opening and closing her mouth. From which blood was now dripping.

But that was not the end of the ritual.

Geralt hunched over and jerked the blade upwards, carving through the sternum and the costochondral joints of the upper ribs. Blood spurted from the woman's mouth, and he knew the blade had severed the pericardium and the aorta.

He pressed down on the hilt and jerked the blade downwards, carving the last, lower costochondral joints of the ribs. Arteries. Veins. And the chambers of the heart.

The dyer sighed. Her eyes were still open.

But that was not the end of the ritual.

He turned the blade over. He jerked it horizontally, splintering the ribs. First to the right, then to the left. Now the chambers of the heart and the arteries had become pulp.

This time it was the end.

He withdrew the blade slowly and carefully; it slid out smoothly. The woman remained in the rocking chair. Motionless.

Were it not for the blood, you might have thought she was sleeping.

The young man in the beret with the pheasant feather ran over to him in the market square, breathing heavily.

"The execration ought to have stopped working," said Geralt, before the youngster had stopped panting. "Finally. It should be possible to see—"

"It is well!" the youngster interrupted. "It's abating, easing off! M'lord burgomeister and his lady have only black feet now, and that tar has receded utterly from the kiddies..."

"I'm glad to hear it. Then it will be time to settle up, won't it? What about my fee?"

The youngster fell silent, cleared his throat, and blushed in a way that left no room for doubt. Geralt sighed.

“You see, Master Witcher,” said the youngster in a trembling voice, confirming Geralt’s suspicion. “You went away somewhere, vanished, and the priest was there the whole time, offering up exorcisms and saying prayers... Thus, the councillors decreed that you invalidated the contract. Because the curse was revoked thanks to the priest and not to you... In other words—”

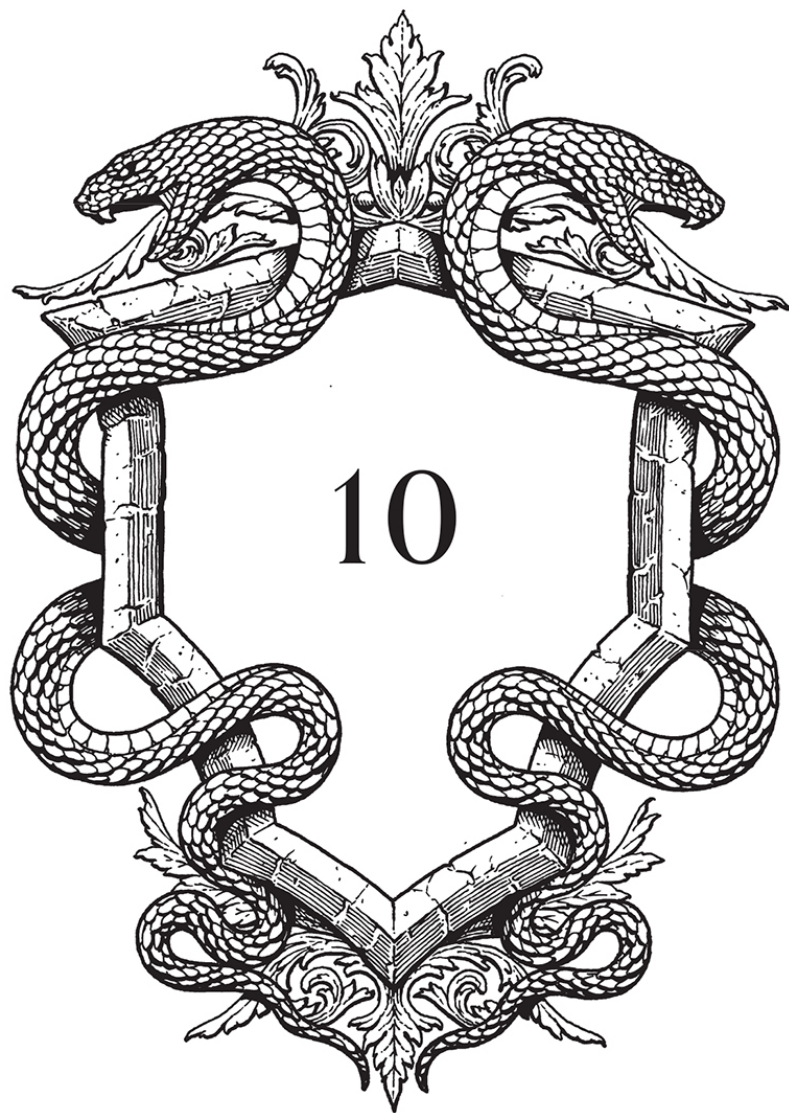
“In other words, you’re paying me nothing.”

“Aye,” muttered the youngster, in embarrassment. “Anywise, you see, it’s been resolved... The decision has been made. But not nothing, no, not at all. The gentlemen councillors have decreed that we can pay you... five marks. For making the effort to come here...”

It was on the tip of Geralt’s tongue to tell the gentlemen councillors to stick the five marks up their arses. But he changed his mind. Five marks was enough for dinner in the tavern at the crossroads. And he was hungry.

He recalled the eyes of the woman at the moment his blade had cleaved her aorta. And he suddenly lost his appetite.

But I need to eat, he thought, mounting Roach and heading towards the turnpike.



Sciendum est about witchers, additionally, that those rogues received from the devil consummate knowledge of herbs and other substances. Thus, having stolen expertise about certain decoctions from wise men, by themselves combining poisons and lethal essences on this basis, they did manufacture alkahests and philtres of awful potency, capable not only of befuddling the imagination, but also of utterly transforming human nature. Having such alkahests ready to hand, the witchers began to kidnap children, particularly such infants as were not immediately taken to a temple by their unsteady and foolish parents following their birth, owing to which evil spells had access to them. As it was proved, the witchers administered by force their loathsome decoction to these abducted children, owing to which every human quality was obliterated in those few children that survived the horrors of that treatment, such that what was nefarious and evil like hemlock did bloom. In this way, unable themselves in naturalibus to reproduce, witchers began to multiply in a devilish fashion.

Anonymous, The Description of a Monstrum or a Witcher

Geralt wanted to forget as quickly as possible about the incident in the town of Glass Mountain, which indeed was once a place where glass was smelted from the quartz sand obtained there. He couldn't. The news spread widely, astonishingly quickly and astonishingly far and wide. Admittedly, a certain pious priest was chiefly praised for removing the curse, but, surprisingly, somebody spread a rumour making a hero of a certain young witcher. Wayside oaks and posts at crossroads were suddenly adorned with boards covered in writing. The appeals on the signs—which displayed great variety in their mastery of spelling—desperately called for help. The help of a witcher—the inscriptions announced—was urgently needed in order to remove a curse, a spell or a bane.

Geralt, still full of youthful fervour, at first didn't pass over any of the appeals, hastening to each with gusto. His enthusiasm slowly ebbed away as he was forced to explain to a family that their grandfather, aged ninety—hats off to him!—was suffering from dementia and the feeble-mindedness linked to it, and the issue was not at all, as the family maintained, a spell cast by a spiteful neighbour. In the next village, he had to examine the village headman's genitalia and explain that the issue wasn't a curse, but an advanced dose of the clap, and it wasn't a witcher that was needed there, but a physician. In the next three villages he explained to men afflicted temporarily or permanently with sexual impotence that he, a witcher, was unable to undo anything like that. Typically, when he declined to help, he was accused of a desire to extort more money and was roundly scolded. There were several attempts to trick him with downright deception—persons of various ages and sexes feigned demonic possession, and accused somebody from the neighbourhood, a relative, or their spouse of casting a spell in the hope that the witcher would immediately kill the accused individual. When the witcher declined, he was himself accused of fraud or colluding with the relative or spouse, castigated and run out of the village.

Closer to the end of September and after having travelled over thirty miles, Geralt began to treat the appeals nailed to posts quite selectively. He only responded to the ones without spelling mistakes, and there were very, very few of those. However, not once did he encounter a real spell he could remove.

Neither did he undertake the job of killing a bear which some forest beekeepers he came across wanted to task him with. The bear was destroying their tree hives and devouring the honey. Geralt hid behind a hastily invented witcher code, as he wasn't particularly keen on a confrontation with the bear, for the latter was huge and—it turned out—had already chalked up several successes against previous hunters already.

It was more or less a week after the equinox when his attention was caught by a board made of pale birchwood on a crooked post at a crossroads. The inscription on the board had been burned into it, which he rarely encountered—the letters were usually daubed on in charcoal. This appeal was bafflingly enigmatic.

WITCHER WANTED CURSE

An arrow burned into it indicated a direction. Down a track into the forest. Heading more or less southwards.

Something wasn't right. The village, he realised at once, had been abandoned. And long before. The thatched roofs of the cottages had fallen in, black holes yawned in broken windows, torn-off doors hung mournfully from their frames. Lush weeds had colonised the farmyards and vegetable patches. The teeth of broken fences grinned in the long grass.

There was actually nothing to indicate a witcher was needed there. There wasn't even a sign of anybody who might need one.

The sandy track, interestingly, bore numerous—and fresh—hoofprints.

A more experienced witcher would have turned around at once and made a hasty withdrawal. Geralt compensated for his lack of experience with courage. Which resulted not just from a lack of experience but also a lack of imagination. He prodded Roach with a heel and set off towards the well. It, too, was covered in moss and buried in nettles, but the well sweep looked sound and there was also a drinking trough.

He had barely managed to approach the well, when from nowhere—or rather from behind the cottages—four big bruisers suddenly sprang forth. They were dressed alike, in fact uniformed, wearing yellow and black

surcoats. He was comforted by the fact they weren't just common thugs. What didn't comfort him was that all four had crossbows. Cocked. And aimed at him.

"Off the horse. Onto the ground. And drop the swords."

It didn't seem to be open to discussion.

"Walk. Over there. To the barn."

It was bright in the barn—for the roof was actually just a single, large opening. The remains of it were hanging from the ridge and the rafters, threatening to fall off at any moment. Plenty of what had already fallen was lying all around on the threshing floor. The gentleman present in the barn seemed unconcerned by the danger. He was sitting on a spar of a broken manger, picking his teeth with a straw.

"The witcher called Geralt?"

"I am he."

The gentleman made a short gesture. The bruisers with crossbows left the barn. Geralt had no doubt, however, that they had not moved far away.

"I am Estevan Trillo da Cunha. The Prefect of the Guard from Ard Carraigh. Responsible for security in the Kingdom of Kaedwen. Show me your witcher's emblem."

Geralt unbuttoned his jacket and took out the chain and medallion showing the wolf with bared teeth.

"Thank you. And here is my emblem and a confirmation of my identity."

The gentleman took from inside his jacket a small, round, enamelled plate and showed it to Geralt. On the plate was a rearing, black unicorn on a yellow background.

Estevan Trillo da Cunha was slim, almost thin. He had black hair pulled back and plaited in a queue, a black moustache and a small pointed black beard. He was also dressed in black. And quite opulently.

"And now down to business," he said, staring hard at the witcher with his black eyes. "It appears that you, Witcher Geralt, represent a threat to the Kingdom of Kaedwen. You are accused of two murders. You killed a soldier in March, in the settlement of Neuhold. And in August, a woman, in Glass Mountain."

"I killed a marauder in the defence of people being attacked and in my own defence. There are witnesses—"

Estevan Trillo da Cunha interrupted him by raising a ringed hand.

“I wouldn’t pin my hopes on it. Witnesses come and go. And testimonies change very quickly. Depending on the need.”

“The woman you speak of had cast a spell, killed a child with it and endangered the lives of several more people. Only her death was capable of removing the spell. It was witcher work...”

“I have other information. And evidence confirming its veracity.”

“Besides, on the strength of the titulary edicts of Dagread, King of Kaedwen, witchers are permitted to be exempt from the jurisdiction—”

“The edicts concern witchers killing monsters. Monsters. Not people. I shall have to arrest you, Witcher Geralt.”

Geralt was silent for some time. It seemed to him that Estevan Trillo da Cunha was smiling faintly under his black moustache.

“The board at the crossroads,” said Geralt slowly. “With a sham appeal about a curse. In the middle of nowhere. This is an ambush. An arrest, but somehow unofficial. An absence of witnesses. Is that how the security service of the Kingdom of Kaedwen operates? That medallion with a unicorn, M’Lord Prefect of the Guard, is that not a sham, too?”

Estevan Trillo da Cunha also said nothing, and also for some time. He had stopped smiling.

“You bear a witcher emblem and you work as a witcher,” he said finally. “Apparently on your own account, but actually you serve somebody else.”

“I do not serve anybody. I work *per procura*, which means—”

“You are the assistant of a criminal,” the prefect interrupted sharply. “Preston Holt, whom you serve, is a criminal. He is responsible for the premeditated and treacherous murder of three men. I know that, but knowledge of it doesn’t suffice. I wish to arraign him, and for the trial I need irrefutable proof. And you will supply me with that proof.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“You will obtain the proof of Holt’s guilt and supply it to me. Thus, you will avoid a trial, a verdict and a penalty. And for a double murder the penalty, know this, would be death by garrotting in Sturefors prison.”

Geralt shrugged and turned his head away.

“Three men,” continued the prefect. “Murdered in an extremely brutal fashion, and executed in a way that does not point to a witcher. Meaning without the use of a sword.”

“Well, I never.”

“Kari Nourred, a cripple on crutches, hanged by his own long johns. Otto Margulies, a distinguished civic activist and philanthropist, butchered with a meat cleaver. Remko Chwalba, father of three and grandfather of six children, clubbed to death with a shoemaker’s hammer.”

“And each time,” Geralt mocked, “the witnesses fingered Holt?”

“Each time they indicated a different person with a completely different appearance. By the way, do you know where the name of Holt’s estate comes from? Rocamora?”

“No.”

“*Roac a moreah*. In the Elder Speech it means retribution, ancestral revenge.”

“Incontrovertible proof, indeed,” said Geralt, still smiling mockingly. “But how can Holt take the blame for those three men? Or perhaps Holt murders random people by chance, just like that? Like witchers do? One can blame a witcher for everything. One can find proof for anything, and witnesses, and everybody else will believe it, for let’s face it, a witcher is the cause of all kinds of evil and foul miasmas, and anything he touches should be burned. He must be to blame for everything, including murders. Particularly, if the actual criminals just cannot be found, and you have to prove yourself as a problem solver—”

“The three victims,” Estevan Trillo da Cunha explained calmly, “were leaders of a popular movement that in the year one hundred and ninety-four attacked Kaer Morhen, that witcher Fastness of yours. That is precisely why, young man, I don’t believe that various unconnected criminals are responsible for those crimes. Because I know who really is guilty and what motive he had.”

“Well, it’s all clear,” said Geralt slowly. “Now I get the picture. The year one hundred and ninety-four. Know what, prefect? If all that is true, then those three warranted it, they deserved their fate, I would willingly have put paid to them, I had a bloody great motive, and it’s a pity somebody beat me to it. Were I to meet that somebody, I would congratulate and thank him. And stand him a drink.”

“You won’t get the chance,” said the prefect, who had got up from the manger. “For you will be imprisoned in a cell in Sturefors awaiting your trial. Unless you agree to—”

“I will not.”

“Do you know why we are speaking in the middle of nowhere and without witnesses? Because if you agree to supply me with the proof I require, if you even promise to search for them, you will leave here as free as a bird, and no one will learn of our conversation. If, however, I officially arrest you, the machinery will be set in motion, and the gears will pull you in. And the only way out is via the scaffold.”

“I refuse.”

Estevan Trillo da Cunha stood up suddenly and walked over to Geralt, very close. Geralt, who for some time had been toying with the key in his pocket, was wondering what would be a better target—the bregma? Or the bridge of the nose and that pretty-sounding glabella?

One of the crossbowmen rushed into the barn, panting and sweaty, gesticulating frantically. The prefect glared at Geralt once more and then went outside.

Geralt was left alone. The rear door of the barn was ajar, no one was guarding it, it wouldn't have been difficult to escape through it and disappear into the nearby undergrowth. But the witcher had no intention of leaving either Roach or his swords at the mercy of the prefect. *What will be, will be*, he decided, sitting down on the manger. *I shall wait*.

He waited. From outside came the sound of raised voices, the thudding of hooves, the snorting and neighing of horses. After a long while, complete silence fell. It seemed to him, however, that he could still hear the snorting of horses. And the creaking of the well sweep.

When he finally exited, bored with waiting, eyes squinting in the sunlight, he was extremely surprised. Five mounted men were waiting in the farmyard. All of them were wearing red and black surcoats. There was no trace of the yellow and black riders or the prefect from Ard Carraigh.

By the well stood a tall, fair-haired woman in an elk-hide man's buff coat and high boots. She was pouring water into the drinking trough from a pail hauled up from the well. Roach, head lowered, was drinking from the trough.

He walked closer. The woman had venomous green, almond-shaped eyes. A blinding white patch of a hem-stitched shirt showed inside the unbuttoned buff coat. A long cutlass was hanging from a baldric embroidered with silver thread.

The woman gestured with her gloved hand towards the swords resting

against the well.

“Your property, I presume?”

He nodded.

“I am Elena Fiachra de Mersault, commandant of the security service of the Upper March.”

Geralt ought to have said something witty. In the style of “it seems to be the season for security services.” Or “you wait ages for the security service and then two turn up at once.” He didn’t say anything. He was simply tongue-tied.

The woman noticed and stopped talking.

“The horse has been watered,” she said briefly a moment later. “So, we can ride.”

“I am not...” said Geralt, finding his voice. “I am not going to supply any evidence.”

“That’s a good thing. For I don’t care about it. Mount up, please.”

“You mean I’m not under arrest?”

“Do you want to be?”

“No.”

“Then hop into the saddle. This conversation is boring me.”

“But first I’d like to—”

“His Lordship the Margrave Luitpold Lindenbrog,” Elena Fiachra de Mersault interrupted, “requests, witcher, that you report for an audience at his seat, in Brunanburh Castle. Margrave Lindenbrog governs here, in the Upper March. I just called on that authority, by the way. By ordering Estevan Trillo da Cunha to leave you alone and return home to Ard Carraigh. Heedless of what he holds against you or what he wants from you. And Estevan, though in the royal service, politely obeyed. He is not here, as you can see. A few words were enough for him to vanish. I suggest that you, too, obey the request of the Lord Margrave. Just as politely. I don’t mean to waste any more words.”

“I understand. Well, then let’s ride.”

Elena Fiachra de Mersault, commandant of the security service of the Upper March, looked the same age as the priestess Nenneke from Elsborg,

which made her, Geralt calculated, just under thirty years old. By no means could she be called plain, but her looks were of quite a different kind than those of Pampinea Monteforte or the girls from Lorelei. The looks of the girls from Lorelei were—Geralt searched a long time for the right word. Fluffy? Plushy? Fuzzy? Somehow nice, soft, and alluring. Whereas there was nothing alluring at all about Commandant de Mersault.

They rode in absolute silence for probably an hour. And there was absolutely nothing to suggest that de Mersault would be the first to speak. Geralt indeed had several questions, but he was in no hurry to ask them. He recalled that the commandant didn't like to waste words, so he wasn't inclined to hear that from her once again.

But finally, he couldn't restrain himself.

"What does the margrave need me for?"

The commandant rode over to him, so close she nudged Geralt's foot with her stirrup.

"You are a witcher." Surprisingly she didn't hesitate with her answer. "You are needed for matters concerning witchers."

"To be precise?"

"Actually, very precise."

He fell silent, his patience slowly draining away.

Some way away, where the trees ended and there was a bright glow of sunset, came the barking of dogs. And the lowing of an ox.

"We shall stop for the night in the village," said Elena Fiachra de Mersault. "I shall call on the margravian right of billeting. Then we shall talk."

Billeting, or the duty to provide board and lodging for the retinue of travelling dignitaries, notables and low-ranking state officials, was an obligation that usually signified a veritable affliction for a village or settlement, probably only comparable to a fire or an attack by an enemy army. Geralt had seen peasants in the temple in Elsborg imploring the priestesses for help and mediation in the matter of grievances they were lodging with the authorities against officials who had abused the duty of billeting, sometimes excessively.

Thus, it should have come as no surprise that the visibly impoverished hamlet at the edge of the forest greeted Commandant de Mersault and her demand for billeting without enthusiasm. Why, some women began to openly wail and their children to weep. Needlessly. The commandant was restrained in her use of the obligation. Naturally, she didn't decline the offer of the hamlet's headman to give his entire cottage over to her disposal. She ordered her soldiers, however, to sleep in an outhouse. And they fed themselves with their own provisions, without depleting the hamlet's already very meagre goods and chattels, and stores of food and animal fodder, without which surviving the winter might have become burdensome.

She didn't forget her promise. When night fell, Geralt kept her company in the village elder's cottage. At a crooked and roughly planed table. By the light of a candle taken from Geralt's own saddlebag. There wasn't a candle to be had in the hamlet, only torches in cressets. Reeking horribly of old tallow.

"You're clearly quite a young witcher," she began, staring at the flickering wisp of the candle flame. "Hence, it ought not to surprise you if I ask, just to be certain. The monster called a striga. Do you possess any knowledge about it?"

"I do. The striga is a monster in the night-terror sub-group of the ghoul category. It may arise as the result of changes to a foetus owing to a curse or a spell cast on the pregnant mother—"

"When the pregnancy is the result of incest."

"According to folk wisdom. The curse or spell may also be cast not on a foetus, but on a person of any age. If the spell takes effect, the afflicted individual will become a striga after their death."

"Have you ever seen one?"

"I have," he said. He wasn't lying. But he omitted to add that it was in an engraving. In *Physiologus*, and other books in the library at Kaer Morhen.

"And do you know how to deal with something like that?"

"I do." Again, failing to add that his knowledge was from books and Vesemir's lectures.

"That means you have a striga at Brunanburh," he continued, not waiting for a reaction. "That is the matter that the margrave needs me for."

A mouse ran into the circle of light cast by the candle. It stood upright and looked around. It ran to the tip of Elena Fiachra de Mersault's boot. Then scurried over it. And vanished into the gloom.

"More or less a year ago, in the summer," said Elena Fiachra de Mersault, following the mouse with dispassionate eyes, "a noblewoman from Ard Carraigh came to the castellum at Brunanburh. Secretly and incognito. With her daughter, aged fifteen. The noblewoman asked for refuge and protection. Owing to their old friendship, Margrave Lindenbrog pledged her the former and the latter. After a brief sojourn, the noblewoman quit the castellum and the March. Whither she went was known only to the margrave. But she left alone. Her daughter remained with us."

It seemed to Geralt that after her last words the commandant sighed softly. But it didn't throw her off her stride.

"The daughter remained," repeated the commandant. "But just before Midinvaerne she fell ill and died soon after. The margrave took it very hard."

Geralt guessed the rest. The commandant surmised without difficulty that he had. And abridged her account.

"It began before Yule was out. The girl began to leave her grave as... How did you put it? As a monster in the night-terror sub-group of the ghoulish category? Folk, however, didn't have any difficulty calling the monster by its real name. For although everything was one great secret, it wasn't possible to stop people gossiping. That noblewoman from Ard Carraigh had fled the capital from her father. With her daughter who... was at once her sister. Which is why she became a striga. A monster with very large and very sharp teeth.

"The striga," said Elena Fiachra de Mersault, still looking at the candle flame, "began to do what a striga does. Meaning it left its grave at night to kill people. With great vigour.

"The real wealth of the Upper March," she continued a moment later, "and of the margrave personally, is salt. The entire Foreland, or western slopes of the Blue Mountains, particularly in the vicinity of Brunanburh, stands on huge, subterranean deposits of rock salt of the finest quality. Currently, three shafts are being worked there, and the yield is of the order of several thousand hundredweight annually. And the prospects are considerably greater. An entire village of miners has sprung up outside

Brunanburh, a good hundred of them live there with their families.

“Unfortunately, the cemetery and the striga’s tomb are close to that village and the mine itself. The striga doesn’t have to bother itself with venturing far and the number of victims among the miners is rising. And suddenly nobody wants either to live there or work in the margrave’s salt mine. The striga is endangering the economy of the March.

“You might say that a gang of miners with mattocks ought to cope with any old striga, shouldn’t it? Well, the miners haven’t and they can’t. Rumours and hearsay have spread. That the striga is a supernatural creature and mortals can’t overcome it. That anybody bitten by the striga will become one themselves. That you don’t need to be bitten: a look will suffice. That not even a look is necessary, the curse of the striga even works at a distance and woe to any pregnant woman in the vicinity. And on top of all that—”

She suddenly fell silent. The candle flame flickered, the wick sputtered and smoked.

“On top of that, word has it that Margrave Lindenbrog isn’t minded to... destroy it. He’s still vainly searching for a way to remove the curse. And disenchant the girl. The margrave searches, the striga murders, the miners flee from Brunanburh, and the people are rising up. Demanding that the margrave finally does something. To be precise, to divest himself of his prejudices. And call for the help of witchers. Which... well, let’s say, he isn’t fond of.”

Geralt could have nodded, but decided it wasn’t necessary.

“In Glass Mountain, you removed a spell, killing the person who cast it,” said the commandant, raising her head. “Does one act thus in the case of a striga?”

“No. Quite differently. And to be clear: I have no intention of going to Ard Carraigh in order to kill that girl’s father.”

“Good to know.”

They said nothing for some time.

“I have a strange feeling,” he said, “or rather a presentiment. That you haven’t told me everything.”

In fact, Geralt had neither a feeling, nor a presentiment, and there was nothing, absolutely nothing in the commandant’s behaviour or words that might have indicated that she wasn’t being completely candid. It was

simply a shot in the dark. Which surprisingly hit the target.

He might just as easily have missed. For Elena Fiachra de Mersault wasn't bothered at all.

"I am not in the habit of revealing everything on the first date," she said and looked him in the eyes over the candle flame. "And now you will go. We are setting off at dawn and need a good night's sleep."



In this world, my dear margrave, there exist irreversible phenomena. Those that only become transformed in one direction and once transformed cannot assume their previous form. For example: one cannot make an aquarium from fish soup. Or, using simpler words which will be more comprehensible to you: one cannot unspoil a spoiled egg. Put even more simply and without using metaphors: what has become a striga, will be a striga for ever and ever. You ought to have thought earlier, my dear Luitpold. And using your head, not your cock. Well, now you've got what you deserve.

Excerpt from a letter from the sorcerer Artamon of Asguth, Dean of
the Academy of Magic in Ban Ard, to Luitpold Lindenbrog,
Margrave of the Upper March

The land behind Brunanburh castellum was a small, shallow basin, a natural saddle between hills. The castellum rose up on a higher, craggy peak; the ruins of a once majestic construction towered over a lower one. Geralt guessed it had once been a temple. And even earlier than that had been an elven building that had first been destroyed and was then converted into a temple. And later that temple had also been destroyed.

The hollow, apart from some crooked willows, was bordered by a thicket, a dense snarl of bushes. And the centre was similarly occupied by a veritable snarl of gravestones, boulders of various sizes and shapes. One could see at once the division of the cemetery into the ancient part, dating back to elven times, and the newer, human part. In the elven part, very weathered, moss-covered, squat dolmens prevailed. The newer, human part was covered by modern tombstones: slender columns, slabs and stelae.

There was a full moon. The cemetery looked enchanting and delightful in the moonlight.

Geralt had received instructions and so knew where to search for the right grave. He probably would have found it without them, too, for it stood out. There was no stela, only a slab of pale marble. It was quite smooth, without epitaph or markings.

An infallible sign, too, were the skulls and bones scattered all around. The striga had dragged some of its victims near to the crypt to feast on them.

He knew what he had to do, remembering well the lessons from Kaer Morhen.

All the theories about removing spells from ghouls of the night-terror group—and there were several—were in agreement regarding the fact that the spell metamorphosing the striga would vanish if the striga was caught outside its crypt by the third rooster, meaning the third time a cock crowed. This didn't mean an actual rooster or its crowing, but the astronomical time and the Sun's position below the horizon. Few, however, had heard of astronomical time, and no one knew how to calculate the Sun's position below the horizon. Time was thus demarcated by roosters crowing three times between midnight and dawn. The first crowing, i.e. the first roosters, occurred just after midnight. The second heralded imminent daybreak, or

the moment when a glow appeared over the horizon. The third roosters were heard at sunrise, at the moment when the twilight of dawn veiled the most weakly shining stars in the firmament.

It was just before the middle of October, and a distant bell and the first roosters announcing midnight had sounded around an hour before. So, more or less four hours remained until dawn. Perhaps a little more. Or less.

Geralt sat down on a grave at the start of the path leading to the miners' village. He took from his bag a casket, pressed down on the catch, and ran a finger over the vials' stoppers. Golden Oriole, Black Gull, Lapwing, Wagtail, Blackbird, Heron, Nightjar, and Rosefinch.

Tonight, he thought, taking a vial from its compartment, *I'll be sure to need Nightjar*.

All four walls of the chamber were decorated with hunting trophies. And not just any old trophies. Stags' antlers, the smallest of which were probably fourteen-pointers. Hides and heads of easily six-hundred-pound boars. Skins of huge wolverines. Curled and ridged mouflon horns of phenomenal size.

The honorary place—above the fireplace, where Luitpold Lindenbrog, Margrave of the Upper March, was warming his feet—was occupied by the antlers of a gigantic elk, a rack with a span of at least six and a half feet.

The margrave scrutinised Geralt in silence, toying with a large, silver goblet adorned with something like fragments of bone. He looked a spruce man in his fifties. Or a man in his forties who had neglected his wellbeing. The bluish nose and prominent belly betrayed a penchant for strong liquor and the pleasures of the table.

In spite of those rather epicurean traits, the margrave's demeanour was severe and grim. Perhaps owing to the very deep wrinkles and a forehead made higher by an advanced and prematurely receding hairline. Perhaps owing to his eyebrows, which were bushy and fluffed up like a pair of shaggy rodents. Perhaps owing to his eyes with their nasty expression.

The menacing severity emanating from the margrave made no impression on Geralt. Probably as a result of his youthful lack of imagination.

In the corner of the chamber, beneath a large stuffed eagle, stood a loom, and beside it sat two women, or more precisely a woman and a girl. The girl was around twelve and looked like a little girl. Pretty, apart from some pockmarks. The woman had long, straight hair, large eyes and a thin mouth. She looked to be in quite a bad way. Perhaps owing to the horrifying pallor of her face and the whiteness of her dainty hands. Perhaps owing to something else that Geralt was unable to identify.

The two of them—the woman and the little girl—were working at the loom. With quite mechanical movements they were operating the contraption, weaving the weft and the threads of the warp, the woman with a shuttle, the little girl with a small batten. The thing that was emerging as a result of their work resembled a sheer curtain. Or a net. The arrangement of the threads was unusual—the pattern looked like a fish's scales. Or the plates of scale armour.

The fragments of bone on the margrave's goblet, Geralt noticed, included teeth and eye sockets.

"Witcher," said Luitpold Lindenbrog, breaking the weighty silence, and raising the goblet. "Do you know what this is?"

Geralt knew, but remained silent.

"This chalice," said the margrave, "was actually made from the skull of a witcher. The ringleader of all witchers. It's a trophy from the historic Battle of Kaer Morhen, which was waged in the year one hundred and ninety-four. As a memento of that battle, the skull of the witcher killed there was incorporated into it. My father, the Margrave of the Upper March before me, received it as a gift from one of the participants of that victorious fray."

Geralt didn't have the slightest intention of correcting the margrave. The trophy was clearly a fake. Whether the margrave was aware of that or whether he had been deceived wasn't especially important.

"Why am I telling you this and why am I therefore drinking from the goblet in your presence? I am doing it to make you aware that, similar to my father, I am not fond of witchers. I consider the mutation to which you owe your existence as something contrary to nature and not deserving of existence. Even if we boldly assume that you accomplish as much good as evil, if we suppose that your good deeds balance out your excesses and your offences, then in consequence it comes out at zero. Zero. In other words:

nothing. That neutral outcome means that, in short, you are utterly redundant in the world.

“But,” said the margrave, sipping from the goblet and raising his head, “I can muster up tolerance when professionalism is in the reckoning. I’m not fond of elves or half-breeds either, to put it mildly. But I tolerate Elena Fiachra de Mersault, a quarter-elf; why, I favour her with a senior position, for she is an outstanding professional. So, if I overcome my revulsion and talk to you, it is also because I would like to treat you as a professional. Although you are smooth-cheeked... Deianira! Herzeloide! I’ve had enough of that tapping! Be gone! Both of you!”

The margrave’s last words indeed sounded like the roar of an elk. The woman and the little girl positively cowered at the sound. They stood up and hurriedly exited the chamber, abandoning both the loom and the curtain woven in a fish-scale pattern. Luitpold Lindenbrog watched them go, remaining silent until they had gone. For Geralt, it became apparent that it wasn’t the banging of the loom that was disturbing the margrave, but their presence. He quite clearly didn’t want to talk in front of them.

“The maid entrusted into my care,” he finally said, sipping from the goblet again, “died suddenly. And after her death, following her burial, she turned into a striga. Into a hellish monster that emerges from its grave at night, killing people and sowing fear all over. Commandant de Mersault was ordered to acquaint you with the details, so you surely know this. Please confirm.”

“I confirm.”

“And I shall throw in a little what-not. You see, witcher, tidings travel fast around here, particularly when somebody helps them. And a certain priest from Glass Mountain helped, helped considerably. He was boasting to all and sundry in that town that, aided by fervent prayer, he had removed a spell from the burgomeister and his family and freed them from a terrible curse. When that reached my ears, and the striga had managed by then to slaughter a good dozen people, I sent the commandant and ordered the priest to present himself to me. Well, he was standing before me, just as you are now. But his calves were trembling pitifully, while yours, I observe, are not. Ha, no doubt through lack of imagination.

“But let’s get back to the matter. I tell the priest what it’s all about, that I need a curse removed from a striga. I describe the striga’s appearance and

habits to him. And he—I observe—goes as pale as a gravedigger’s arse. So, I smell a rat, but ask him politely, very politely, if he is certain whether his prayers did indeed overcome the execration in Glass Mountain. And whether he is prepared to repeat the deed and remove the spell from our ghoul. And he lowers his eyes and mutters something. When pressed, he nods, saying he is, but must first spend the entire night alone praying to the gods. I graciously allow him this, but I wasn’t born yesterday, so I secretly order a watch to be set. And what happens? Just imagine that it had barely got dark before the priest surreptitiously tries to slink away. Naturally, my man grabs him by the scruff of the neck and brings him to me. Again I ask, again politely, why was he planning to bolt? What about the removal of the curse? He is not gulling me, by any chance, is he? But he sticks to his original account. Somehow my politeness left me after this. In brief, I was pissed off. I ordered him shoved into an iron cage and hung from a corbel over a cliff. He hadn’t even hung for half an hour before he started yelling and begging for mercy. And confessed that he hadn’t removed the curse in Glass Mountain at all. And named the one who really had. Can you guess who that was?”

Geralt nodded.

“You guessed right,” said the margrave, apparently pleased. “I am most content. Well, what now? Will you undertake the removal of the curse from the striga? Just don’t tell me that you first have to spend the whole night praying. Because the cage is still hanging in the same place.”

“With the priest inside?”

“Not at all,” said Luitpold Lindenbrog, grimacing. “I let him go and sent him to hell. Having first ordered him flogged with a bullwhip, to teach him a lesson.”

“Has anyone else tried... Has your lordship approached... I believe the March has a resident sorcerer?”

“Had. He up and died in the spring of last year. They were meant to be sending me somebody from Ban Ard, but they still haven’t. While we’re on the subject of Ban Ard, I requested help with the striga from one of the mages there. A powerful mage, an important figure in that academy of theirs, and what’s more, a relative of Deianira, my wife, and previously a comrade of my late father. I thought he’d help. Who, I thought, if not him? He’d wave his wand, cast a spell and remove the curse. But he... instead of

helping, wrote me a letter.”

Geralt saw the margrave’s expression and guessed at its contents, but said nothing.

“I kept that letter,” drawled the margrave. “And if an occasion presents itself, I’ll make that whore’s son eat it.

“And so, that leaves you,” said Luitpold Lindebrog and stood up. “I freely confess that it sickens me greatly to have to put up with you, a witcher, here, and ask you for help, but sadly I’ve run out of other options. With great reluctance, I must offer you, and no one else, honest payment for honest work. More than honest, I’d say. Five hundred Novigradian crowns. You will receive that sum if you remove the spell and the striga becomes a maid again. You removed the spell cast on the burgomeister of Glass Mountain, as has been shown. It means you’re capable of removing spells, although you are but a whelp. So, disenchant the striga. For the sake of my satisfaction and your gain. And fame, for I shall trumpet your exploits to the entire world. You will be more famous than Preston Holt.

“And now leave. This audience is over.”

Geralt waited.

After drinking the elixir, he withstood the first jolt. In a flash, his vision adapted to the darkness. The moon gave off enough light when it emerged from behind the clouds, but the elixir meant that the witcher could see as though it was day, or even better, sharper and with greater contrast. He could see rats—a short while before hidden in the shadows—scurrying over gravestones. He heard their squeaking, for his hearing was also more acute. He could hear the barking of dogs from the miners’ village down the hill. And the distant hooting of an owl.

He waited.

First the rats fled, scattering in all directions like grey missiles. And then stone grated against stone.

The striga jumped from its grave as though shot out by a spring, bounding a good four yards upwards. It gave a roar and screamed, circled the vault in wild leaps, jumped to the highest stela in the vicinity, and climbed up to the very top, as agile as a monkey. Like a monkey it wiggled

its upraised backside, yelling and howling. And saw the witcher.

It shrieked terribly again and jumped down from the stela. It brandished its long arms. And attacked at once. Fangs as long and sharp as daggers flashed in its jaws, opened wide to roar.

Geralt dodged, spun around in a pirouette, and the striga brushed against him, its teeth snapping shut, and its claws slicing through the air. He made use of the opportunity and his advantage to punch it with all his strength in the side of the head with the silver studs of his glove. There was a hiss, smoke belched out of its ear, the monster dropped to the ground, yelling ferociously, and shook its head. *Excellent*, he thought, *like all strigas, you're sensitive to silver*. The striga didn't hurry with the next attack. This time it approached slowly, baring its fangs and drooling repulsively.

The moon emerged for a moment from behind the clouds and brightened up the graveyard enough for Geralt to scrutinise the striga.

It was by no means tall, four feet at the most, with a disproportionately huge, pumpkin-shaped head. Its enormous, bulging eyes blazed with fire, and fangs of impressive size flashed white in its broad, fishlike jaws.

It had a strange pattern on its skin. A design. Seemingly scorched. Or etched with acid.

Geralt moved slowly among the gravestones. As he walked, he circled the striga, which turned around on the spot, tense and hunched, primed to attack. It bared its terrible teeth and snapped its jaws.

The witcher unwound a silver chain, arranging it into coils in his left hand. With his right he made the end of the chain whirl in a circle through the air. He was waiting for a suitable moment, when the striga would move away from the headstones and into more open terrain.

The chance came, and quicker than he had expected. The chain whistled in the air, and the monster dropped to the ground and attacked from an almost prone position. The chain, rather than wrapping itself around the striga, barely brushed its back. The striga howled furiously, its skin hissing and smoking as it came into contact with the silver.

The witcher didn't get a second chance. Before his astonished eyes, the striga seized the chain in both hands, the hissing and smoking of burned skin seeming not to concern it, as it shrieked abominably. The striga tugged the chain. Geralt prudently released the end he was holding, but the final links caught on his belt buckle. Put off his stride, he lost his balance and fell

against a headstone, overturning it. The striga attacked with a frenzied leap and pinned him to the ground, its fangs snapping just above his face, while saliva dripped into his eyes. He wriggled out from under it and thumped the striga in its hairy ear with the silver studs of his glove with all his might. He punched once, twice and a third time, until he knocked it off him.

He rolled away, hiding behind a gravestone, and managed to leap to his feet. The striga once again leaped, and this time he avoided being crushed thanks to a lightning-fast evasion. He stumbled again, miraculously regaining his balance. But the striga was already upon him, was already raking his jerkin with its talons and snapping its fangs in his face. Geralt shoved it away with a desperate punch of his silver studs, so powerfully it fell to the ground. Before it got to its feet, he jumped aside and formed his fingers into the Aard Sign.

To no effect.

He tried again, fear making his movements clumsy. To no effect again.

The elixir shouldn't have let it happen, but his berserker state suddenly yielded to terror. Panic flowed over him like a waterfall, and it was panic that dictated his next movements. Geralt sprang back, jerking his sword from its sheath. Powered by a leap and a half-turn, he slashed the attacking striga in the neck, with a classic mandritto tondo. Cut half through, the striga's head lolled on its shoulder, in spite of which the monster came on, waving its clawed hands clumsily. Geralt circled the striga with a half-turn and slashed once more. Its head fell off and rolled between the graves. A fountain of aortic blood shot upwards from the monster's neck. Geralt managed to leap aside to avoid being drenched.

He went closer, slowly and cautiously. He knew that a monster animated by magic was capable of causing damage even after losing its head. The striga lying between the gravestones looked, though, as if it were completely dead. And it was, lying in a spreading puddle of blood that was still being pumped out by its heart.

And before the witcher's eyes it began to transform. Gradually, beginning with the feet. Through the shins, thighs, belly and breasts. Until it became a young girl. Very young. And very dead. For it was decapitated.

Geralt swore quite coarsely. It wasn't the result he had hoped for. And of which he might be proud. For he wasn't in the slightest.

He leaned over. And took a closer look. Astonished. The last thing of the

striga that remained in the girl was that strange design on the skin. Seemingly burned into it. Or etched. The design was becoming less and less distinct, fading quite slowly, but still visible.

Something like a fish's scales. Or scale armour.

Commandant Elena Fiachra de Mersault gazed at him for a long time in silence.

"Say it again," she finally said.

"I was compelled," he obediently repeated, "to carry out... an annihilation."

"Utterly?" she asked after another period of silence. "Completely and utterly?"

"Couldn't have been more utterly."

"Well, yes," she said, lowering her head. "It's plain to see."

He wiped his face involuntarily and felt the dried-on blood that was stuck there. Clearly he hadn't managed to completely avoid the fountain spurting out of the striga. It also partly explained the reactions of the chamber maid and the guards defending the ingress to the commandant's bedroom from a fellow specked with blood like a butcher. Or a surgeon.

Elena Fiachra de Mersault ground her knuckles into the corners of her eyes and yawned. While Geralt had been arguing with the sentries, she had managed to rise from her bed and get dressed. She'd put on britches and high boots. She was still in a nightshirt, however, which was tucked into her britches. The shirt, made of flannel, was pink, fastened up to her neck with three buttons and had a small collar with rounded corners.

"Ah, well," she said finally. "What is done can't be undone. The margrave won't be overjoyed, however. That wasn't the result he was counting on, I believe."

Now it was Geralt's turn to say nothing for a long time. He wondered what to say and how to say it.

"I know how the transformation in the striga occurred," he finally said, in a soft voice. "Somebody cast a spell. Somebody is to blame."

"To blame?" Commandant de Mersault said, jerking her head up and placing both hands on the table. "And don't you think that searching for the

guilty and pointing fingers goes well beyond your competence? That your words seriously exceed your purview and skills?"

"Yes, indeed," he said, sighing. "Just the other day, a certain blacksmith brought it to my attention. Everyone, he said, should take care of their own business. His field, as a blacksmith, was a hammer and an anvil. Murders are a matter for the shire-reeve and the courts. And a witcher's business is his sword."

"My, my," said the commandant, squinting, "what a sage that blacksmith was. And how he touched the very essence of the matter. A moment ago, however, you used a word that in the given situation you ought to have avoided. For the only person to blame for the murder is you, you yourself. Somebody else, with greater experience and abilities, a sorcerer, a priest, a scholar, perhaps even another witcher, might have removed the spell from the girl. There was a chance. You definitively took away that chance from the girl. By murdering her. Don't stop me. Naturally, I won't level any such charges against you, but shall find that you acted out of necessity and indeed for the greater good. Thanks to you, from tonight there won't be any more victims."

"I'd like to believe that."

"What do you mean?"

"You also know who is to blame, commandant."

She drummed her fingers on the table.

"An interesting conjecture," she said. "Which, in any case, I refute. Suspensions, conjectures and suppositions are not facts. After all, you don't have any facts, either. You have presumptions. And how do you propose to act on the basis of those?"

She leaned over and looked him in the eyes.

"What would you like to do, I asked? Hack open the entire chest of the suspect with intersecting cuts, as you did in Glass Mountain? I was there and I saw what you did to the dyer. What now, then? Who'll be first? Will you start by butchering Deianira in front of Herzeloide or Herzeloide in front of Deianira? The mother before the daughter's eyes or vice versa?"

"In Glass Mountain, I—"

"You saved the burgomeister, his wife, and two children from death. I know," she said, interrupting him harshly. "Here you won't be saving anybody. There's no one to save."

“To be exact...” he stammered. “To be exact, there is. One day, sometime in the future... Who can know what those two might yet weave on that loom of theirs? What will the next design be? If somebody knows how to cast a spell—”

“They will surely cast another?” she interrupted. “Why, there’s no guarantee. Particularly if similar circumstances occur. If some sodden old fart loses his mind over some teenaged girl. If the girl teases the old fart and wiggles her behind in front of him, but keeps her distance, doesn’t let him come closer until he fulfils her demands and whims. And he, utterly under her spell, does exactly that. Yes, you suppose right. Besotted with the girl, Lindenbrog quite seriously planned to make the young maid the object of his desires, the margravine. It wouldn’t be the first time; he cast out his previous wife in the same way. Now he meant to cast Deianira out. Along with her daughter. A child who is deaf and dumb because of disease.

“And thus,” she continued, “no investigation will be conducted. There’s no point. For everybody it was, is and will be obvious and indisputable that the girl became a striga because she was conceived incestuously, was begotten by her father with his own daughter. That is already being widely talked about and is now the definitive version. And may it thus remain so. Do we understand one another?”

He nodded.

“Excellent,” said Elena Fiachra de Mersault, slapping her hand on the table. “The sun is rising, the miners from the village will soon begin making ready for their shift. I shall go and announce the wonderful news. The intrepid witcher has saved them. He fearlessly faced the monster in battle, vanquished and killed it. The danger is over, they can stop bolting their doors shut after dark. They can visit the tavern of an evening and return home late at night. The entire mining village, intrepid witcher, and the entire castellum of Brunanburh will learn of the event before the sun is even fully risen. And—which is no less important—before Margrave Lindenbrog emerges from his featherbed, takes a leak and demands his wine. Do you understand me?”

He nodded again.

“Excellent,” repeated the commandant. “And now I’m going to get dressed, so get out. Go to your quarters and wait there, don’t venture out and don’t open the door to anyone. Except me.”

He obeyed without a word.



Something is coming, strange as spring. I am afraid.

John Gardner, *Grendel*

“I expected you sooner,” said Preston Holt, rummaging in the pot with a wooden spoon and fishing out some ribs from the cabbage. “Word has it you were in Brunanburh around the middle of October. Where have you been dawdling?”

“Nowhere, actually,” said Geralt, licking his greasy fingers and sipping wine. “In Brunanburh I was hired as the escort of a salt shipment that was setting off for Ard Carraigh. They paid me decently, and I was running out of cash. The convoy set off shortly before Saovine, but was dragging along at a snail’s pace. It was getting colder and colder, I was afraid that the snows would come, and we’d be stuck in some camp or other until the spring...”

“But you’re finally here. Right at Midinváerne itself. At the very last minute, if I may say so.”

In Kaer Morhen, naturally, the witchers were familiar with the wheel of the elven annual cycle and the eight feast days, the eight magical points marked around the perimeter of the wheel. The witchers knew Imbaelk, Lammas, Belleteyn, Saovine, and the solstice and the equinox. But they treated all those days only as dates in the calendar. No one in the witchers’ Fastness ever thought about observing or celebrating those days.

Thus, Geralt’s astonishment was considerable when he finally reached the region of the town of Ban Fillim, and the small grange of Rocamora, Preston Holt’s homestead at Midinváerne, on the winter solstice. Dusk had fallen and the glow of a fire he saw from a distance had somewhat alarmed him. He was soon reassured by the sound of singing—merry, joyful singing—which would never have accompanied a conflagration or any other unpleasant occurrence. Everything became clear as he rode into the courtyard. A huge campfire was blazing there, and the entire staff of the farm were sitting on benches set up around it, probably further bolstered by various relatives, in-laws, and friends of theirs who had joined from the surrounding villages. Geralt had barely managed to dismount, when, among the loud and incoherent wishes for a Happy Solstice and a Merry Yule, he was handed a mug dripping foam and a chunk of grilled sausage. There was

also a moment to sit with the company and even pretend to sing. It didn't last long, for right away Preston Holt took Geralt to the common room and sat him down at the table. Soon after, the housekeeper set down a flagon of wine and a steaming pot containing, it turned out, the ribs of a young wild boar in cabbage swimming in grease.

Holt took two glasses from a dresser, wiped the dust off them and filled them.

"Let's hear it," he said, sitting down at the table. "I'm all ears, Witcher Geralt."

He told him. Not very articulately and a little haphazardly. He told him everything—or almost everything—that had happened from the month of Blathe until the beginning of winter. Holt listened without interrupting. Occasionally, even giving the impression of dozing. He became somewhat animated when Geralt got to the encounter with Commandant Fiachra de Mersault, the audience with Margrave Lindenbrog, and the fight with the striga.

The sounds of singing, laughter and merry whooping could still be heard from the courtyard. The festive party was in full swing.

"The day after I killed the striga," said Geralt, finishing the story, "before noon was tolled, the entire Brunanburh, the small town surrounding the castellum and the miners' village were celebrating the elimination of the monster, and I had suddenly been proclaimed a hero."

Preston Holt went on listening in silence, toying with his glass.

"Commandant de Mersault did her best to make sure everybody had heard about my exploits, from the youngest child to the oldest grandfather. Wherever I appeared, everybody lauded me so boisterously, and raised cheers in my honour that I felt embarrassed. They tried to carry me through the streets on their shoulders, but I didn't let them. They began to compose songs and sing them. But what to do, I had to put up with it, for—"

"Margrave Lindenbrog," Holt guessed.

"Yes indeed. The commandant knew what she was doing by trumpeting it. The decapitation of the striga hadn't especially delighted the margrave; I suspect he was already looking for a place for my head to add to his

collection above the hearth, somewhere between the elk and the mouflon. But he had to put a brave face on it, and he couldn't take revenge in any way, he couldn't give a hiding to the hero being feted by everybody, who had saved the people from a deadly threat. Particularly since his own praises were being sung loudly and widely for finding the witcher and hiring him. And since the miners had begun to return and dig salt with redoubled effort, it was somehow easier for the margrave to get over the fact that the lass he had taken a liking to was gone and wasn't coming back. Except—"

Geralt faltered. Holt didn't rush him.

"Except he didn't pay me anything. And didn't want to see hide nor hair of me. Which actually rather gladdened me, because..."

He fell silent. And said nothing for a long time. Preston Holt nodded, stood up, and took a large, square bottle made of dark glass from the dresser.

"I see the tale demands a drink of much greater strength than this thin wine," he said, as he poured. "Go on, drink."

"What was I..." Geralt sipped from his glass, gasped for breath and coughed. "What was I to tell the margrave? That it was all my fault? That instead of leading the striga a merry dance until the third roosters, I decapitated it, because... because my legs suddenly turned to jelly, and my throat tightened so much I saw spots before my eyes?"

Preston Holt said nothing. The fire roared in the hearth.

"Should I have told him," said Geralt, raising his voice, "that there's something wrong with me, that I'm a defect, a damaged failure of a witcher? That he made a mistake entrusting the task to me, rather than a more... skilful witcher? One, who even without elixirs, is unable, simply unable, to act as I acted there? Would the margrave have understood? I doubt it. For I don't understand it myself."

Holt said nothing.

"That marauder, in March... the one I was almost hanged for... came for me with a battle axe, and I didn't even draw my sword. I spun away from the blow with ease. And only the second time, when he aimed another blow, I... I felt nothing. My breath didn't even quicken. With the dyer, too... So, what's wrong with me? Preston Holt? Can you explain it?"

Holt stood up.

“No, no I can’t. Let’s go to bed. It’s late.”

The winter, it turned out, had followed in Geralt’s footsteps from the north, breathing down his neck. Two days after Midinváerne an icy, stinging gale blew. The following day, the sky darkened and snowflakes glittered in the air. The day after that it was completely white everywhere. After a few more days, snowdrifts had formed like mountains all the way to the horizon, and the roofs of all the grange’s buildings were adorned with thick, white caps. There was no doubt—the Kaedwenian winter had set in, and nothing would change, at least until March, if not April.

A few days later, when they were sitting by the fireplace after sunset with glasses in their hands, Preston Holt unhurriedly brought up the subject that had been troubling Geralt for a long time.

“Do you know, Geralt, where witchers come from? How they originated? What was the beginning of all this?”

“I do. You told me in Spynham. That we’re said to come from witches...”

“That’s also true. But I’m talking about the very beginning. Do you want to hear it?”

“Of course I do.”

Holt took a sip from his glass, eyes fixed on the glowing logs in the fireplace.

“As it is with all inventions and innovations,” he began, “the impulse came from the army and warfare. Every military commander dreamed of a unit for special operations, consisting of incredibly physically able, invincible superhumans. Every leader and every self-proclaimed king desired a similar personal guard. Sorcerers, or more precisely an elite group called at that time the Circle, resolved to satisfy that demand. By creating a superman, which is an improved version of the human species, the first stage of the evolution of an entire species to a level that was superior in every respect. In theory—or rather in theories, because there were several of them—it concerned the creation of a transitional form, from which by

means of natural selection would spring a new, improved human race. There were various methods. Some sorcerers chose the method of re-animating selected corpses and modified human parts. Others concentrated on foetuses in their mothers' wombs. Finally, still others took tiny children to work on. For a long time, there were no results, and the failed specimens ended up in laboratory crematoriums. Which smoked relentlessly."

"But they ultimately succeeded, didn't they?"

"Indeed. They did. Apparently quite by accident. But they finally created a mutagen, an anatoxin, a hormone and a virus, everything that was necessary. And of course, they refined the magic formulas and rituals, essential for those decoctions to take effect. But when all the loose ends were tied up and the only thing missing was to put it all into practice, one of the sorcerers working on the project stole all the material and fled."

"Like that hero from that legend," said Geralt. "I can't recall his name... The one who was meant to have stolen fire from the gods and given it to mankind. Right?"

"Well, I wouldn't necessarily go that far. The sorcerers from the Circle, as one might have expected, accused the renegade of everything they could, including a vile plot aimed at achieving world domination. Others attributed more noble motives to him. Admittedly, they had created a superhuman, not with the aim of seizing power, not for some royal palace guard, but for the common good. For humankind. And humankind, let me remind you, was suffering terribly because of monsters making their existence almost impossible at times. This enhanced being was supposed to protect and save people from monsters. It was to be a saviour and a remedy for all forms of evil.

"The sorcerer-renegade," continued Holt pensively, "soon ended his days in shadowy circumstances. But he had managed previously to build a laboratory where those enhanced creatures were being created. The laboratory was located in the North, way beyond the sources of the River Toina."

"Mirabel." Geralt didn't ask but stated.

"Indeed," said Holt. "An old citadel at the foot of Traanberg. The sorcerer had acolytes. And it was they who manufactured the first witchers in Mirabel."

"What about Beann Grudd and Kaer Morhen?"

“They were founded later. There were differences of opinion among the acolytes I mentioned about how to create the best mutations. Eventually, a schism occurred, and that single institution became three. There was a need for witchers, since monsters were making people’s lives very difficult. Thus, as many witchers as possible were manufactured. Regardless of the circumstances. And thus, the beginning became the beginning of the end.”

Geralt said nothing.

“I bet I know what your earliest memory from Kaer Morhen is,” said Holt. “For mine is the same. A large, twenty-bed dormitory. Boys all around. You can’t sleep. One boy is crying, another groaning, yet another is screaming or talking in his sleep. The weeks go by and it becomes quieter and quieter. It’s finally completely silent. Because there are only three of you left.”

“One of them was tiny,” muttered Geralt. “Never stopped crying. Then one day they took him away... And he never returned.”

“Mutations,” said Holt, nodding, “are able to mutate spontaneously. Mistakes are inevitable during the manufacture of elixirs. And the pathogens which are made and stored in the cellars spoil. Nothing lasts for ever. I believed—and I wasn’t the only one—that the Trials should have been stopped. Only one child in ten was surviving. It was beyond the limits of error. It smacked of a crime.

“It went on for some time, there were arguments, conflicts, fights. But finally, common sense prevailed. The Trials were stopped completely. Too late, unfortunately. You’ve heard about the Cats, haven’t you? That happened in Beann Grudd, as you know. Apparently, something even worse occurred in Mirabel, but the blunders were immediately... eliminated. Nothing of the kind ever occurred in Kaer Morhen. When you left the Fastness, how many kids were still there?”

“Six.”

“I wonder how many survived. In any case, you, Geralt, are one of the last to set forth from Kaer Morhen.”

“One of the last. Pity I was flawed, as it turns out. Is it because of those stale elixirs?”

“Perhaps. Maybe not just that. When Nature encounters a mutation, it fights against it. You have no other option, young witcher. You must come to terms with your own imperfection.”

Winter didn't let up. On the contrary, it seemed to grow even more severe. Rocamora was buried under snowdrifts.

Holt quickly found a remedy for any boredom and inactivity. *This isn't a bear's cave and no one's going to hibernate here*, he announced. *There are lessons for the wintertime, too, lessons which no witcher may forsake.*

Dressed in padded jerkins and protective leather caps, armed with three-foot-long oaken staves, the two witchers spent hours practising lunges, parries, and feints. And they had plenty to practise.

There was the *angelika* and the *angelika ridoppio*—a downward slash and an upward slash aimed diagonally across the neck—both infallible in an attack on the carotid artery. The *delta* and the *delta stoccata*, ending with the bisection of the femoral artery. The *alfa* and the *alfa sottomano* for the axillary artery, completed with two quick steps. The *volta affondo* and the *volta affondo dexter* on the third step, aimed at the brachial artery. And universal feints with universal application: the *neuvième*, the *lilia stretto passo*, the *lilia fendente* and the *lilia montante*. And there were—it goes without saying—defensive parries for all of the above.

During snowstorms, whiteouts, or severe frosts they practised in the barn, and when the strong winds died down and it grew warmer, they went outside to the courtyard. And spent hours practising. In their shirtsleeves, from which steam rose as though from a cauldron.

In spite of being asked, Holt didn't want to reveal to Geralt the secret of his feinting tactics, particularly the move beginning with the *mandritto*, then the *molinetto* and the *tramazzone*. A sequence against which there was virtually no defence.

"I must keep some things secret from you, mustn't I," said the old witcher.

"Just tell me," Geralt insisted, "if you invented that sequence yourself."

"No. I learned it from somebody."

"Tell me."

"Let's go inside; it's cold here. And Madam Berta is serving mulled wine."

"There was a fellow," said Holt, sipping from the mug, "from Beann

Grudd...”

“A Cat?”

“Aha, just so. But even for a Cat he was... let’s say very defective. He was simply a psychopathic bastard. They finally confiscated his medallion and banished him. And since he was a genuine master swordsman, he founded a fencing school to support himself. I signed up for it out of curiosity. Incognito, under a false name. After staining my hair with a dye made of walnut shells.”

“And you learned that feint there,” Geralt stated. “And the defence against it? Did the Cat teach you a parry?”

“There is no parry. There’s only one way to defend yourself against it.”

“Yeah?”

“A crossbow bolt from ten paces.”

“Are you joking?”

“No. That’s good advice, Geralt. That master had several pupils. If you ever come up against one of them, flee. Swiftly.”

The two of them—Holt and Geralt—were too skilled with a sword to suffer any serious injuries during training. Less serious ones occurred, naturally, and quite often. In the evenings, the housekeeper applied to their bruises medicinal tallow—purportedly bear grease, but bear grease that stank a little too much of goat. The tallow possessed medicinal powers, nevertheless, whether goat or not, and the following day the two witchers felt as good as new and could once again take up their oaken staves.

It was all the stranger that one morning—it was in February—Preston Holt fell ill, severely enough as to not be able to get out of bed. There was no chance of sending for a physician: snowdrifts covered the ground as far as the eye could see, and none of the roads were passable. All that remained was bed, vodka and goat grease. A break in the fencing practice ensued, it went without saying.

The imposed inactivity finally directed Geralt’s attention to a small alcove and the bookshelves built into it. It had to be admitted that Holt had a truly impressive library. The old witcher’s book collection naturally couldn’t compete with the one in the temple in Elsborg, but the priestesses

didn't allow anybody from outside access to the books there, so Geralt could only guess at the knowledge contained inside. But all he had to do with Holt's library was to pick up a book. Thus, Geralt picked up as many as he could. And there was much to leaf through. Four bestiaries were gathering dust on the shelves, two of which were utterly unfamiliar to Geralt, and two which were in a much better condition than the ones in Kaer Morhen. There was also a well-kept copy of the *Physiologus*, as well as Hugo of Alna's *Aviarium et reptiliarium*: a truly rare find. There were history and geography books, such as Roderick de Novembre's *A History of the World*, Baldwin Adovardo's *Regni Caedvenie Nova Descriptio*, the anonymous *Liber Memorabilium* and the very old *Chronicon Novigradense*. There were also treatises about magic, and grimoires, such as Paolo Giambattista's *Empires of the Elements*, Jan Bekker's *The Invisible World*, *Ard Aercane* and *Dhu Dwimmermorc*.

Holt was groaning in bed, covered in goat tallow, while Geralt leafed through the tomes.

As the commonplace adage had it, books were said to be the source of all knowledge and the key to all mysteries. And thus, it was. One of those mysteries—by no means the least significant—was hidden in Holt's library. And Geralt found it. When it fell out from between two other books.

"I told you about my encounter with that... Tree-low—"

"Estevan *Trillo* da Cunha," Preston Holt corrected, stretching cautiously. He had only just risen from his bed, apparently hale and healthy and healed. "Estevan Trillo da Cunha is the *praefectus vigilum*, or prefect of the royal guard."

"Exactly. I told you he tried to recruit me to get the dirt on you. Supply proof of the wrongdoing you're supposed to have committed. But you dismissed my words out of hand, and scoffed that I could easily have let myself be recruited and searched for that proof. Saying that no such proof exists."

"I did. And it is indeed so. There is no proof."

"You say there isn't." Geralt produced a thin and slightly dog-eared pamphlet. "But, take a look at what I found in your library. It fell out from

behind some other books. *The Description of a Monstrum or a Witcher*. With a handwritten dedication. *To Master Sergeant Otto Margulies in thanks of his loyal service*. Ha. Otto Margulies, the respected civic activist and something beginning with ‘phil,’ I forget what. And it turns out he’s a master sergeant. In other words, a mercenary. But he’s the Margulies the prefect was talking about. The one who was killed. How did this pamphlet end up here?”

Holt shrugged. Geralt snorted.

“Yeah, right, I shouldn’t have asked. And any souvenirs from those other two? What was it? Nourred and Chwalba? Are they to be found somewhere here?”

“Perhaps they are, who knows,” said Holt, arms folded on his chest. “Keep looking. Perhaps they’ll also fall out of some-where?”

“Master Sergeant Margulies, Nourred and Chwalba are meant to have commanded the mob that attacked Kaer Morhen in ninety-four. So, I don’t feel much sorrow for them, nor do I mean to weep over their memory...”

“I’m glad,” said Holt, mockingly. “I was thinking you might want to hold a funeral feast for them.”

“Rocamora,” said Geralt, ignoring the scorn. “*Roac a moreah*. ‘Revenge’ in the Elder Speech. The name didn’t come with the property when you bought it. You chose it. Before or after, I wonder?”

Holt shrugged again.

“A while back,” Geralt continued calmly, “a certain blacksmith said something quite wise to me. *Everyone*, he said, *should take care of his own business*. His domain. His blacksmith domain was a hammer and anvil. A witcher’s domain is to kill monsters. And punishing crimes is the domain of the shire-reeve and the courts.”

“Words worth remembering,” said Holt and grew serious. “Remember them the next time you wade in with your sword to defend some maid being harassed. And hack a man to death.”

“That’s completely different...”

“It is not. It’s precisely the same thing. That’s enough of this. Call Madam Berta. Have her come with that ointment of hers.”

They didn't return to that conversation for quite some time. But finally, they did. Geralt forced himself to read the anonymous work entitled *The Description of a Monstrum or a Witcher* to the end. Occasionally, he laughed; occasionally, he bristled; and he very often swore coarsely. But he finished it.

"That inscription," said Geralt, pointing out to Holt the dedication to Master Sergeant Margulies, "was no doubt written by the author. Pity it's not signed."

"Oh, but it is. Look carefully."

"That picture? That little bird?"

"It's a martlet. That's what it's called in heraldry. It's probably the mobile charge of the author's family arms. Unfortunately, mobiles like that are too common to be used to track down the right person."

"Meaning you don't know who it is," Geralt said slowly. "Ha, once again I shouldn't have asked. For if you knew, you'd have killed him. Wouldn't you?"

"No," Holt drawled. "I'd have run at once to the shire-reeve. M'lord Shire-Reeve, I kindly inform you that there's a fellow who wrote a scurrilous text, thanks to which he set hundreds of fanatics on the witchers. Because of that, seven witchers lost their lives and one was narrowly rescued. Yes, I know, m'lord Shire-Reeve, that there's no law forbidding the writing of anonymous, libellous texts and the law doesn't ordain any punishment for them. *Nullum crimen sine lege*. But it's very nasty to write things like that. Thus please, m'lord Shire-Reeve, have that nameless author quickly arrested and brought before the court. May law and justice triumph."

"Are you mocking me?"

"You bet I am."

The winter, although severe, yielded surprisingly easily and almost without a fight. Mild winds blew, and the snow began to melt quickly. Already by midway through February—called Imbaelk by the elves—the hazel was in bloom, covering the southern side of the property in thick clusters. All the bushes were covered in gold and yellow caterpillar-like catkins. The banks

of the stream hidden among alders and willows were still encased in ice cornices, while the margins of ponds and shallow backwaters were also bound in ice. It didn't bother the frogs which had begun to exuberantly mate. Soon, all the waters became thick with frogspawn.

At last, the singing of skylarks above the fields unfailingly heralded the spring.

And finally came the Equinox, marking absolutely the official beginning of spring.

And Geralt made his decision.

That's not true: he did not. He sparred with his thoughts for several sleepless nights. He recalled the conversation with the priestess, the Assumpta of Rivia. He recalled what Estevan Trillo da Cunha, the prefect of the royal guard, had said. He regretted finding what he had found among the books. And he felt he was quite determined.

But after waking in the morning, he wasn't so sure.

There were delicious pancakes with jam for breakfast. But Preston Holt hardly touched a thing. He had dark rings under his eyes. He looked as though he had slept very poorly the last few nights.

"We will have to say farewell," he announced tersely. "I have decided to end our adventure, Geralt. Nothing lasts for ever. From this spring you will go your own way. As soon as it gets warmer, you will be leaving Rocamora."

"But in... I mean, listen—"

"You will leave Rocamora."

"Does it have anything to do with—"

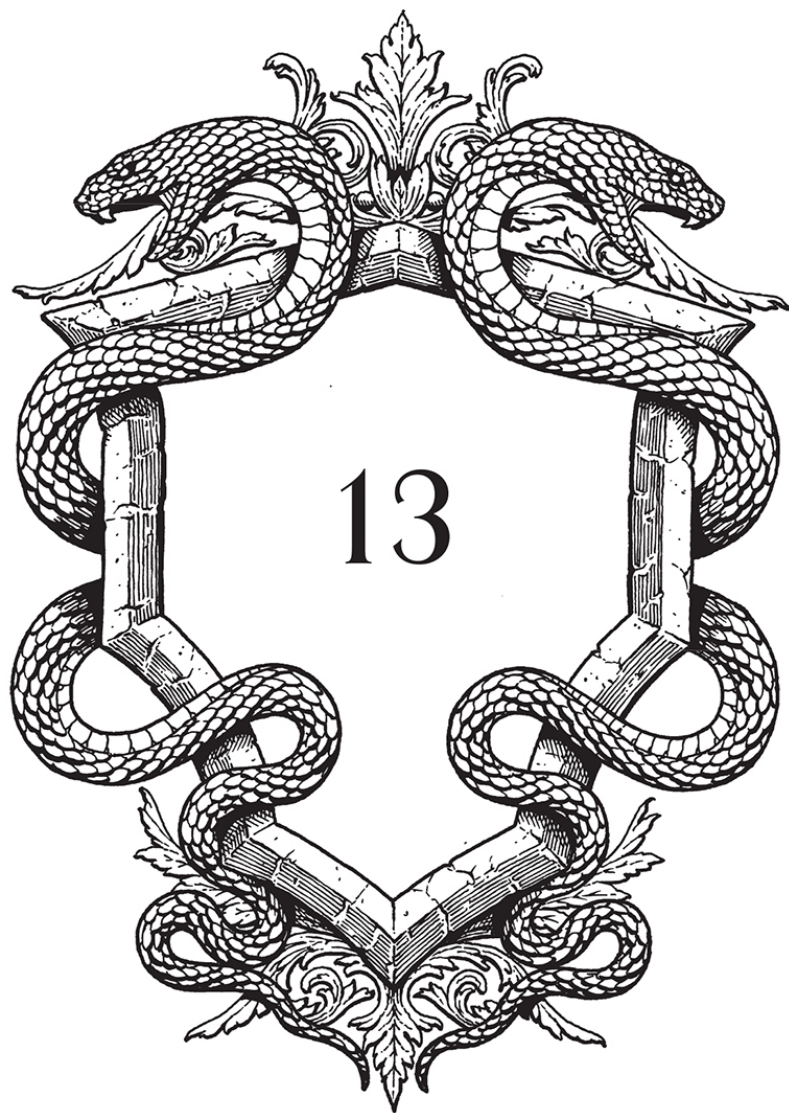
"Certainly, it does. It's your... and my bad luck that you came across... what you came across. Estevan Trillo da Cunha won't give up, he'll stay on your trail. If he puts the squeeze on you, you won't be able to get away with a glib lie, for you're a hopeless liar, as I've found out. You will incriminate... yourself, mainly."

"I—"

“Let me finish. Moreover, it’s time you saw the sea you so long for. And something of the world.”

Geralt said nothing.

“And now,” said Holt, standing up, “put on your guards and pick up the singlestick. It’s spring, it’s a shame to be stuck inside. Let’s go out into the courtyard. And practise a few more feints before you leave.”



The hippocamp, Equus marinus monstrosus, also called the borbothis or zydrach. It is half horse, half fish. The upper part alias the head is like to a horse, although with fins instead of hooves, the nether part is similis to a fish.

Science has proved that, contrary to its name, the H. does not only inhabit seas, but also fresh water, for it is duplicis generis. If in fresh water, then great lakes are its most frequent abode. H. has been confused, even among learned folk, with such beasts as the marine stag (Cervus marinus or polmorarius) and the marine ass (Onus marinus).

The plebs believes that the H. is born from various Natures, that it arises from the commingling of the seed circa coitum of a horse and a fish. That belief is false, for how could that coitus be achieved? The mind is bemused when it endeavours to picture it.

Physiologus

To His Excellency
Prefect of the Guard Estevan Trillo da Cunha
in Ard Carraigh

*Written: in Ban Fillim, on the eighteenth of April, in the nineteenth
year of the reign of His Royal Highness King Miodrag*

Your Excellency Lord Prefect,

I humbly report what has occurred on the estate named Rocamora. The suspect Holt was once again stricken by ill health and a physician summoned to the estate. The young witcher, called Gerald, the one which Your Excellency Lord Prefect has been keeping close watch on, has left the estate. And since he rode away in secret during the night, I thus cannot report when he left and whither he was bound, for which I beg forgiveness.

Wishing Your Excellency Lord Prefect every felicitation. I remain
your humble servant,

Uger Zolteri, crown investigative agent

“Well, then, young Master Witcher,” said the merchant, removing his cap, wiping his forehead and pointing to a roadside post with a metal sign attached. “We are now in the Lakeland March. The town of Tullach is thataway, beyond the forest. So, we’re home! Safe and sound! And all thanks to you.”

“Not at all,” said Geralt, waving a dismissive hand. “It all went smoothly. Nothing happened.”

“Nothing happened because a witcher was at hand. The gods watch those as watch themselves, and you was watching us. We shook on that and you earned your fifty marks fair and square. Let’s go! Hey, gee-up there!”

Whips swished, axles creaked and wheels rumbled over potholes. The merchant’s two horse-drawn wagons trundled along the highway.

“The Lakeland March,” said Geralt, examining the sign nailed to the post. Close up, one could make out a coat of arms on the somewhat rusty

surface, two silver fishes *adossés*—that is with their backs to each other—on a black shield. “Already?”

“Aye. Do you see down there? The water’s glittering. That is Lake Tuaim Dur, the very tip of it. Soon after it there’s another lake. Long Lake. The town of Tullach lies beside it. You’ll see it right soon!”

Geralt’s knowledge about the Lakeland March was scant. Baldwin Adovardo’s work *Regni Caedvenie Nova Descriptio* was admittedly part of Preston Holt’s library, but Geralt had barely leafed through it. So he didn’t know that there were four main lakes from which the march took its name: Tuaim Dur, Long Lake, Toikka and Rannveig. There were eight slightly smaller ones, but few remembered their names, aside from the local anglers. No one had counted the very smallest, and no one at all remembered their names. They were all ribbon lakes, carved out a long, looong time ago by a glacier and deepened by the rivers flowing beneath it. That was all in theory, since hypotheses about glaciers and glaciation were only just beginning to be formulated among the more modern scientists of Oxenfurt. The oldest scholars still stubbornly attributed the landscape to the activities of a Higher Power, and the variation in the landscape to the exuberant and creative invention supposedly manifested by that Power. As far as folk outside Oxenfurt and university circles were concerned, you could tell them all you wanted about glaciers and they still wouldn’t have understood a word of it. Where did the lake come from? you’d ask, and they’d tell you it was really a very large puddle.

Neither did Geralt know that the line of the lakes, aligned along a north-south axis, historically delineated the eastern border of the Lakeland March and the Kingdom of Kaedwen. The border was firmly established. Settlement had occurred along the western banks of the lakes. Untamed and impenetrable wildernesses—which were still mounting effective resistance to the axes of the settlers—extended to the east of them, right up to the distant Blue Mountains.

They left the forest. The surface of the lake glinted silver down below. On it was an island quite far from the bank, which looked black in the distance. And a small town surrounded by a palisade hugged the very edge. There was a harbour full of fishing boats fenced in by wooden jetties, nets drying on pales, and smoke rising from smokehouses. Gulls and terns circled above, shrieking.

The gate with a turnstile leading to the town of Tullach was wide open, and the soldiers guarding it evinced little interest in the merchant and his two wagons. But one of the soldiers must have known him, for the man entered into an animated conversation with the merchant. Geralt looked around, not entirely certain whether it was worth his while entering the town, or whether it would be better to not waste time and simply continue on with his journey. His deliberations were interrupted by the merchant's excited voice.

"Oh, young sir! Fortune smiles on you! They need a witcher here in Tullach, and urgently. They say a notice was nailed to a frontier post. We didn't see it, for some scoundrel must have ripped it off..."

"If you are indeed a witcher," said the commander of the sentry post, walking over, "then make haste to the town hall and you'll find out what's what. Down that road and in the square there's a building with a green door, with a gilt tower and a crown painted on. You can't miss it."

"Show me your witcher's emblem, lad," ordered the burgrave. "Not that I wouldn't trust you, or, heaven forbid, that I smelled a rat—"

He broke off, leaned over and scrutinised the medallion with the wolf that Geralt had pulled out of his jacket.

"Forgive me, master," said the burgrave and moved to a more polite form. "But you're very young, so—"

"The witcher," said a dour man in a leather doublet girdled with a belt of steel buckles and chain links who had until then been standing silently alongside, "is to be employed not by the municipal authorities, but by His Excellency the Margrave, who governs the entire March. For whom I am the plenipotentiary here. My name is Diego Mars. Seneschal Diego Mars."

"Greetings, m'lord seneschal. What am I to be hired to do?"

"Castellum Thornhall, His Lordship the Margrave's summer residence, is being haunted by some sort of creature. You must put an end to this. Using any means you wish. You will find out the details in situ. And will be paid handsomely, I assure you."

"Where is this castellum? Are we leaving for it now?"

"We are still waiting for somebody."

The burgrave sighed and waved his arms.

“And have been for some time,” he said with a wink. “The honourable mistress is making us wait. Arriving fashionably late seems to be a thing among enchantresses.”

He pointed to a disc on the table the size of a one-crown coin, decorated, however, not with the profile of the Novigradian hierarch, but with etched-on runes and curious designs. In the centre of the disc there was a protuberance; a semi-precious, golden-yellow stone.

“It is a summoning jewel,” explained the burgrave, “called a *terry port*. If you press that yellow stone hard three times, it sends a call and the person summoned arrives soon after, by magical means. It is called terry portation. We sent the call some time ago. And have been waiting since then—”

“And we shall continue to wait,” Seneschal Diego Mars interjected morosely, “as long as needs be. The healer is needed urgently and imperatively. I cannot return to Thornhall without her, for—”

There was a loud—somewhat insect-like—humming that grew to a droning crescendo. A luminescent oval appeared in front of one of the chamber’s walls. First, an indistinct silhouette loomed in the oval, then a moment later a short woman in male attire emerged from it.

The burgrave and the seneschal stood up and bowed.

“Most Venerable Lady Mistress...”

Geralt also bowed. And his amulet vibrated and pulsed powerfully beneath his shirt.

He remembered the sorceresses he had seen in Spynham town square, looking young and stunning. Not by a long shot could one call the woman with the short, dark hair emerging from the magical oval plain, but there was none of that dazzling beauty. Or youth—she seemed a little older than the priestess Nenneke of Elsborg. But her chubby, ruddy face emanated warmth, some kind of immediately palpable kindliness, which meant that Geralt couldn’t lower his eyes, though he recalled Preston Holt’s teachings, according to which sorceresses didn’t tolerate being stared at, and regarded other people as churls. This woman didn’t give that impression.

“Where am I?” Her voice was also pleasant. And melodic. “I don’t know this place. But it is not Thornhall.”

“It is the town of Tullach, madam. I am the burgrave...”

The woman took a large cloth bag from her shoulder and put it on the

floor.

“How did my talisman come to be in Tullach?” she asked. “I left it in Thornhall. For the use of Margrave Vaikinen.”

“His Excellency the Lord Margrave,” stammered the burgrave, “entrusted the talisman to me—”

“Because he didn’t wish there to be a talisman used for teleportation on Seevalk,” interrupted the seneschal. “The lord margrave had his reasons for doing that.”

“Indeed,” added the burgrave. “Thus, His Excellency gave me the talisman. To use in need—”

“And a need arose, I gather. Where is the patient? I refer to young Count Frederik, the margrave’s son, who met with an accident.”

“You already know about that, madam?” marvelled the seneschal. “So swiftly? How so?”

“Magic, rumours and homing pigeons. Your Lordship Seneschal Diego Mars, if I remember rightly? We’ve already met.”

“Indeed,” said the seneschal and bowed again. “Welcome, Venerable Madam Natteravn. Count Frederik is residing in Thornhall, on the isle of Seevalk, having suffered an injury. We shall make our way there without delay.”

Geralt’s medallion vibrated once more.

“And this witcher?” asked the enchantress, fixing Geralt with her green eyes. “Is he coming with us?”

“Indeed, he is,” interrupted Diego Mars. “If I may request it, let us go —”

“My horse,” Geralt interrupted, “is in the stable—”

“And let it stay there. We shall not be travelling on horseback.”

The destination, it turned out, was Seevalk, an island on Long Lake, visible far away on the water as a dark outline shrouded in fog. And the means of transport turned out to be a large, unwieldy, six-oared boat, loaded with an impressive quantity of crates, boxes, barrels and sacks. The cargo included, moreover, four sheep and a black cat in a cage.

“Are we to travel in that?” asked the enchantress. “That barge? With that

menagerie and mountain of luggage? You used to have a small sailboat on Seevalk!”

“It isn’t a barge,” said Diego Mars, his face becoming gloomy. “It’s a wherry. And what we have on Seevalk isn’t a sailboat, it’s a cutter. But that one’s in use for the time being, so we’re left with the wherry. Please embark.”

They boarded, taking their places near the bow. The oarsmen groaned in unison, the oars creaked in the rowlocks, and the boat called a wherry set off from the jetty.

“Forgive me for only introducing myself now,” said the woman a moment later. “I am Vrai Natteravn, a healer.”

“Geralt. A witcher.”

“I once treated a witcher. His name was Holt, Preston Holt. It was long ago and I doubt whether somebody as young as you... Is it just me, or are you a little wary of me? Aha, you’ve heard that animosity exists between sorcerers and witchers, have you?”

“I have.”

“I shall not apologise for my colleagues,” said the enchantress, growing serious. “But know that I hold no prejudice. My animosity has to be earned. So, cheer up. Agreed?”

“Agreed.”

“Mars hired you, did he? Does it have anything to do with the margrave’s injured son?”

“No, nothing. Apparently, some kind of monster is bedevilling them on the island.”

The wind blew, the rowlocks creaked, and the wherry skipped jauntily over the waves. The fog began to clear. Gulls screeched. The sheep bleated. The cat miaowed.

“That sail over there,” began the healer, shielding her eyes with a hand. “M’lord Mars? Isn’t that your little skiff?”

“Cutter,” the seneschal corrected patiently. “It’s the cutter *Nihil Novi*.”

“And it’s occupied by whom? Who’s sailing it?”

“The pals and comrades of His Excellency Count Frederik. They are hunting hippocamps.”

“What?”

“As I said. Hippocamps.”

The cutter *Nihil Novi* set a course straight for them. After a moment, it was close enough to the wherry for them to get a better look. It had three sails; two triangular foresails and a large rectangular mainsail towards the stern. When they got even closer, they could make out several people on board. And the sounds of singing, laughter and shouts. None of it too sober.

“The hunting seems quite merry,” said Vrai Natteravn. “Hippocamps, you say. What do they want with them? What qualities do they possess to make one want to hunt them?”

“Well, it’s like this,” said the seneschal, clearing his throat. “Last year, Ezra Metzgerkop, the celebrated restaurateur, ingratiated himself with our King Miodrag by treating the monarch and his court to an extraordinary delicacy, an enormous roast bird, an aporniss, if I’ve got the name right. The king enjoyed the roast so much that he rewarded Metzgerkop with the title of baron. Many were envious. And hunting began. Many people desirous of a noble title set off into the wilds in order to bag an even rarer delicacy for the king...”

“I see. You mean those men on that yacht—”

“—cutter. I told you; they’re the pals—”

“—and comrades of the count. I heard. And they want to hunt a hippocamp?”

“Word got around that the king would gladly eat one. Well, they swore they’d catch one...”

“And they’ll become barons?”

“They are barons. Most of them. But they’re hoping for glory and kingly favour.”

“But are there really any hippocamps living in this lake of yours?” asked Vrai Natteravn with interest.

“There are. So folk say. Few have seen one close up, for they are uncommonly shy. One has to do it furtively, quietly... But over there, on the cutter... Well, you can see for your-selves.”

“We can indeed,” said the sorceress. “That’s not hunting: it’s a floating banquet.”

As though lending credence to her words, one of the barons on the cutter leaned far over the side and puked very copiously. The rest of the crew roared with laughter.

“*Nihil novi*,” said Vrai.

The rowlocks creaked and the oar blades showered drops of water around. Gulls shrieked. The cutter *Nihil Novi* caught the wind in her sails and moved off. The drunken singing and cries died away.

The water was suddenly churned up and several silvery fish broke the surface in wild leaps a stone's throw from the wherry's bow.

"Trout," said Geralt, recognising them. "Quite large ones, more than a cubit in length. I wonder what was after them?"

"There are pike weighing sixty pounds and more in the depths here," explained Diego Mars. "A two-foot trout is like a minnow to them. And deeper down there are other beasts I'd rather not coax to the surface—"

"Perhaps," said Vrai Natteravn with interest, "one of those infamous hippocamps frightened the trout?"

"Hippocamps don't eat fish," said Geralt. "And don't hunt them."

"What do they eat?"

"Water weed."

"Weeds? You mean they graze? Like cows?"

"You could say that—"

"But it'd be better not to," the seneschal firmly interjected. "Particularly in Thornhall. After all, His Grace the young Count Frederik sustained an injury in a gallant fight with a hippocamp. If people began to say it was a cow that harmed him—"

"A hippocamp injured the count?" said the healer in astonishment. "How could that be? When it's a herbivore... What do you say to that, witcher?"

"Herbivores can be dangerous, too," Geralt replied.

Thornhall fort on the island of Seevalk was ringed by a double palisade. The first one bristled up on the very edge of the island, and at that moment, with the water level high, soon after the snows and ice had thawed, it was almost half-submerged. The second palisade topped an earthen embankment several yards high. Two square towers overlooked the fort.

"A genuine stronghold," said the witcher. "Evidently built to defend."

"Indeed," said Diego Mars. "It has repulsed attackers more than once."

"Skirmishes with sylvan elves occurred here at the beginning of the marches," added Vrai Natteravn.

“The eastern bank was theirs,” added the seneschal, “and the western ours. And the island was the outpost. It passed from hand to hand. Finally, we prevailed and built the fort. During the reign of King Benda it was, many years ago.”

They rowed into a bay that turned out to be an excavated canal. It was closed off by a large, heavy gate made of beams. They were seen and hailed from the look-out point above the gate and a horn sounded. The gate was opened slowly. Beyond it was a harbour surrounded on all sides by jetties. The wherry pulled in to one of them, finding a berth between other craft.

Geralt looked around. Seen from a distance, the towers looked more like blockhouses, built from pine timbers of formidable thickness. Between the towers was located a huge, free-standing, wooden building with several storeys, also looking more like a fortified blockhouse than a house, as did the towers with arrow slits instead of windows.

They disembarked onto the jetty, and the oarsmen immediately began unloading the boat. Vrai Natteravn was about to ask Diego Mars something, when the seneschal suddenly cleared his throat and bowed low.

A girl was walking towards him along the jetty, attended by two female servants. She was fair-haired and looked to be around fifteen or sixteen. Singularly beautiful, very slender, she looked dainty, fragile, almost breakable. She walked, slightly lifting up and holding her elegant cornflower-blue gown, in order that the hem didn't catch on the rough-hewn planks.

Diego Mars bowed even lower. The girl turned her large, doe-like eyes towards him, but just for a moment. She seemed only to be interested in the cargo brought by the wherry which was now piling up on the jetty.

“Ludmilla, the count's daughter,” explained Diego Mars sotto voce, seeing Geralt's enquiring look. “The daughter of His Excellency Margrave Vaikinen. She is residing here on Seevalk, temporarily, it could be said—”

“It could be said,” snorted Vrai Natteravn, “that she's imprisoned here. There's no point beating about the bush, Master Mars. All Kaedwen knows the rumours.”

“I don't trifle with rumours,” said the seneschal, frowning. “And by the way, His Excellency the Margrave is within his rights. It is a father's prerogative to bring a disobedient daughter to heel. And if necessary to punish her, too.”

“What’s she been up to?” asked Geralt, still staring spellbound at the maid.

“It’s a matter of love,” said the healer, smiling. “The girl’s heart skipped a beat—”

“And skipped off somewhere it shouldn’t have,” Diego Mars interrupted. “When it shouldn’t have. And towards somebody it shouldn’t have. What am I saying; I’m sure you know everything, madam. You’ve heard the rumours.”

“Naturally I have,” snorted Vrai again. “The heart of Ludmilla, the count’s daughter, was stolen with her full consent and willingness by the youngling Redfern Finnegan. A Finnegan, no less. And that’s a problem.”

“Why so?”

“The Vaikinens hate the Finnegans,” Mars interjected. “There’s a feud between them.”

“Of the bloody kind? Have there been deaths?”

“In a manner of speaking,” said the seneschal, making a face. “But you’d better get to your tasks, young Master Witcher, and pass over the gossip. Madam Mistress, forgive me, ought similarly to respond to the call and swiftly attend to the suffering patient...”

“Right enough,” said the healer, making the bag comfortable on her shoulder. “I shall hurry to the wounded patient as swiftly as I can. We’ll meet later, witcher. Lead on, Master Mars.”

Nearby on the jetty, several women were gutting fish. They were accompanied by a black cat, the same one that had travelled to Seevalk with Geralt and Vrai Natteravn. Fish scales, guts and swim bladders were floating on the water of the harbour.

The sun was setting beautifully over the lake, reflected in the surface. In the distance, some creatures—probably cranes—were making a racket.

“When grilled, young Count Frederik Vaikinen did his best to confabulate,” said Vrai Natteravn, leaning against the palisade. “But I’m a physician, capable of diagnosing the nature of injuries and their cause. So, I forced him to confess. Just imagine, a hippocamp was by no means to blame, nor any other monster. The margrave’s son had climbed up the

cutter's mast in a state of alcoholic intoxication in order to show off and fell from it. He broke his collar bone, sprained his ankle and bruised his knee, which has swollen up like a football. It will be necessary to drain the fluid off... And how are things going, witcher?"

"Not bad."

It turned out that the creature prowling around Thornhall had taken a liking to the rooms of the kitchen complex, and Geralt had also managed to gather information there. The cooks, kindly women, had treated him right away to a mug of ale and a dish of salted loach.

While Geralt nibbled the loach and sipped the beer, the cooks gave their account. The monster, they said, interrupting one another, was small, but vexatious. It had a frog's head and bulging eyes. It also croaked like a frog. Since it came in from the lake it dragged in mud and slime on its froglike feet, so they were constantly mopping up after it. It had made a mess in various places. It pissed against the wall. It ate up their supplies. It scattered kasha and flour all over the kitchen. It had smashed a teapot. It had swiped a silver ladle with His Lordship's coat of arms. Geralt was very doubtful about the latter claim. The monster—a vodnik according to the description—had clearly been falsely accused of such a theft: someone else must have nicked the ladle.

The beast was last seen some two weeks since, the cooks recounted. *Some more ale, perhaps?*

Vrai Natteravn heard the story out without interrupting.

"A vodnik can be vexatious, but it's not dangerous to people," said Geralt, sighing. "But since they're paying... Well, I'll have to patrol and keep an eye out for it, and when it appears frighten it and shoo it away... But please tell me about that—in a manner of speaking—bloody feud, madam."

"Please don't 'madam' me," said the enchantress, kicking a fish head off the jetty. "And regarding the feud, it's like this: Magnus Vaikinen, the grandfather of Sirius, the current margrave, conducted business with Roald Finnegan. They were partners. When they became bankrupt, Roald and Magnus began to accuse one another of embezzlement and thievery. Loudly

and publicly. Finally, Magnus challenged Roald to a duel. They injured each other seriously in the lists. On hearing of it, Roald's wife miscarried and Magnus's elderly and ailing father died of agitation. Those are the deaths—in a manner of speaking. And the feud derives from that. Every generation has contributed something to it. Ever since. Sirius Vaikinen and Gordon Finnegan jostled for the title of ruler of the March. When the king named Sirius as margrave, Gordon loudly accused him of fraudulence, cronyism and corruption.”

“What about Miss Ludmilla?”

“A classic story, one might say. She met young Count Redfern Finnegan, Gordon's son and Roald's great grandson, at some ball or banquet. You can guess the rest.”

“I'm pretty poor at guessing. And I've never been to a ball.”

“It was love at first sight,” said the enchantress, smiling. “They began to meet in secret. They knew their parents wouldn't agree to such a liaison, so they decided to elope. Margrave Sirius foiled their escape, and imprisoned his daughter here on a remote island, and delegated her wardship to his son, Count Frederik, Ludmilla's brother. Not for nothing did the margrave empower his own son with the supervision of his sister, for Frederik hates Redfern for utterly personal reasons. He won't side with him, nor can he be bribed. He has announced publicly on several occasions that he would sooner see his sister dead than with Redfern. Count Frederik, however, adjudged that the island itself offered the best way to oversee his lovestruck sister and that close surveillance was unnecessary. So, he is enthusiastically taking advantage of the independence and financial resources given to him by his father. He has invited his comrades to Seevalk and they are drinking and gallivanting without let-up under the pretext of hunting for hippocamps. Oh, talk of the devil. The monster hunters are returning, weary and drunk.”

The gate to the harbour creaked and grinded open as the cutter *Nihil Novi* sailed in. It moored at the jetty, and a moment later a small group of young men disembarked—with some difficulty. Most of them were staggering heavily. And making a lot of noise.

“The gilded youth of Ard Carraigh,” said Vrai, pouting. “The progeny of wealthy, titled, and prosperous parents. I know some of them, actually, and it's nothing to boast about. That one, there, who can barely walk, is the younger son of Baron Dormont. I treated him, but I won't say for what. And

the last one, probably the most sober of them all, is Primian Grohot, the son of a brewer, a parvenu. I can't imagine what he's doing in this society."

"Hunting hippocamps."

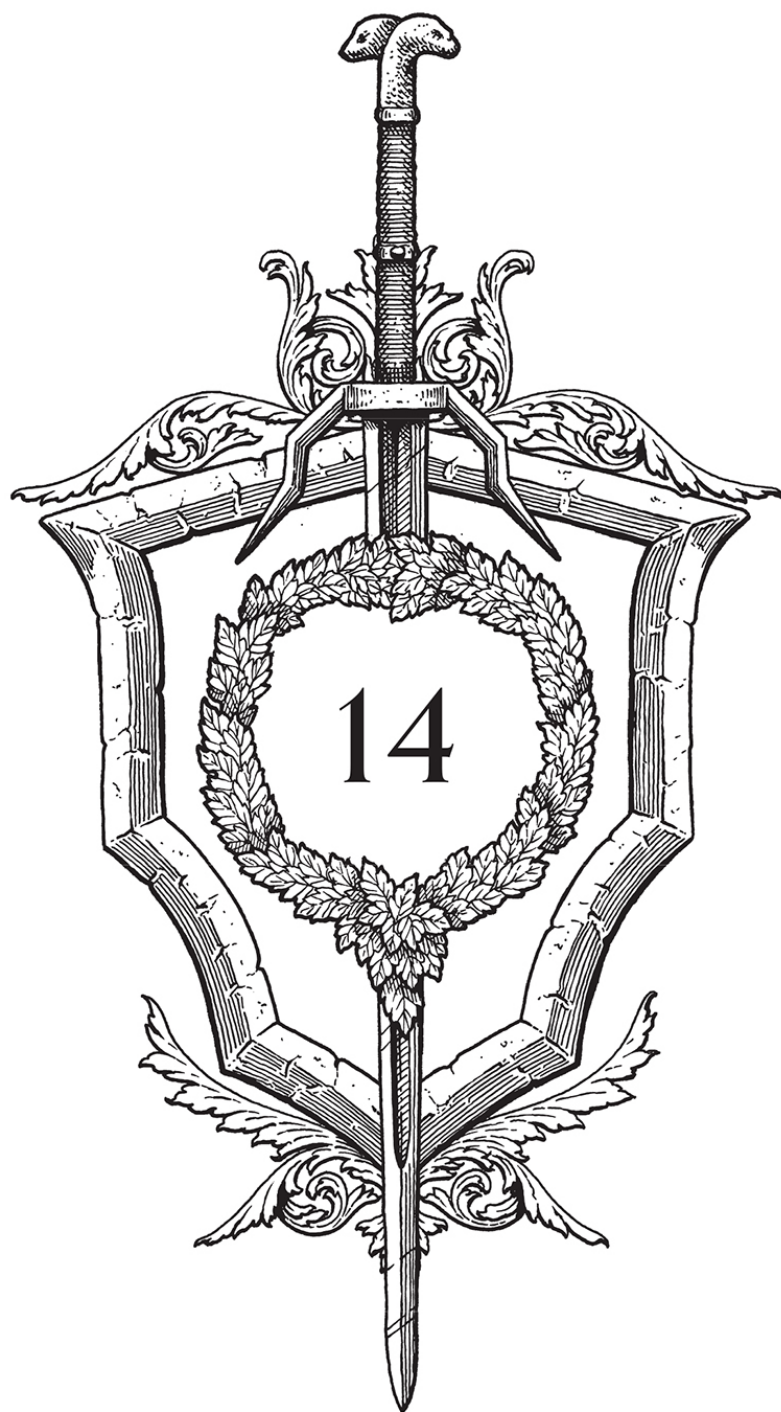
Vrai snorted.

"The chase," she said, growing serious, "will no doubt supply me with patients, when one of them breaks something. As long as none of them drowns, for medicine would be powerless then. And I wouldn't worry about the hippocamps. It doesn't look as though the boisterous gilded youth is capable of harming them at all."

Geralt didn't comment.

"Farewell for now," said the healer, adjusting her scarf. "I'm going to drain the fluid from the count's knee."

"Good luck."



*And let us not be dainty of leave-taking,
But shift away. There's warrant in that theft
Which steals itself when there's no mercy left.*

William Shakespeare, *Macbeth*

Night fell and the whole of Thornhall was plunged into impenetrable darkness. For safety considerations—since everything was made of wood—all fires were diligently extinguished, including the torches and cressets that illuminated the staircases and winding corridors during the day. The only sources of light were the dimly-shining lanterns which the guards in the watchtower and on the palisade had at their disposal. Those guards—as Geralt found out—treated their service and duties extremely neglectfully, trusting in the island’s inaccessibility. It was apparent that no one had seriously threatened the island or the fortress for a very long time, which had led to the guards becoming lazy and careless. Geralt was certain that that was how the vodnik had managed to enter the darkened complex easily and unchallenged. Why, even a herd of hippocamps jumping over the palisade might have escaped the notice of the skiving guards.

The darkness, naturally, wasn’t a hindrance to Geralt, since starlight was quite enough for his mutated eyes. Inside the building, he could make use of his hearing, too. And also his sense of smell: since he knew that vodniks reeked of fish slime, mud and rotting sweet flag.

That evening there were no guards to be seen on the palisade; they were all in the watchtower playing cards, moaning about the graveyard shift on that shitty island where there wasn’t even anything you could spend the margrave’s shilling on, because the tavern and brothel were too far away and across the water, at that.

Geralt walked all around the palisade, looking out for any cracks hidden beneath the drying fish traps which a vodnik stealing out of the lake might slip through. Finding nothing suspicious, he entered the building. He had managed to patrol the corridor leading to the kitchen complex earlier, so now he decided to check the corridor leading to the margrave’s apartments, the armoury, the storeroom and the guards’ quarters. He had barely set foot in the corridor than his medallion twitched powerfully, vibrating and pulsating beneath his shirt.

He took several steps forward and the medallion calmed down. He turned back. After a few steps, the medallion came to life again. He stepped back and the vibrating stopped.

Something in the corridor was emanating magic.

The witcher raised a hand, forming his fingers into a Sign. At once, everything around him became bright. He approached and looked closely. He almost had to bring his face up against the wall, but he finally saw it.

Visible on the wall was an outline, a thin, barely perceptible line drawn in charcoal. Shaped like a door. And there was no doubt—it was the outline that was magical.

None of the bestiaries known to Geralt attributed magical abilities to vodniks. But all of them emphasised their great cunning and craftiness and agreed unanimously that vodniks were able—like monkeys—to mimic everything they saw.

Was a vodnik capable of using a magical amulet or other artefact, snatched, let's say, from a drowned person? Geralt didn't know. But he resolved to find out.

The light of the Sign faded and a moment later went out completely. Geralt took a few steps back and then hid himself around a bend in the corridor. He waited, utterly motionless and in complete silence; even slowing his breathing down.

He didn't have to wait long.

The medallion vibrated. The outline on the wall lit up and glowed, the door drawn in charcoal opened and something emerged from it.

Geralt reacted in a flash. He was on the figure in one jump and seized them in a praying mantis grip. His quarry turned out to be quite the strongman. Almost effortlessly, they threw off Geralt's grip and flung the witcher against the wall with a hammering blow. And punched him hard. Geralt was saved by his witcher reflexes, and the fist, rather than hitting him in the temple, barely brushed his head. Geralt fought back with a body punch, and then rushed into the fray once again. He knew by then that the stranger was by no means a vodnik. Wrong size and wrong smell; instead of mud and sweet flag, there was a faint scent of rum and herbs.

The two of them fell to the floor and rolled across it. The stranger found himself underneath, but leaped up and elbowed Geralt hard in the side of the head. The witcher saw stars. But didn't loosen his grip, instead punching the man once and twice in the jaw. He thought it would be enough. He was wrong. The stranger faltered for a second at most, and then retaliated with a sweeping—but accurate—roundhouse punch. After which he seized Geralt by the throat with both hands and began to strangle him,

paying no heed to the blows the witcher was throwing blindly and pell-mell.

Suddenly, from all sides the rocking lights of lanterns flooded the darkness with light, shadows danced, and the corridor teemed with people. Iron-like hands seized Geralt and pulled him away from his opponent. The latter was also struggling in the clutches of strong hands.

“Release the witcher!” bellowed Diego Mars. “And hold that one! And bind him! Bind him, I say!”

There were more lanterns and torches and the corridor became thronged. And cramped. Geralt’s opponent was dragged to his feet, bound and shoved against a wall. The witcher was astonished to see how young he was. He didn’t look any older than Geralt himself.

Diego Mars walked closer and shone his lantern in the captive’s face. The latter narrowed his eyes. He was clean shaven—explaining the smell of perfumed rum used by fashionable dandies after shaving.

“Well, well,” said the seneschal, not concealing his astonishment. “What a surprise we have. M’Lord Count Finnegan. Here, in Thornhall. By what fate and miracle? What a pity, Your Grace, that you came unannounced. But never mind, welcome. You four, take him away. We’re going upstairs. The rest of you move along! Not you, witcher. You’re staying and coming with us.”

The clamour, noise and bedlam had clearly reached the upper floor, since Vrai Natteravn was waiting for them in an open doorway, lantern in hand, wearing a white medical coat. The chamber behind her was illuminated by the light of several candlesticks.

On a sign from Mars, the guards hauled the bound man inside. The enchantress, the seneschal and Geralt all entered, too.

Frederik Vaikinen, count, son of the margrave of the Lakeland March, was sitting in a large armchair with a backrest reaching almost to the ceiling.

The count had long, fair hair, curled into locks like a maiden, a pointed nose and unpleasantly narrowed green eyes. His thin naked chest—with bandages bound diagonally across it, over both his shoulders and under his arms—peeped out from under a fur draped over his shoulders. The young man’s legs were also naked and his left knee was bandaged. Beside the armchair stood a small table, and on it Geralt saw dressings, vials and a nickel-plated syringe. No doubt Vrai Natteravn’s medical paraphernalia.

She had clearly just been tending to her patient despite the late hour.

“Your Excellency,” said Diego Mars, bowing. “I report that we have unexpectedly detained—”

“I see who you have detained,” interrupted Frederik Vaikinen. His voice was even less pleasant than the expression in his eyes.

“The noble young master Redfern Finnegan,” continued Frederik, staring at the captive, “has deigned to grace us with his presence. At night. Like a common thief. Like a thug. He’s a chip off the old block. After all, thievery and banditry are family traditions of the Finnegans. But you aren’t here to visit me, Redfern. You didn’t want to see me, but my sister. Though, couldn’t it have been done like a civilised fellow? During the day? With flowers and gifts? With a request for permission to visit?”

“Would you...” said the young man smelling of rum, struggling in the arms of the guards. “Would you have granted me permission?”

“No,” growled Count Frederik. “I’d have set the dogs on you.”

“Exactly. It’s the tradition of the Vaikinens. Fucking dog catchers!”

“Keep your trap shut, you whoreson!” yelled Frederik, getting up from the armchair.

“You’re a whoreson yourself, Fred! Go fuck yourself.”

“Just wait till I—” said the margrave’s son, choking. “I’ll... I’ll have you flogged... With a horsewhip, like a bitch cur. And then I’ll have you hung from the gate... Mars! Over here!”

Diego Mars approached the count, leaned over, and whispered in his ear. Frederik Vaikinen flushed.

“Why bring my father into this?” he yelled. “What, you wish to placate me? Advise me? Fuck your advice! My father’s not here, but in Ard Carraigh, and when he’s not here, I command! Understood? I command! And I shall do what I want with the lover-boy!”

The seneschal bowed, saying nothing.

“You probably think you’ll frighten me, Fred,” said Redfern Finnegan. “Don’t bother. You’re wasting your time.”

“Indeed?” said Count Frederik, who leaped to his feet, threw the sable fur from his shoulders, and hobbled over to the captive. “I’ll punch you in the face, Redfern! I’ll—”

“I forbade you from standing up,” said Vrai sharply. “You’ll undermine the effects of the treatment. And my efforts.”

“You act too boldly, witch!” said Frederik, turning to her. “You take too many liberties! And you forget my title! I am addressed as ‘Your Excellency’!”

“I see I’m no longer needed here,” replied the enchantress coldly. “So, farewell. I shall leave the island in the morning.”

“Have a pleasant trip. Mars, pay her.”

“There’s no need. I will settle up with Margrave Sirius. I’m accustomed to doing business with serious people.”

Her words and exit made some kind of impression on the young count after all, for he sat down, huffed and puffed a little, but had evidently calmed down.

“Mars.”

“Yes, Your Lordship.”

“Lock Finnegan up. In the dungeon. And go to hell, everybody.”

Despite her declaration, Vrai Natteravn didn’t leave the island the next morning. She was only ready to depart around noon. Geralt went to the harbour to see her off. The sorceress adjusted her bag on her shoulder, brushed her hair away from her forehead and looked up at the sky and the gulls. She was silent for a long time.

“The art of healing, witcher,” she said finally, “has two sides. It has its obverse. I can ease pain in the joints, or make them hurt acutely. I can remove the pain from an aching tooth, but I can also cause toothache. In *all* of the teeth. I can heal somebody’s piles, but can also make their arse hurt like hell. I can go on like this and you can complete the rest. Do you know why I’m saying this?”

“No.”

“Because not long ago I was meaning to treat you to one of the ways I’ve just described. For I was furious with you. You ruined my plans, put my opinion and earnings at risk. I think you can guess how.”

“The enamoured Count Finnegan,” he didn’t ask, but stated. “The door drawn in charcoal on the wall was your work.”

“You bet it was. Redfern Finnegan got into Thornhall using my teleport and was planning to elope with his beloved. But he had the bad luck to run

into an overzealous witcher. And now he's in trouble."

"He is indeed."

"So now the guilty party will get him out of trouble," said Vrai Natteravn, looking him straight in the eyes. "That means the Witcher Geralt. Don't make faces. Do I have to say it more plainly? Get Redfern out of gaol. And off the island."

"I beg your pardon?"

"Free Redfern," repeated the enchantress patiently. "And spirit him safely away."

"How?"

"Use your loaf."

"Seriously... I mean... Come on, Vrai, I can't... One margrave's already feeling... animosity towards me. Should I set another against me? And get on the wrong side of his bored son?"

The healer shrugged.

"On top of that, the king's Prefect Trillo is after me, trying to dig up dirt on me... No, Vrai, can't be done. And anyway, why me? Can't *you* teleport him?"

"No, I can't. Because it would get out at once that it was me. And I have standing and prestige. I can't put myself at risk."

"But you can do it to me. Because I don't have prestige or standing. I can be written off?"

"I didn't say that."

"Vrai—"

"Geralt," she said, interrupting him. "That's enough talk, my boat is waiting. You know what to do. And you'll earn my gratitude by so doing. You will benefit from it; I can assure you."

"I won't benefit much if I'm killed here."

"Try not to let them. Rumours of my ability to bring the dead back to life have been greatly exaggerated. And now farewell."

Diego Mars, who brought the summons from the count, accompanied Geralt to the door of the chamber. But didn't enter. He opened the door and shoved Geralt in quite roughly.

Frederik was sitting in his large armchair, its backrest decorated with the coat of arms of the march: two silver fishes *adossés*. The bandages criss-crossing his bare chest were still visible beneath the sable fur covering his shoulders. His left knee was still bound with a dressing.

He raised a hand, unambiguously indicating for the witcher to approach. Needlessly. For Geralt had no intention of going any closer. He remained near the door and waited calmly. The count was in no hurry, and fixed Geralt with his nasty expression.

“You’re young for a witcher,” he finally said. “Hard to guess your age, for you’re a mutant, and that white hair... I’d say you’re around my age. Well? I vouch we have much in common. You’ve certainly had to hear that you’re a pup, a beardless youth, that you must obey your elders, that you’ve still got plenty to learn, that you need to grow up, blah, blah, blah... that knowledge has to come with age. As though you’d never seen any old fools.”

Geralt didn’t comment. Frederik certainly wasn’t expecting a response.

“You have my gratitude for Finnegan,” he announced. “I shall reward you for apprehending him. The guards botched it, the scoundrel managed to sneak in and would have been with Ludmilla... Do you know she was ready, dressed for the road? She knew he was coming for her. How they plotted it, I don’t know. But I shall find out. Well, though the plan was cunning, it came unstuck. Thanks to you.”

Frederik was silent for a moment, scratching his chest beneath the bandages.

“I shall reward you for it, I promise. In addition, I’ll give you the chance to earn even more. And win my grace and favour. What, you don’t want to know what it’s about? What task I wish to give you? Or perhaps you’ve guessed?”

Geralt had, but said nothing.

“When my father returns, he will no doubt release Redfern. And Redfern won’t let up, he won’t forget Ludmilla. He will search for other means... Thus, I must put an end to it once and for all and for ever. I cannot issue the order, for my father would... In any case, heaven only knows if my men would obey me... But you...”

The count sat up straight.

“Finnegan’s cell will be left open tonight and the guard called away. You

will take him out, lead him quietly to the embankment and break his neck. Or knife him. As you wish. And toss the body into the lake. No one knows how he got here; no one will know how he got out. He'll simply vanish."

Geralt said nothing.

"It goes without saying," said Frederik. He reached towards an escritoire and took from a drawer a full pouch, which clinked as he put it on the desktop. "It goes without saying that I'll reward you for the service rendered. And handsomely. After the job has been completed, of course. Two hundred Novigradian crowns in gold. Have you ever seen so much cash at one time?"

Geralt said nothing.

"You say nothing," the count noted, smiling horribly. "But your eyes lit up at the sight of mammon! Meaning you agree. Indeed, that pamphlet, the *Monstrum*, speaks the pure truth about you, witchers. You're prepared to commit any roguery for cash."

The cutter *Nihil Novi* had returned from hunting for hippocamps unusually early; it was only one in the afternoon. Perhaps for that reason, the pals and comrades of Count Frederik disembarked unusually sober. It soon turned out they'd decided to put that right. Not long after, the sounds of merrymaking could be heard from the arrow slits of their quarters in the tower. This time the party was mixed, for the high-pitched laughter and squeals of women could also be heard. The count's comrades had clearly dragged along the girls from the kitchen. Or the laundry.

As he strolled beside the palisade, the witcher noticed one member of the party not far from the watchtower who hadn't joined in the carousing. It was the son of the brewer, named by the healer as Primian Grohot. He was standing, leaning against the palisade, staring at the lake.

Geralt approached.

"Looks like it failed again," said the witcher, getting the ball rolling. "Nothing came of the hunting trip, master?"

Primian Grohot hawked at length and spat into the water.

"What business is it of yours?" he said, turning his head.

"In truth, it isn't. But I see that rather than make merry with the rest of

the company, you are standing and looking longingly into the water... As though, forgive me, you're not drawn to drinking, but over there, to the water, and the hunt..."

"Well, well, what a keen observer you are," said the brewer's son, grimacing. "And what if that's so? What brought me here, to these bloody fens, was hunting, for hippocamps, not to nurse a glass of vodka. But instead of hunting I've found here only libation, carousal and debauchery. You can hear for yourself. Well, if people don't care..."

He fell silent, looking disgruntled. Geralt didn't hurry him, guessing that it wasn't necessary. He had guessed right.

"It's all one to those counts and barons," muttered Primian Grohot, nodding towards the window in the tower, "if we catch a hippocamp or not. The king won't give them any more than they already have. It's different for ___"

He didn't finish. He looked keenly at the witcher.

"You wouldn't have started this conversation," he muttered, "if you didn't want something. Am I right?"

"I'd like to help. For I gather that help is needed."

"Meaning?"

"In my opinion," said Geralt, standing beside Primian, also leaning against the palisade, "it would be worth hiring somebody for a hunting trip who knows something about monsters. Has an idea about where they reside, where they feed, where they migrate to... who would know how to entrap them..."

Primian Grohot scrutinised him for a long time.

"And would it be possible to hire somebody like that?" he asked in a soft voice.

"Where there's a will and the means," said Geralt, also lowering his voice, "there's a way. But..."

"Aye?"

"Hippocamps are timid creatures. A gin palace with a crew like that," said Geralt, gesturing towards the window with his head, "has no chance of even getting close to them. Moreover..."

"Aye?"

"Why divide it up? Let the king show his gratitude for the hippocamp... to one person."

“I understand,” said the brewer’s son and cleared his throat, looking around. “And how much... how much would help like that cost?”

“We shall talk about my fee when we have a hippocamp on the deck of the cutter,” smiled Geralt. “And now, you’ll have to dig deep into your pockets... I’ll tell you how, sir. Assuming you’re ready...”

“I am, I am,” confirmed Grohot. “I’m ready and willing for everything. And where there’s a will, there’s a way, isn’t there?”

The night was dark, it was a new moon, the sky was overcast. It suited Geralt very well.

He left his small chamber very cautiously, making sure the door didn’t creak. He walked noiselessly along the corridor and went out into the courtyard and then to the jetties. And almost tripped over the vodnik.

The creature cowered, hopping from one foot to the other. It goggled at Geralt and opened its froglike mouth. They both stood motionless. Geralt broke the silence.

“Heading for the kitchen, are we?”

“Breckkreck.”

“You’re fucking lucky,” drawled the witcher, “that I don’t have time for you. Scram.”

He didn’t reach the building. Seneschal Diego Mars suddenly materialised on the path in front of him. Behind him were two individuals shrouded in mantles.

The seneschal took two steps forward, drew a curved sabre and wrapped his cloak around his left hand.

“Out of my way, witcher,” he hissed. “You won’t be killing anybody today. Unless it’s over my dead body.”

“I ultimately don’t have the slightest intention of killing anybody,” said Geralt and raised his hands. “On the contrarily, I’d say.”

“Explain yourself.”

“Firstly primo, I’m not a hired killer, nor someone’s lackey. Secondly primo, two hundred crowns for a murder isn’t cash—it’s a pile of shit.”

“You won’t impede us then?” said the seneschal, tilting his head.

“I will not. Quite the opposite.”

“Thank you,” said Ludmilla Vaikinen melodiously. Through the mantle covering her face.

“Thank you,” muttered Redfern Finnegan from under his hood.

“Ha,” said Diego Mars. “It may be, witcher, that we both shall hang for this stunt, and from the same gibbet. But there’s no point worrying in advance. And let’s not bloody stand here like this. The young people need to be shipped out... I have a boat ready and waiting for them...”

“A boat?” said Geralt, smiling. “M’lord seneschal. I have made ready a cutter for them.”



The vast majority of people, claiming that violence and savagery are egregious and morally unacceptable to them, are plainly and simply unable to use violence even in self-defence, in the defence of their nearest and dearest—or when it is necessary. That is called: making a virtue out of inaction.

Vysogota of Corvo

Most Distinguished
Margravine Ada Ghislain-Vaikinen
Ard Carraigh
Poste restante

Ex urbe Ard Carraigh, die 18 mens. Maii 1230 p. R.

Dear Ada,

I hasten to inform you that nothing now threatens our children. They reached their destination safely, as we had arranged. When our husbands get over their anger, nuptials will be just around the corner. As far as grandchildren are concerned, I trust that when they appear, that senseless feud between our families will already be history and we shall be able to enjoy ourselves with our children and their offspring without plotting or scheming.

Our mutual friend V. N. rose to the challenge, just as she promised. We ought soon to express our gratitude, in measurable terms, as we agreed upon. Apparently, a certain young witcher made a significant contribution to our children's happiness, arousing the anger of your husband by so doing. Try to mollify the margrave and convince him to leave the witcher alone. It wouldn't be expedient for him to fall into the margrave's hands. The youth knows too much.

My best regards,

Persefona Finnegan

Redfern Finnegan turned around in the saddle and waved goodbye to them. Ludmilla Vaikinen also turned back and blew the witcher a kiss.

The witcher waved, too. The count's daughter and Redfern spurred on their horses and soon vanished from sight among the trees.

"And thus love conquers, overcoming obstacles and adversities," sighed Vrai Natteravn. "There go two young lovers, together at last, not heeding to anything or anyone, setting off into the wide world. To their happiness."

"I think it's time for me to go, too," said Geralt, patting Roach on the

neck. “Into that same, wide world. Before the two margraves send their men after me, to my misfortune.”

“I don’t think you need fear that.”

“You don’t?”

“Geralt.” The healer looked at him. “I didn’t act on my own behalf; I merely lent a helping hand. In reality, other, important individuals were busy behind the scenes. Those individuals, I guarantee, will protect both you and I from any consequences. If anybody wants to take this further, which I doubt.”

“I’d like to believe that. Ultimately, I prefer to take my leave.”

Geralt and the runaways had left the island of Seevalk efficiently and without difficulty. The steersman—bribed by Primian Grohot—sailed the cutter noiselessly out through the gate of the fort which had been left open by bought-off sentries. The problems began later, when the brewer’s son realised what was happening and that he had been deceived. Recognising the count’s daughter, Ludmilla, the steersman began to protest. Geralt had no choice but to resort to force. Mainly verbally. Geralt threatened to throw Grohot overboard and Redfern Finnegan threatened to beat up the steersman. Much more serious difficulties were caused by a dense fog that shrouded the lake like a cocoon just before dawn. Suddenly, there was no way of locating the eastern shore, the town of Tullach, the harbour or in fact anywhere at all. Help was supplied by Vrai Natteravn, who unexpectedly was to be found waiting on a jetty with her magical light, as bright as a lighthouse, which penetrated the murk.

“Vrai?”

“Yes.”

“You were waiting on the wharf; you showed us the way with a magical light. You have three horses ready, including one with a woman’s saddle. And my Roach. How did you know we would need you? How?”

“Let’s just say,” said Vrai Natteravn, smiling, “I placed boundless faith in you and your abilities.”

“Oh, really? Was the fog magic or what?”

“Partly magic, partly or what. Before we say goodbye, Geralt, let me show my gratitude, as promised. Something from a grateful healer.”

The object Geralt took from the sorceress was a metal disc the size of a one-crown coin. Geralt turned it over in his fingers. The reverse was quite smooth, without any markings. The obverse bore multiple designs, some convex, others concave. None of them meant anything to him. There was a protuberance in the centre of the disc: a stone of golden-yellow colour set into the metal.

Vrai took a pendant on a chain from under her shirt.

“The talisman is active and is used for teleportation in one direction,” she explained. “The stone in it is a heliodor, also called a golden beryl. The exact same as the one on my pendant. I hope you’ll never need medical help from me. But you are a witcher, after all, and that’s a hazardous occupation. If a need arises, press the stone on the talisman three times, one after the other. I will receive the signal and respond to the call. I shall arrive quickly, I promise.”

She waved a hand held stiffly as though she was cutting through the air. After the motion, a luminescent oval glowed in the air, in the centre of which there was a void.

“Farewell, witcher,” she said. And vanished.

It rained in the night, and in the morning, everything was swathed in dense, sticky, wet fog. White threads of gossamer spread over the grass glistened with dew, like diamond necklaces. But it was clearing up, the sun began to penetrate through the tree canopy, birds were calling, and a woodpecker was drumming somewhere deep in the forest.

Geralt reached the crossroads and stopped his horse. As he had almost exactly a year ago, he thought. A crossroads. Roads heading south, west and north.

Only the ravens were missing.

He saw the hoofprints of two horses on the wet sand of the highway leading south, indicating the direction chosen by Redfern Finnegan and Ludmilla Vaikinen. Geralt pondered. And recalled something.

Don't ride along the king's road, Preston Holt had warned him before he left Rocamora. My estate is under observation, there are patrols on the highway, informers reside at outposts and in taverns and inns. They will inform the prefect and, of course, you wish to avoid that. Take the road less travelled to the east, and then the highway to the south, through the Lakeland March. When you reach the River Pontar, cross onto the left bank. By riding downstream beside the Pontar you will reach Novigrad and your longed-for ocean...

In order to get to the Pontar—the river forming the border between Kaedwen and the Kingdom of Aedirn—it was necessary to ride south. But Redfern and his beloved had gone that way. Who knew, perhaps they were searching for a safe haven in Aedirn, in a foreign land where neither of the feuding families could reach them?

Whatever the case, Geralt thought, it probably wasn't the best idea to head south along the same route as the fugitives. It would be wiser to choose his own way.

He nudged Roach's flank with his heel. And set off westwards from the crossroads. Where the forest seemed to be thickest and wildest.

The surroundings were completely deserted. Geralt rode along forest tracks for three days and saw no trace of any people. Once he thought he heard the thud of an axe far away to the south. Another time, from the north, he detected the faint smell of smoke.

He often heard howling during the night when he was camping. He imagined it was wolves. But he couldn't be certain.

And on the morning of the fourth day, at the next crossroads, he encountered a raven.

He heard it first and then saw it. And was astonished. The raven, rather than flying high in the sky as was customary for the species, was hopping on the ground. Only when Geralt went close did the bird caw and take flight. It alighted on the top of a pine tree and went on cawing from there, most definitely insulting the witcher in its own language for having its meal

disturbed.

For the raven had been feeding. On the partly-chewed remains of some animal, probably a roe deer, that somebody had left. Little remained of the deer: the skull, the skin, the bones; crushed and picked clean. And beside them an enormous, stinking pile of shit.

Geralt leaned down from the saddle, looking around vigilantly. And his suspicion was confirmed. He saw the print of a foot on the sand. It was large. Broad. And measured at least half a yard.

Only one creature had such large, flat feet. Only one creature defecated where it ate.

The forest shrat.

He rode on slowly, looking around, vigilantly listening out. It turned out that there was danger in the forest.

Forest shrats, humanoid monsters from the goblinoid family, could be dangerous. Firstly, they usually travelled in packs. Secondly, they didn't rely exclusively on their own fangs and claws, although both the former and the latter were formidable. They also armed themselves with whatever they could cobble together. And used those weapons very effectively. Thirdly, they were always hungry and attacked anything that could be eaten. Including humans.

The forest track crossed a bigger road at the next crossroads. A post stood there and the metal sign nailed onto it displayed the Kaedwenian unicorn and a horn with a decorative cord wound around it. There could be no doubt—this was a mile post, and the road was a postal route.

The hoofprints of a galloping horse were visible on the road. They were fresh, so the rider had passed that way a short time before. And could not be far away.

Indeed, they were not. Geralt heard the sound of a brass horn. A desperate sound. Calling for help.

He spurred Roach to a gallop.

A clearing suddenly appeared bright among the undergrowth. It was from

there that the increasingly desperate blowing of the horn was coming, which was suddenly joined by the terrified squealing of a horse.

Geralt drew his sword, bent over Roach's mane and hurtled into the clearing at a gallop.

Four shaggy shrats were crowded over the fallen horse. They had torn open its belly and were devouring it alive. The horse was squealing and tossing its head around.

There was a young lad half-lying and half-hanging from the bough of a lone oak tree growing in the middle of the clearing, blowing a brass horn as loudly as he could. Two shrats were trying to reach him, one had clambered onto the shoulders of another and was trying to seize the boy in its claws.

Geralt attacked at a gallop the ones devouring the horse, and chopped off the bald head of one of them with a reverse cut as he rode by. Then he attacked the ones beneath the oak, hacking down one of them and knocking over another. He dismounted and faced the other shrats which were rushing towards him uttering ferocious roars and baring their fangs. One had a cudgel, another a rusty sword, and a third an improvised guisarme, consisting of a beaten-out metal sheet ripped from a mile post and attached to a pole.

The witcher outmanoeuvred the first, slitting open its throat with a swift blow. Astonished at his own calm and cool head, he parried the second one's blow and cut it across the temple. He ducked beneath the whistling sweep of the makeshift guisarme, manoeuvred his way behind the shrat with a half-turn and hewed it in the back of the neck. The shrat dropped to its knees. Geralt hacked again. The monster's head rolled away among the bracken.

He turned his attention towards the one from under the oak tree, but it had already managed to scamper away. All Geralt saw was the red rump of the fleeing shrat as it cleared a fallen tree.

He found to his satisfaction that his breathing hadn't even quickened.

"Stop blowing."

The youth in the oak tree removed the horn from his lips.

"You can come down. It's all over."

The youth jumped—or rather tumbled—down from the tree. He got up onto his hands and knees, trembled, and then tensed up to retch. The horn hadn't left his hand for a second.

“Thank you for saving me,” he gabbled out. “I... My... A thousand thanks—”

“Let’s get out of here,” the witcher interjected. “Before the shrats return in greater numbers.”

“My horse—”

“—won’t be any use to you now.”

The youth saw what the shrats had done to his mount and once again bent over, trying to vomit.

“You’ll ride pillion on my mare,” said Geralt, wiping the sword blade on a tuft of grass. “Come on, let’s go.”

“The mail!” the youth blurted out. “I was carrying the mail in my saddlebags! I am a royal post rider! The mail can’t fall! The mail must get through... It must...”

Indeed, a gorget with an image of a horn wound around with a cord was bouncing on the royal post rider’s chest. It was like the one on the milepost.

“Ha. Then clean the blood off the mail and take it with you. And let’s make haste from here.”

“It cannot be,” gasped the postmaster. “It cannot be, young sir, that I pay you nothing. How can it? We would be showing ingratitude, iniquitous ingratitude. Take this, I prithee. We have all contributed. Me, the post riders, the stable hands... We’ve each of us chipped in a few marks...”

“I am a witcher,” Geralt repeated patiently. “I can accept payment when I am employed. When an agreement stands. Should I simply encounter somebody in difficulty, if I simply come to the aid of somebody threatened by death, I don’t take money for it.”

Before they arrived at the post station, he and the post rider had ridden double on Roach for a little over four miles, passing successive mile posts indicating the way. At the station, the post rider gave a vivid and wonderfully embellished account of the incident, praising to the skies Geralt’s bravery and resolve. The station staff rewarded the witcher with applause, cheers, and slaps on the back, and naturally he was treated to a large mug of ale.

Meanwhile, the postmaster, a distinguished, portly, ruddy-faced and

bandy-legged gentleman had hurriedly organised among the staff a collection and was stubbornly trying to hand Geralt a pouch with the sum he had gathered. He was disconsolate when Geralt declined to accept the money.

“It cannot be thus,” he repeated, shifting his weight from one bandy leg to the other. “You cannot decline a reward. You saved the life of a post rider, young Master Witcher. Why, and more importantly, you rescued the mail. And the mail must get through, it must! We royal mailmen cannot leave your deed unrewarded. If you won’t take coin, then... perhaps then we can offer you dinner? Or to groom your horse?”

Geralt didn’t turn that down. And a short while later he was sitting in the kitchen, fully occupied with *zur* soup and sausage, his first hot meal since the episode on Seevalk, as the scent of a pike specially fried for him reached his nose. The stable hands enthusiastically set about grooming Roach, with brushes, curry-combs and hoof picks. They diligently brushed the mare’s tail, since according to an ancient equestrian superstition a horse’s tail left uncleaned would bring its rider bad luck.

Barely had Geralt finished eating than the postmaster appeared again.

“As a reward for your valour,” he declared proudly, handing Geralt a small gorget bearing a horn, “we have decided to name you, Master Witcher, an honorary royal post rider. When you show that badge, every station and every post rider will offer you help.”

“My grateful thanks,” said Geralt, adjusting his girth and saddlebags. “Farewell—”

“Hold on, hold on,” called a tall post rider, walking over. He was very dusty, and had clearly only just arrived at the station. “Are you perchance *that* witcher? The one called Geralt? If so, I have a message for you!”

The valley nestling among hills was awash with white and pink blossom. There were apple trees in bloom. Dozens—if not hundreds—of apple trees planted in regular rows and columns, as orderly as an army in battle array. An even, compacted track led all the way through the orchard to several large, wooden buildings.

Something like a gateway towered over the track: two columns topped

by a crosspiece. On it there was a pokerwork inscription.

HORTUS DELICARUM

Geralt had every reason to disregard the message brought to him at the station by the dust-covered post rider. Why, he should have treated the message as a warning. As an exhortation. If only for the fact that somebody knew about him, knew where he was heading and which region he was moving in. Moreover, it could be suspected that owing to his recent exploits that person might not be favourably disposed to him.

But sheer curiosity triumphed. Instead of taking to his heels—as he should have done—Geralt rode in the direction the letter indicated. And after two days' ride reached the destination. The valley awash with white and pink flowers. And the gate with the strange sign. And the escutcheon beneath it.

An escutcheon bearing three birds without legs. Heraldic martlets.

That ought to have been a warning, too. And again, he should have fled. But again, curiosity triumphed.

Several people were milling around near the buildings, but none of them paid any attention to him. The courtyard was full of barrels, great vats were piled high, and there were strange machines resembling presses.

Geralt tied Roach to a rail, looked around and walked over.

On the sunlit side of one of the buildings, initially hidden from sight, right by the rows of apple trees, beside another pile of barrels and beside a woodshed, stood a table. At it, absorbed with leafing through documents, sat a man.

When Geralt approached, the man turned his head towards him. He put the document he was reading aside and picked up a short wand from the table.

“You are armed,” he stated, aiming the wand at Geralt. “You have a sword on your back, hidden beneath your cloak. But don't try to draw it, please. I wouldn't want to resort to anything extreme.”

The man was attired in a fashionable scarlet doublet, sumptuously embroidered with metallised thread adorning the front, fastened with silver clasps, with a high, stiff collar, from which the pleated ruff of a shirt peeked

out. He had long, dark hair, only lightly sprinkled with grey, and bushy eyebrows growing together in a single line above the bridge of his nose.

His irises were like polished metal, gleaming and seemingly specular.

“My message got though,” he stated. “I’m glad you’ve taken advantage of the invitation.

“It must be the first properly warm day this spring,” he added, not waiting for an answer. “And I like to reside in the spring here on my estate in Xendell, in my Garden of Delights. Do you know, young witcher, where the name comes from?

“The trees you can see are apple trees,” he went on, in his soft, almost velvety voice. “They are in flower at present, and in the autumn, they will be bowing beneath the weight of apples. Using the art of master vignerons and distillers, something that supplies the local folk with a great, although uncomplicated delight, will be made from these apples. Cider. And also, a much stronger alcohol distilled from it. It will be delivered to the market in barrels and casks, for the sake of—so to speak—the delight of the nation. Well, but it’s time for introductions. I am Artamon of Asguth. Sorcerer. Dean of the Academy of Magic in Ban Ard.”

“Geralt. Witcher.”

“Yes, I know. I’ve been wanting to meet you for close to a year. And there are two reasons why I sent out invitations for a rendezvous all over the region. The first is my gratitude. For I am grateful to you, young witcher.”

Geralt raised his eyebrows.

“The Margravine Deianira, the wife of Margrave Luitpold Lindenbrog, is my kinswoman. Which means that Deianira’s daughter, Herzeloide, is too. Harm could have come to them both, thanks to you. Thanks to you, it did not.”

“I don’t know what you are talking about, sir.”

“Please, please. On top of everything he’s modest. And discreet. And what was it with Ludmilla Vaikinen and young Count Finnegan? Do you deny the help you gave them?”

Word travels fast, thought Geralt. Of course it does. Magic, rumours and homing pigeons.

“I don’t know what you are talking about, sir,” he repeated.

“Fortunately, I do,” said Artamon. “And it’s time to move to the other

reason for my invitation. To get there, a quite lengthy preamble will be required. Be patient.”

Geralt did his best.

“You are a witcher,” the sorcerer began after a lengthy pause. “A mutant. Created as the result of a process that seemed to somebody to be an improvement, a correction of Nature. But Nature cannot be corrected. Nor can it be modified. Any manipulation of what Nature has created signifies pathology. Corruption and destruction. Brutalisation. Whom, if not you, must I remind about the citadel of Beann Grudd and the aberration created there? The notorious Cats? Those psychopathic murderers? It is hard to hoodwink Nature, young witcher. Like an organism that fights a disease, Nature treats every metamorphosis and mutation—and rightly so—as a pathogen, as a germ. And fights it with all its might. Nature, excuse the pun, is decidedly opposed to denaturalisation.”

Sure, thought Geralt. And you, sorcerer, flaunting those little birdies in your coat of arms, helped nature as you could. Kaer Morhen, where the witchers nest, is to be razed to the ground, and the earth that remains sowed with salt. A quotation from your work, isn't it?

“And thus,” Artamon continued, hands clasped together, “at one extreme we have the Cats, the result of brutalising Nature. At the other, you, the result of something contrary. You, Geralt, are the best example of what I am talking about. With you, Nature is beginning to triumph in the fight against the pathogen. In you, rightfulness and empathy, which the witcher mutation was meant to absolutely eradicate in you—are coming back to life. For that reason, I sent out the invitations. For I wish to propose an offer to you. Make a request I wouldn't make to any ordinary witcher. But I won't hesitate to make an offer to a virtuous person, one who didn't harm two women, though he could have—and as a witcher even ought to have. An empathetic person who helped a pair of lovers, although he could have simply shrugged and looked away.

“So, let us move *ad rem*,” said the sorcerer, and sat up straight in his wicker armchair. “I would like you to visit me at the Academy in Ban Ard. In my laboratory, where I would conduct some research. I would take some samples. It wouldn't cost you anything, apart from perhaps a few drops of blood. And perhaps a tiny quantity of other... bodily fluids. As a scientist, it interests me very much what happens to your blood—and your entire body

—when you imbibe elixirs.”

Geralt remained silent.

“As compensation for the time you sacrifice,” Artamon continued, “I would guarantee a substantial benefit. A specific sum of money. Not less than Lindenbrog offered you for the striga. Moreover, I would guarantee you immunity from arrest. The king’s prefect would leave you in peace and stop annoying you.

“Think, too,” said the sorcerer, unconcerned by Geralt’s silence, “about the unquantifiable benefits. My research would result in the creation of medicaments, remedies for the currently incurable diseases that afflict humanity. You already have my gratitude, for Deianira and her daughter. Think about the gratitude of all of humanity. The good that is done comes back around, young witcher. Comes back around.

“You don’t have to decide at once. Ponder on it. And when you do decide, visit me in Ban Ard.”

He was already in the saddle, but before he managed to leave, three riders appeared in the courtyard. All three of them were armed to the teeth, riding combat stallions. Two men in leather jerkins with brass studs. And a woman in a black, man’s doublet. The woman’s flaxen hair was tied in a plait. She had a dense cluster of freckles around her snub nose. Thin lips. And green eyes with an exceptionally nasty expression.

There were rapacious lizards nesting in the cracks of Kaer Morhen’s walls. The woman’s face resembled them a great deal.

“Who the hell is he?” she growled, glaring at Geralt.

One of the men, a great bruiser, also looked at him. His nose was disfigured, crooked, as though it had healed badly after an injury.

“Leave him, Meritxell,” he said, leaning over in the saddle and spitting. “A post rider. Don’t you see the badge with the horn?”

Geralt didn’t head towards the gate with the delightful inscription.

Instead, he reined in Roach among the blooming apple trees.

Never before, even in the fight with the zorril, even in the dance with the

striga, had he had such a sense of menace, felt such danger. Artamon's velvety voice echoed in his ears. He recalled the freckled woman's reptilian eyes.

He dismounted.

"... evidence," said Artamon. Geralt, hidden behind a woodshed, was astonished how altered Artamon's voice was. Now there was no trace of velvet. There was gravel and crushed glass.

"Estevan Trillo da Cunha disappointed me, failed me absolutely. But I shall manage without evidence; I don't need it. I know who murdered Staff Sergeant Margulies and the others. And I won't wait for the law to finally rouse itself. I shall seize the matter in my own hands.

"Regarding Preston Holt, you will proceed as follows. Holt has health concerns. A physician from Ban Fillim is often called to Rocamora, his estate. Now and again the physician doesn't go there himself, but sends an apprentice or servant with the medicaments. One of you, let's say Master Beauregard Frick, will assume that role. But instead of the medicament, he will supply Holt with something that I will prepare. Something that will cause the witcher's death, preceded by prolonged and excruciating agony... Master Frick, you are shaking your head. The reason?"

"Master, this witcher is no friend of mine, I care not about him. But he is a man of the sword and he ought to die by the sword... To poison him like some rat—"

"Primo, Holt is a rat. And deserves a rat's death. Secundo, it's not certain that you would best him with a sword, even the three of you together. Yes, yes, Master Frick, I am aware of your swordsmanship, but Holt is a wily old fox, a seasoned old witcher, and you are ordinary people. Tertio and most importantly: Holt's death may in no way be associated with me. Nor with the lady marchioness, whom you serve. And are associated with yourselves. So, do as I instruct. Do you understand?"

"Yes, sir."

"That is exactly what I expect. And now the matter of the temple in Elsborg, a place where witchers have been educated, hospitalised and supported in all kinds of ways. My efforts have finally yielded a result and

the local authorities have decided to expel and banish the priestesses. But that is too little. They must be finished off definitively, once and for all. Since, let me remind you, nothing can point to me or to the marchioness, you will use a ruse like the one used at Novigrad. Do you remember, Mistress Meritxell?”

“I do,” said the reptilian voice. “I do, master.”

“The most important are Assumpta and Nenneke. The matter is made easier by the fact that both priestesses are hated by some members of the local population for giving women medical help. Mistress Meritxell will impersonate a woman wishing to terminate an unwanted pregnancy and will report to the temple for the procedure. In the company of her lover, who will be impersonated by Master Cibor Ponti. At the first opportunity, Mistress Meritxell and Master Ponti will knife the priestesses. But before they flee, they will raise loud cries about divine law, the protection of sacred life and the like; the more absurd, the better. No one will doubt their motives, for the priestesses have received death threats for their activities on several occasions. Mistress Meritxell, Master Ponti, any objections?”

“None, master,” said a booming voice, probably belonging to the man with the crooked nose. “We shall do as you’ve ordered.”

Geralt, in his hiding place, felt shudders. He didn’t know if it was the effect of the elixir. Or simply rage.

“With regard to the rest of the priestesses and novitiates of Elsborg, it will be better to cause all of them to cease existing at once, en masse. From what I know, they intend to move to a new location in Temeria. It will require a ferry ride across the Pontar. Thus, a small accident will be necessary. The ferry with all the priestesses must somehow sink in the middle of the river, in its deepest part. I leave that to your invention.”

“That is clear, master. And what...”

“Yes, Mistress Meritxell?”

“What to do with the young witcher, Holt’s lackey? The Lady Marchioness Graffiacane mentioned—”

“Steer clear of names, Mistress Meritxell! Please watch your words and don’t mention that name ever and anywhere. And the young witcher? That foolish, naive boy. You need not worry about him. He’s as good as done for. I’ve invited him to Ban Ard. I told him I mean to carry out some research. I didn’t explain...”

Artamon snorted and gave a nasty, screeching laugh.

“I didn’t explain to him I mean to carry out a vivisection on him.”

Punishment for a crime is a matter for the shire-reeve and the courts, Geralt repeated to himself, from his hiding place behind the woodshed. Is a matter for the shire-reeve and the courts. But I...

Holt. The Mother Assumpta. Nenneke. The priestesses.

He gripped tightly the key Holt had given him.

No, I’m not inclined to wait until the law comes to its senses.

The good that is done comes back around.

Evil too.

Bees buzzed among the apple trees.

Meritxell and her company had ridden away. The people in the courtyard had stopped hammering barrels; they were clearly having a break for a meal. Artamon of Asguth, sorcerer, dean of the Academy of Magic in Ban Ard, was dozing over his papers. Awoken by a rustle, he opened his eyes and saw the witcher. He snatched at his wand. He was quick, but couldn’t compete with a witcher under the influence of an elixir. Geralt punched him with a swift jab, striking him right in the throat. The sound of the blow was faint, but the effect was instantaneous. Artamon clutched his throat in both hands, but couldn’t utter a sound, for his larynx was crushed, and his trachea blocked. He was utterly helpless and slowly choking, though Geralt didn’t intend to stop there. Or wait. With the key clenched in his right fist he punched the sorcerer with all his strength in the side of his neck, just beneath his left ear.

Artamon dropped like a stone, onto his back. His hands were still clutching his neck. He croaked. Kicked his legs. And stopped moving.

He was dead.



*Who killed Cock Robin? I, said the Sparrow,
with my bow and arrow, I killed Cock Robin.
Who saw him die?
I, said the Fly,
with my little teeny eye,
I saw him die.*

Tommy Thumb's Pretty Song Book, an anthology of nursery rhymes
published in 1744

His Excellency
Prefect Estevan Trillo da Cunha
in Ard Carraigh

*Datum in Daevon, The 4th day of May, 1230 post
Resurrectionem*

My Lord Prefect,

I inform you that I arrived in Xendell on the 3rd of May along with the starosta of Daevon, and began my examination at once. I found that Master Artamon of Asguth had been dead, as indicated by *rigor mortis*, for over a day. A precise diagnosis and statement of the cause of death without a *post mortem* was not possible. However, I did find on his body signs that might indicate a violent death and the participation of third parties, that is a *crimen homicidio*. I found on the dead man haemorrhages in the region of the neck, as the possible result of a powerful blow. Effusions in the eyeballs and on the skin of the face, as well as bruising, may indicate the fracture of the cartilage of the larynx and strangulation. But—*iterum dicimus* —without a post mortem it is impossible to confirm this unambiguously.

I place my signature and remain respectfully,

Eldardus Thiry, *medicus et adiunct judicialis comitatus
Daevoniae*

His Excellency
Prefect Estevan Trillo da Cunha
in Ard Carraigh

*Daevon, the 7th of May of the 9th year of the reign of His
Royal Highness King Miodrag*

Your Excellency,

I inform you that on the 6th day of May did I arrive at the apple orchard in Xendell and as ordered began my investigation forthwith. I shall convey to you below what transpired.

During the perpetration of the crime, eleven seasonal *laboratores* and one overseer were abiding and working in the orchard. When questioned, every last one of them declared their complete ignorance, since they claimed to be busily engaged in cleaning barrels and vats before the distilling season, and neither saw nor heard anything from behind the said vessels. The overseer expressed thus—and I quote—that there’s a ton of work, and he—I quote again—had a schedule as tight as a ram’s balls. No matter how I pressed, they stuck to their story. They saw and heard nothing.

Nevertheless, a lad turned up, in truth somewhat of a simpleton, who recalled that shortly before his death, the murdered sorcerer was visited by three riders: two men and a woman. They commanded the lad to guard their horses, they proceeded to the sorcerer and spent some time there. Afterwards they left, and on parting boxed the lad’s ears, the gods only know what for. The lad recalled that they called one of them “Zibor,” and the other “Bo.”

I beg for instructions on how to proceed, Your Excellency’s obedient servant,

Ulf Markhor, royal investigative agent

His Excellency
Estevan Trillo da Cunha
Praefectus vigilum
in Ard Carraigh

In Ban Fearg, 28th day of May, in the year 1230 p. R.

Estevan, my dearest!

And so, somebody has killed Artamon of Asguth. I don't know how it is there in the capital, but in Ban Fearg and the marches, when the news got around, many more folk were joyous because of his death than sorrowful. The sorcerer's diverse ventures and the manner in which he conducted them had indeed earned him numerous enemies. I wouldn't be surprised if one of Artamon's competitors hadn't paid him back for his dishonest gambits; his downright frauds and swindles. I wouldn't rule out either any of his confreres from the academy in Ban Ard—although the renowned scholar and scientist apparently didn't impudently steal other men's ideas and inventions.

In truth, I have another suspicion. In your letter you mentioned three people, the last to see Artamon before his death. Well, I know who those people were—although the term “people” doesn't suit them in the slightest. That “Zibor” who was cited is undoubtedly Cibor Ponti, a brigand with warrants out for his arrest in Kovir. Meanwhile, that “Bo” is none other than Beauregard Frick, a hired cut-throat, who is being pursued by numerous prosecutions *in absentia*. If we are dealing with those two, then the third person must be, I am certain, one Meritxell, suspected of innumerable offences, including bestial murder. And now the best of all: the three of them are secretly in the service of Cervia Herrada, the Dowager Marchioness Graffiacane.

The amatory and purportedly most fervid sentiment linking the dowager marchioness to the murdered sorcerer is common knowledge. Nonetheless, one cannot overlook the fact that the dowager marchioness has for a long time been a batty old woman probably approaching a hundred. And the saying runs: what use is silk to an old woman? I cannot rule out that, bored by the old hag, Artamon gave the eye to some young thing, and as another saying goes: hell has no fury like a woman scorned. If, then, the marchioness resolved to take revenge, then she had Frick, Ponti and Meritxell at her beck and call. I would thus suggest pursuing an investigation against those

three.

That would be my advice, Estevan,
fortem te et hilarem opto et bene vale,

Martin van Creveld, inquisitor privatus

Illustrissimus ac Magnus

Abelard Levesley, Count de Bauhin

Dux Instigator Regni

in Ard Carraigh

*Ex palazzo Graffiacane, die 5 mens. Junii anno 1230 post
Resurrectionem*

Magnifice domine, Most Honourable

Your Excellency Lord Prosecutor,

On behalf of Her Excellency the Dowager Marchioness Cervia Herrada de Graffiacane, I submit an entreaty. Her Excellency the Dowager Marchioness politely requests that the servants of Your Excellency the Prosecutor and Prefect da Cunha refrain from pestering and harassing her. The Lady Marchioness is in mourning and categorically declines being interrogated. She also categorically demands a cessation to the importuning of her courtiers and gentlemen-in-waiting with some kind of imaginary suspicions and investigations. The Lady Marchioness considers such investigations as scurrilous bedevilment. The Lady Marchioness has expressed her wish for Prefect da Cunha and his men finally to demonstrate suitably directed activities and turn their attention to actual criminals—like the witcher Preston Holt from Rocamora near Ban Fillim.

On behalf of Her Excellency the Dowager Marchioness, I wish to inform you that in the case of her entreaty not being carried out and further harassment occurring, legal measures will be undertaken.

Yours sincerely,

Nachtigall Visser, legal adviser to the Graffiacane family

Praefectus vigilum

Estevan Trillo da Cunha

in situ

*Datum in Ard Carraigh, 10th day of June in the year 1230 p.
R.*

My Lord Prefect,

I command that the investigation into the Dowager Lady Marchioness the Cervia Herrada de Graffiacane and her servants be discontinued with immediate effect and any inquiries ceased. I order, however, an investigation into a certain Preston Holt, witcher, from the estate Rocamora near Ban Fillim.

Abelard Levesley *Instigator Regni*

His Excellency Prefect of the Guard

Estevan Trillo da Cunha

in Ard Carraigh

written in Ban Fillim, on the 7th day of July in the year 1230

Your Excellency Lord Prefect,

I hasten to inform you what has occurred. On the 5th day of July of this year a certain Preston Holt appeared in the shire's court of Ban Fillim. He presented himself as a witcher. He announced that, and I quote, he gives himself up into the arms of justice, since his conscience is tormenting him, as he murdered with premeditation the sorcerer by the name of Artamon of Asguth. And furthermore, three other persons named Margulies, Nourred and Chwalba. I therefore asked him why he had done that to those men, why he had killed

them. To which he said it was because he didn't like them. However, he later confessed more seriously that those three men had attacked with force the witcher stronghold and defeated numerous witchers there some thirty years and more since. And that the sorcerer Artamon had set those men onto the witchers and incited them to that act. At which he, the witcher Holt, had sworn revenge and finally wrought it. But he is conscious that he defiled his soul with those crimes and sorely burdened his conscience, thus he admits his guilt and gave himself up to the law to be tried and punished. Thus, did he speak, in those words.

So, wasting no time, nor deliberating, I ordered that witcher be incarcerated and dispatched in a convoy to the gaol in Sturefors, in the hope that I was acting aptly.

Commending myself to your steadfast grace, I remain respectfully,

Yon Bervoets, *Shire-Reeve*

Illustrissimus ac Magnificus
Abelard Levesley, Count de Bauhin
Dux Instigator Regni

*Datum ex Ban Ard, die 1. Mensis Augusti anno 1230 post
Resurrectionem*

Illustrissime Prosecutor,

Regarding the witcher called Preston Holt, inmate of Sturefors, guilty of murdering our dear Brother and Amicus Master Artamon of Asguth, may it be known that we, the Academy of the Magical Arts in Ban Ard, are proceeding as follows.

Our master and *condiscipulus*, Adrian of Tallema, an expert in both jurisprudence and the penal sciences, has adjudged that a witcher is not a human being, but a mutant, and thus not entitled to a trial. The fundamental right to personal

inviolability *nisi iure victum* is only the right of a human being and not a mutant. Which means that a court hearing is completely redundant. Since there is undoubtedly guilt, one may proceed at once to execution without convening the court. Those are the words of Adrian of Tallema.

Motivated, however, by a sense of justice, we decided that since the *auctor* of the crime has two arms, two legs and is capable of *communicare* in human speech, then although that does not make him a human being *ex definitione*, it is agreed, nonetheless, that he may be permitted to benefit from certain human laws. *Nullus describatur reus, priusquam convincatur*, thus the said Preston Holt ought to be brought before a court and tried. We are, withal, inclined towards the opinion of Master Adrian that it was a *crimen nefandum* and that Holt is undoubtedly guilty. *Nec veniam effuso sanguine casus habet*. Thus, no leniency may be shown and there can only be one verdict. *Ultimum supplicium*, that is *poena capitalis*. The Academy of the Magical Arts will not accept any other sentence and will disregard it.

Thus, the sentence should be carried out as soon as possible.

I remain respectfully,

Euclides Croft *Rector Academiae*

Praefectus vigilum

Estevan Trillo da Cunha
in situ

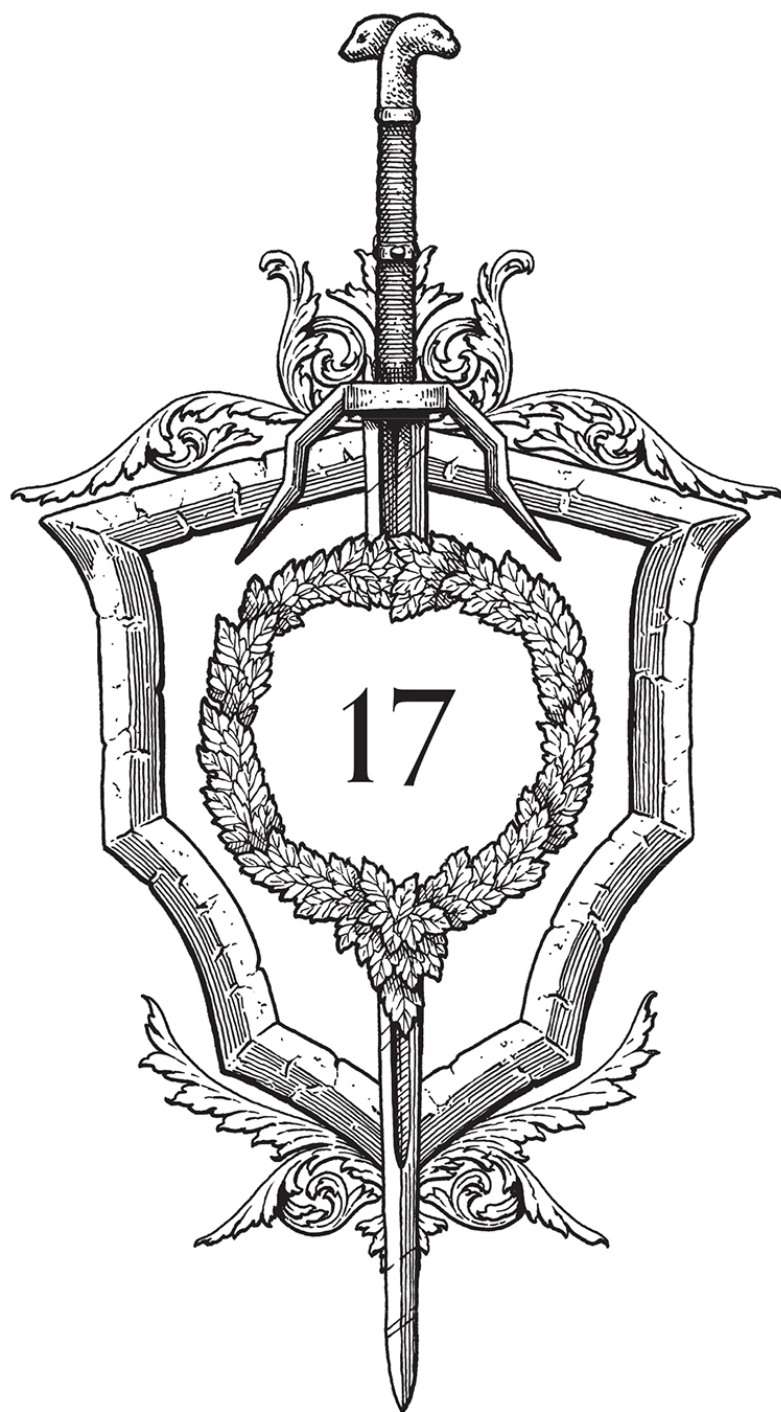
*Datum in Ard Carraigh, 6th day of August in the year 1230 p.
R.*

M'Lord Prefect,

I attach a copy of the letter of His Magnificence Euclides Croft, Rector of the Academy in Ban Ard. I recommend you acquaint yourself precisely and to the letter with the case of

the witcher imprisoned in Sturefors *diligenter procedere*.
Meaning: pass judgement and execute without further ado.
Inform me once it has been carried out.

Abelard Levesley *Instigator Regni*



*If I must die, I will encounter darkness as a bride,
And hug it in mine arms.*

William Shakespeare, *Measure for Measure*

Seated behind a table, Estevan Trillo da Cunha, Royal Prefect of the Guard, looked at Geralt long and keenly, squinting and slightly biting his lips. He finally sat up straight in his armchair and twisted his black moustache.

“Well, well, well,” he drawled. “For a long time, my agents have been searching for you throughout the entire kingdom. Unsuccessfully. And you, to my amazement and admiration, show up here yourself. Voluntarily. Not in a prison convoy.”

Geralt shrugged. He had no intention of revealing to the prefect where he had lately been, or what he had been doing. And it had been a busy time.

After the incident on the first of May, Geralt decided to get as far away from the scene as quickly as possible. He travelled to the Lower March on the River Pontar. And there, the gorget with the horn and honorary title of royal post rider proved themselves extraordinarily well. The royal postmen, it turned out, were characterised by quite indomitable solidarity. Geralt encountered support and assistance in every post station he stopped at.

And since what he needed was to go into hiding for some time, the postmen of the Lower March didn't have to be asked twice and offered Geralt work. So, for the previous three months Geralt had been escorting post riders carrying precious deliveries.

Dwarven bankers, too, demonstrated solidarity, know-how and an efficient communication system. When Geralt, escorting a post rider, appeared at a branch of the Boni family's bank, word from Timur Voronoff was waiting for him. In this way, Geralt learned of Preston Holt's arrest. And of his incarceration in the forbidding Sturefors prison, a place of confinement and back-breaking toil in quarries.

“I wager,” said the prefect, twisting his moustache again, “that I know the purpose of your visit. But we aren't going to wager, since, as everyone knows, when two people make a bet, one is foolish and the other dishonest. For that reason, tell me what brings you here to Sturefors. And I shall

decide whether to let you go, or whether you will remain here permanently in the prison. Go on, speak.”

Screams could be heard from the courtyard, from behind a barred window. And insults.

Anyone approaching Sturefors prison saw first, from a distance, *Aedificium carceris*, a huge edifice, a stone monolith towering over the lowland surroundings. What the edifice had been in the past and what it served, no one remembered. It was suspected it had been a temple.

Anyone venturing nearer took a narrow road alongside a quarry located in a gully. There one could look at the ragged inmates in shackles, cleaving rocks with hammers and mattocks. One couldn't look at them for long, though, as visitors were forced by the grim shouts and even grimmer countenances of the mounted crossbowmen guarding the prisoners not to linger beside the quarry.

Further on, there was a tall palisade and a gate with a guardhouse, where anyone coming to Sturefors had to report, stating the purpose of their visit. Then one had to wait for permission to enter. Which usually took a very long time.

From the guardhouse, the road ran straight to the *Aedificium*, between two spike walls, which were high enough such that even a mounted rider couldn't see what was beyond them. Frequent visitors knew, however, that there were wooden barracks, places for serving a sentence for minor—and less serious—offences. Those convicted of more serious crimes were imprisoned in stone cells in the main building. The prison administration, guards' quarters and stores were also located there.

Geralt didn't think much of the austere room he was led into. Or of the iron hook suspended from the ceiling whose purpose wasn't difficult to guess. Or of the fact that the chair he was instructed to sit on was permanently affixed to the floor.

“I'm waiting,” said Estevan Trillo da Cunha, hurrying Geralt. “Speak.”

“You are holding Preston Holt, witcher, here,” said Geralt, clearing his throat.

“Whom we hold here,” said the prefect a moment later, when it was clear Geralt wasn't going to say anything else, “is a state secret.”

“He has been imprisoned for the murder of Artamon of Asguth.”

“That is also a state secret.”

“You are holding Holt unfairly. He is innocent. It wasn’t he that killed the sorcerer. I did.”

“You? Indeed? And what would your motive be?”

“Artamon was the author of that vile pamphlet that in the year one hundred and ninety-four incited the mob to attack Kaer Morhen, our headquarters—”

“And that was enough for you?”

“He was also planning to poison Holt. And to murder the priestesses of Elsborg. I had to prevent that.”

Estevan Trillo da Cunha was silent for a while, drumming his fingers against the hourglass in front of him. The sand in it had all fallen through, but the prefect didn’t turn it over. He clearly wasn’t interested in measuring the passage of time.

“In other words,” he said finally, “you claim to have killed a man for his literary oeuvre and his intentions. Congratulations. By so doing you occupy a high position on my private list of people’s asinine motives. But at the same time, I must upset you, young witcher by the name of Geralt. You aren’t credible. Your confession isn’t credible. The audience is over. Leave Sturefors.”

“I killed the sorcerer. I can prove it definitively.”

“Indeed? How?”

“I can describe exactly how I killed him. It must have come out during the examination of the corpse.”

“It must have,” said the prefect, nodding. “And did.”

“I punched him in the Adam’s apple—”

“The Adam’s apple, known to physicians as the *prominentia laryngea*,” the prefect interrupted, finishing Geralt’s sentence. “But because you didn’t want him to suffer, by choking to death, you finished him off with a blow to the neck, in the mastoid process, causing a rupture of the vertebral artery. Am I right?”

Geralt remained silent.

“Holt described precisely how he murdered Artamon of Asguth,” the prefect continued impassively. “And the post mortem confirmed it. And you, well, you must have known Holt’s style of killing, his *modus operandi*. To a degree sufficient enough to now try to rescue him, taking the crime upon yourself. Let’s raise three cheers for the admirable sacrifice, my lad,

and proof of loyalty. Vain loyalty, nonetheless. Your admission, which in any case doesn't have the weight of proof, is of no use to us, for we already have the culprit. The verdict has been delivered and the execution is taking place today."

"Today?"

"Yes, today."

"You'll be killing an innocent man!"

"Don't raise your voice. Preston Holt, alias Reyndert the Wraith, gave himself up to the authorities. Confessed willingly and without compulsion to the crime. Or, rather, crimes. He confessed to the murder of Otton Margulies, Kari Nourred and Remko Chwalba, which, as you know, I had suspected him of for a long time. He also confessed to murdering Artamon of Asguth. *Confessio est regina probationum*; admission of guilt is the queen of proof. The court couldn't and didn't have any doubt. Judgement was passed on Preston Holt. He was sentenced and execution awaits him. The law and justice are satisfied; we need nothing more."

"I repeat, it wasn't Holt that killed Artamon, but me. I confess. So confessio is the vagina and so on. Arrest me, and release Holt."

Estevan Trillo da Cunha looked at him in silence. For quite some time.

"The law," he finally said, "or to be more precise the prosecutor general of the Kingdom of Kaedwen and the sorcerers of Ban Ard need the real witcher to be executed. The master and not the apprentice. One verdict and one execution absolutely suffice. The law isn't barbaric. Neither am I. After Holt's execution, I shall consider that justice has been served..."

"Pretty pathetic justice."

"Enough. Take note and realise you won't save Holt, should you even rend your garments and howl to the moon. I explained the issue to you last October, during our first encounter. Holt turned himself in to the forces of justice. The machine was set in motion and pulled him in to the gears from which the only way out is via the scaffold. It's irrevocable and inevitable. And will literally occur in a moment. Visitors—the persons who requested to be present at the execution—have already arrived at Sturefors. The persons who needed the execution to happen."

Geralt said nothing, gritting his teeth.

"Thus, you may leave in peace," began the prefect. "I advise you, though, against any further noisy and sweeping admissions and against

talking about your alleged deeds. For it might have lamentable—”

“I wish to see Holt,” Geralt interrupted sharply.

“Agreed,” said Estevan Trillo da Cunha, and in doing so totally astonished Geralt.

Preston Holt didn’t look too good. His white hair was hanging over his forehead and eyes in a messy fringe. His sickly pallor, sunken cheeks and abnormally protruding cheekbones completed the picture. On top of it all, his left cheek and eye socket bore the mark of a large, now yellowed bruise.

“It’s customary here,” said Estevan Trillo da Cunha impassively, seeing Geralt’s angry glance. “Nothing personal.”

“Nothing personal,” confirmed Holt, sitting up on a bench. “They just punched me in the face. A kind of tradition.”

“I shall leave you,” said the prefect, finally turning the hourglass over on the table. “For a short time. Trusting that neither of you will do anything stupid. I warn you; you are under guard.”

Holt watched the prefect leave. Then fixed his suppurating eyes on Geralt.

“Imagine,” he said, sighing, “that I demanded the last meal due to a condemned man. And they said it was pearl barley and grease. It was pearl barley and grease yesterday, I said. And they said it’ll be the same tomorrow. Because of cuts to the budget. So, I—”

“Holt,” Geralt interrupted sharply. “They plan to take your life.”

“I know, I know,” said the old witcher and waved a hand. “After all, I was present when the judge donned the black clap and announced the verdict.”

They said nothing, watching the sand in the hourglass.

“I had you down as more intelligent,” Holt said finally. “I thought you’d matured. But it turns out you’re still a naive young pup. And a dupe. Why the hell did you come here, eh?”

Geralt shrugged.

“I can guess why.”

Geralt shrugged again.

“Unlike you,” continued Holt, “I knew what I was doing and was aware

of the consequences. I acted according to a plan. Your pitiful intervention, without any sense or purpose, wasn't part of it."

"I wanted to save you—"

"And I wanted to save you," Holt growled back. "But it was my idea first and I don't need any impersonators. And then you turn up wanting to spoil everything."

"I apologise," Geralt replied. "It won't happen again."

They both burst out laughing at the same time. Which was a little out of place.

"Does da Cunha have anything on you?" said Holt, wiping away a tear. "Apart from your foolish confession? Will they let you leave here?"

"I think so. The prefect didn't believe my confession."

"I wouldn't be so sure. Officially, they have a culprit and a verdict, they can't go back on that. Were they now to bring forward a different offender, they would completely embarrass themselves. All of them. All of the active parties. Da Cunha and the royal office of prosecutor, but mainly..."

"The sorcerers from Ban Ard?"

"You're starting to think."

They said nothing for a while.

"Holt?"

"Yes?"

"Why... Why did you admit your guilt? Why did you take it on yourself —"

"Once, a man spotted a hornets' nest in an old tree stump in a forest," Preston Holt interrupted. "He walked closer and kicked the stump hard several times. He was asked afterwards why he did it. And he replied—"

"What?"

"That it had seemed a good idea at the time. Geralt, the sand has almost fallen though the hourglass. Listen: Voronoff has my two swords and my medallion. Make sure they find their way to Kaer Morhen. They have confiscated everything else, including Rocamora. Will you be present at the execution?"

"Yes."

Unlike typical municipal scaffolds, the one in the courtyard at Sturefors prison was very small. Needless to say, scaffolds used for municipal executions had to be large and wide, since they had to accommodate a whole arsenal of devices and machines, essential for the often very elaborate and varied ways of inflicting suffering and causing death. There wasn't much sophisticated about the gallows at Sturefors—why, it was just one sturdy column in the centre. Town scaffolds were also tall—for they had to ensure a good view for the masses filling the town square. The gallows at Sturefors were quite low; the few spectators could observe the hanging from above, from the gallery surrounding the yard.

There were about a dozen observers on the gallery, Geralt saw. His attention was caught by a grey-bearded elderly man in rich attire surrounded by younger and much more handsome men and gorgeous women. Doubtless, they were the sorcerers and sorceresses from Ban Ard, present in order to witness the execution of their confrere's killer. There was also a woman, old and hunched, in a black gown and a close-fitting escoffion edged with pearls, her face utterly hidden behind a thickly woven black veil. The woman was leaning on the arm of a well-built bruiser. Geralt had seen him before. This time he wasn't wearing either a brigandine or a belt encumbered with weapons; he was dressed in the simple, grey attire of an underling or attendant. But Geralt recognised him anyway. By his crooked nose.

The hangman, wearing a leather mask, was waiting on the scaffold, leaning against the column.

Holt was led out into the yard by four servants. The old witcher walked calmly, and his face was also serene. Just in front of the scaffold, the servants tried to seize him by the arms, but he shook their hands from him and climbed the steps himself. He stopped, turning towards the gallery and raising his head. It looked as though he would say something. And he did.

"I regret what I did," Holt said loudly.

Without a word, the executioner pointed to a seat attached to the column. Holt sat down without hesitation and held his hands out behind him to be bound. The executioner attached around his neck an iron collar joined with a threaded mandrel. He placed his hands on the grips of a handwheel protruding from the back of the column. He raised his head, looking enquiringly at the prefect. Estevan Trillo da Cunha gestured with his hand.

The executioner turned the handwheel. Holt wheezed. The old woman in the escoffion screeched.

The executioner turned the screw again. And again. And that was the end. The old woman screeched once more. Only then did Geralt understand it hadn't been a screech, but a laugh.

"So, it's over," said Estevan Trillo da Cunha, drumming his fingers against the hourglass on the table. "The drama is over. Time for all the actors to descend from the stage. Including you, witcher. Regardless of the role you played.

"I won't stop you; you may leave Sturefors unhindered," he continued. "The road that runs alongside here heads south and you will travel that way. A long way. All the way to the River Pontar. The world is huge, witcher. Redania is on the Pontar, beyond the Pontar are Aedirn and Temeria. To the west, on the ocean are Novigrad, Cidaris, Verden, numerous kingdoms, innumerable towns and villages, all sorts of picturesque places. You'll like it there, I'm certain of it."

Geralt said nothing.

"You'll like it there," the prefect repeated. "And even if you don't, you won't return to our lands anyway. I'd prefer it to be utterly clear, without room for misunderstanding. I don't want ever to see you again, Geralt. I also don't want to hear about you again. Do you understand?"

Geralt nodded to indicate he did.

"Before we bid each other farewell finally and for ever," said the prefect, "there is one, last matter—"

"Who was the woman dressed in black?" Geralt interrupted. "The one in the veil? The one who was so overjoyed at Holt's death?"

"It's not within my gift to give you information," said the prefect, scowling. "But very well. That was the Dowager Marchioness Cervia Herrada Graffiacane. And that was the joy of revenge, for Artamon of Asguth had been her lover. They were together for over sixty years. Right up until the mage's death."

"Really? Artamon and that old woman? How old could she be?"

"Eighty-two. Does it surprise you that a romance could last such a long

time?”

“It does. But that’s not the point. That character with the crooked nose who was accompanying her, disguised as an attendant. It ought to interest you, as the prefect in charge of security, that the sorcerer deputed him with the murder of the priestesses of the temple in Elsborg. He and a woman by the name of—”

“Meritxell,” said the prefect, finishing his sentence. “I know.”

“The priestesses are still in danger—”

“It’s not your business now, witcher,” interrupted the prefect sharply. “You are leaving and won’t ever return here. Matters connected to the security of the Kingdom of Kaedwen don’t concern you anymore. Let’s return though to the last matter of which I was speaking. Are you listening?”

“Attentively.”

“Well, the sorcerers from Ban Ard demanded Holt’s corpse. For a post mortem, for their research and experiments. I couldn’t refuse them. But...”

Geralt raised his eyebrows.

“From tomorrow at dawn, the wagon bearing Holt’s body,” said the prefect and looked up at the ceiling, “will be standing outside the gate of the prison, waiting for the people from Ban Ard. For some time, why, for quite a long time, that wagon will be completely unattended. Perhaps somebody might appropriate it; things like that happen. An explanation like that ought to suffice for the mages from Ban Ard. Why, it’ll have to suffice.”

Geralt bowed without a word.

“Prefect...”

“Yes.”

“In spite of everything... I can’t help feeling you’re showing me more kindness than enmity. It comes as something of a—”

“Surprise?” said Estevan Trillo da Cunha, smiling faintly. “Why, I was meaning to keep that to myself, but perhaps it’ll be better, when, as you head off on your long journey, you understand what benefits services rendered to somebody can sometime bring. They say the good we do comes back to us. Madam Vrai Natteravn recently treated my daughter. And she let slip a thing or two. Farewell, witcher. Good luck on your way.”



Sweet is revenge—especially to women.

Lord Byron, *Don Juan*

The edge of a forest above a shallow gorge, beneath a large, spreading yew tree with a fissured trunk became Preston Holt's final resting place. It wasn't particularly far from the prison, outside the gate of which a wagon containing a cadaver swathed in linen cloth had been waiting at dawn, as the prefect had promised. Geralt hauled the wagon for several hours, as far as he could before he weakened. Roach couldn't help him, for as a saddle horse there was no way in the world she would have allowed herself to be harnessed to a vehicle. Thus, Holt was buried beneath the yew, in the first place Geralt deemed suitable.

Geralt left the grave unmarked. He only erected a cairn over it, made from stones he gathered and dug up from round about.

He sat near to the grave almost until sunset, pondering over this and that. He contemplated the road vanishing into the trees.

A road leading southwards.

Then he mounted Roach and urged her on. Towards the north.

Meritxell tightened the girth, adjusted the horsecloth and arrangement of her saddlebags, and patted her horse's neck. She turned around, vaguely hearing muttered oaths.

"What is it, Beau?"

"For fuck's sake," said Beauregard Frick, grinding his teeth as he entered the stable. "I'm getting more and more fed up of serving that infernal old hag. Not only is she tight-fisted, but... I won't have anyone call me a bloody moron. I've almost had enough of it."

"Glad you said 'almost,'" said Cibor Ponti, wiping his crooked nose. "For in truth we don't have much of a choice. The marchioness is covering our arses. And if she discharges us from her service—"

"The hunters would find us in no time," said Meritxell, finishing his sentence. "There's a price on our heads, or have you forgotten?"

"No, I haven't," said Beauregard Frick, hopping into the saddle. "But it sickens me to have to hang my head and listen while someone calls me a moron. But you're both right, so enough talk. We know what to do, so we must do it. Let's ride!"

“Let’s ride!”

It was around the beginning of September—but who knew, perhaps it was a little earlier or a little later—that Geralt reached the outskirts of Ard Carraigh and could gaze on the capital from a distance, at its splendid bastions and towers with their domes and spires gleaming with copper. He reined in Roach on a hill outside the city, near a large rubbish heap, and looked on for a while. But not for too long. Chiefly because of the flies. But he was also in a hurry to travel north. He was even afraid to think he might get there too late.

From a crossroads he headed along the highway in the direction indicated by a signpost.

Towards Ban Fearg.

The Crayfish and Snail tavern in Ban Fearg, like all the road-houses belonging to Ezra Metzgerkop, had a new sign. This one, aside from the gilt letters of the name, was decorated with a baronial crown with seven clubs and four pearls around it owing to the owner’s preferment. The sign was so grand that for the first few days after it had been hung, the residents of Ban Fearg rushed to admire it. Inevitably, the restaurant’s turnover improved considerably. Ever since the new sign had been hung, it had been difficult to get a table at the Crayfish and Snail; the restaurant was usually full.

It was also full that day, so Lozado Cross, the tavern’s doorman, reluctantly scrutinised the new customers—three riders: a woman and two men—knowing that in a moment he would have to turn them away. And the three riders, as the doorman astutely observed, didn’t look like the kind that would meekly accept it. The freckle-faced woman with the flaxen plait had evil, green eyes. One of the men had a misshapen nose, the other had hair shaved almost to the skin. All three of them were bristling with weapons. Lozado Cross felt like calling the other doormen to assist him, but he was a little embarrassed—he was no weakling and up until then had coped by himself in plenty of dicey situations. So, he crossed his arms on his chest and decided to wait for the events to unfold.

And it looked like it would develop. The freckle-faced woman with nasty eyes, her hand on her sword hilt, rode her horse hard right up to the porch, the horse's hooves almost on the steps. The one with the broken nose also rode up close and rapped his pommel with a menacing-looking, iron-bound cudgel.

"Meritxell, Cibor, leave it," called the shaven-headed one from the rear. "Let it go. Look at that sign. They've no doubt added the golden crown and letters to the prices; it would cost us too much. Let's search for another inn. Without a gilt sign, but with simple, good eating. Come, let's ride on!"

Lozado Cross sighed with relief.

The sign of the Crayfish and Snail in Ban Fearg was new, the paint and gilt on it looked quite fresh. The sign was also decorated with a golden crown with seven clubs and four pearls around it.

The air was permeated with the heady scent of boiled crayfish. For a moment, Geralt had the urge to stop and go in, if only to greet his friend the restaurateur. But he decided against it. He recalled that the prefect's spies frequented such places. And he preferred Estevan Trillo da Cunha not to find out about his expedition to the north.

He reined his horse around and rode away.

He reached the vicinity of Rocamora in the night. The moon was full, lights were burning in the homestead, and he could smell smoke. Geralt had no intention of going any closer, much less entering. He just stopped for a while on a hillock, watching. Then he prodded Roach with his heel, urging her to a trot.

Jupiter Mello, the royal bailiff, glanced around the empty room with an uncomprehending look.

"Isn't there anyone here?" he asked in disbelief. "No one came?"

"Aye, seems so," said Yon Bervoets, the shire-reeve of Ban Fillim, scratching his head. "Looks like no one—"

“I don’t get it,” said the bailiff, glumly. “I don’t get it at all. Yesterday they were climbing over one another to get in... And small wonder, it’s a beautiful property, a wonderful locality... And today it’s as if the plague has done for them! Won’t anyone come for the auction? I don’t understand. Why?”

“Well, sir, it’s like this...” said the shire-reeve, scratching his head again. “Folk have taken fright. Fear has seized them.”

“Fear? Of what?”

“They say...” stammered the shire-reeve. “They say this property is accursed. In elven, Rocamora means ‘revenge.’ The owner, that witcher, him what they executed in Sturefors, cast a vindictive spell on this place...”

“Superstition! People believe that?”

“How can you not?” said the shire-reeve, looking away. “When much has been seen...”

“Like what?”

“A spectre.”

“What?”

“A spectre appeared at night, on a hill above Rocamora. Many folk saw it. It was light, the moon was full... On a ghastly horse, with white hair... It were ’im, no doubt. That witcher, what they executed, has returned as a spectre. To get his revenge...”

“Superstitious boors!” snorted the bailiff. “Ignorance! They’ve imagined a spectre, the yokels. Bloody simpletons! Country bumpkins!”

In truth, Jupiter Mello’s grandfather was still using a wooden ard to plough common land and would go behind the barn to take a shit, but the incumbent royal bailiff preferred not to remember that.

“And what am I to do now?” he said, spreading his arms. “I’ve been instructed by my superiors to auction off this Rocamora in the interests of the state... Hey there! And who might you be?”

“Please forgive me,” said the new arrival. “Am I in the right place? The auction of Rocamora homestead, is it here?”

“It is,” said the bailiff and the shire-reeve in unison.

“But there aren’t many prospective buyers,” said the newcomer, looking around the empty room. “Just me. That means it won’t go for much above the asking price, will it?”

“Looks like that,” confirmed Jupiter Mello indifferently. “Then we may

begin. Your name, for formalities' sake?"

"Timur Voronoff."

Something was happening in the isolated croft. A woman's cries and laments, and the barking of a dog could be heard from a distance. Geralt rode closer.

A dog was lying beside a well with its throat cut. Another was running around the farmyard, barking. Outside the cottage, on a bench carved from a single tree log, was sitting or rather half-lying, a sturdy peasant with a bloody rag wrapped around his head. Beside him stood a peasant woman in an apron, waving her arms and lamenting incessantly. A teenaged boy in a linen shirt was glowering at Geralt. He had the red mark of whiplash on his swollen face.

"They killed my man, all cut up he is!" yelled the woman. "Is there no punishment for such rogues! How can the good earth bear such as them, devil's spawn!"

"What happened?" Geralt asked, still mounted. "Was there a raid?"

"Aye, there was, good sir, there was! Brigands from hell, may the plague have 'em! One maid and two strapping fellows! The maid was freckled like a turkey's egg, and one of the fellows had a lopsided nose. They rode into the yard like they owned it, without so much as a bye-your-leave, and started watering their horses. The dog barked at them, so they upped and killed him. The lad sprang forward to save the dog and they licked him with a horsewhip. My man there went at them with a hatchet, meaning to chase 'em away—well that vile wench, she struck him in the head with a sword... Look for yourself, sir... Will he live or not, who knows? Why, sir, such disgraceful rogues, where is the punishment... A witcher is what's needed... A witcher! And they say one was hung in the prison at Sturefors. Has it come to this, master? They lock a witcher in the prison and hang him, and brigands like these ride freely around the land, maiming folk?"

The wounded peasant grunted and groaned. The peasant woman took up her lament again. After a moment's thought, Geralt fished a vial of Golden Oriole from his casket. And handed it to the woman.

"For his wound," he instructed. "Pour it on each time you change his

dressing. Ought to help.”

“Thanks be to you, good master!”

After a day of fast riding, Geralt rode onto a hill and saw from a distance those brigands from hell, those disgraceful rogues, for whom, as the crofter’s wife claimed, there was no punishment and whom the earth had no business bearing. The woman with the fair plait, on a grey horse. And the two bruisers in the brigandines. One of them, Geralt would have bet, had a broken, crooked nose.

The three of them were heading north, riding their horses hard.

Geralt reined Roach in, taking his time to descend the hill. He was happy for the three riders to draw away. He didn’t want them to catch on he was tracking them. He wasn’t afraid of losing their trail.

He guessed—or was actually certain—he knew where they were headed.

The priestess Assumpta of Rivia had already been kneeling before the alabaster statue of the goddess Melitele for several hours. It never even occurred to any of the younger priestesses to disturb her in any way. Nenneke, Flavia, Ailidh and Zdravka remained silent, kneeling on prie-dieus. While praying, the Mother Assumpta entered a trance and it was believed she was in mental contact with the goddess. Whether that was true or not, it didn’t make any difference. The priestesses profoundly believed it, and nothing was impossible for that kind of faith.

The candles were already burning low in festoons of wax and the dawn was already lighting up the stained-glass windows when the Mother Assumpta rose from her knees.

“Danger,” she said to the younger priestesses. “We are in danger. Keep the wicket gate locked, permanently locked, by day and night. And don’t admit any strangers.”

Before nightfall, after sunset, just before dusk, he saw Baba Yaga gliding through the forest in a large, wooden mortar, sweeping away her tracks with

a besom. The creature flitted close by, and for a moment he saw her huge teeth bared in a grin.

Baba Yaga was heading towards the village—Geralt had already heard the barking of dogs and the clinking of shepherd's bells coming from there. Somebody in that village—most probably a child—was in danger. The village was in need of a defender.

But Geralt was hurrying northwards. He was afraid even to think he might arrive too late.

Geralt passed the town of Spynham early the next morning. For a moment, he looked at the slender tower on the town hall and the birds circling it. Then he rode on.

The goddess Melitele was regarded by those who still believed in her as the protector of women, as their refuge and hope. Of all women, regardless of age, position or origin. And regardless of their profession. So it came as no surprise that an effigy of their patron—a small, golden figure of the goddess in her pregnant, maternal aspect, with her belly emphasised—was kept in Lorelei, the celebrated house of disrepute in the town of Spynham. No one remembered how the figure came to be in the whorehouse. But it was protected and very seldom taken out of its hiding place. There had to be a very important reason to do so.

That day, there was.

Pampinea Monteforte lit a candle and placed it in front of the figure.

“O Goddess,” she said softly. “Ensure that the witcher Preston Holt finds well-deserved repose in the other world. Give him an abundance in the other world of everything he had little or none of in this life. And if and however he sinned, forgive him and absolve his sins. No one in this world is without sin.”

Zoë, Fervida and Hippolyta, the girls from Lorelei, stood alongside with heads bowed. Zoë suddenly went closer, and placed another candle before the figure of the goddess.

“That...” she said, coughing slightly on seeing Pampinea's enquiring

glance. “That is for the other witcher... The young one.”

“But I believe he’s alive, isn’t he?” gasped Pampinea.

“Just to be on the safe side...” whispered Zoë.

They all bowed their heads. The goddess gazed on them with her golden eyes.

Geralt reached the crossroads before evening. Helped by a raven, he recognised it at once. This time there wasn’t a whole flock, just a single bird. It was circling above the crossroads and croaking.

Had Geralt been more experienced, or if he’d listened more carefully or pondered more deeply, he might have discerned a warning in the raven’s cawing. *Go back*, croaked the raven. *Don’t ride north, for danger lurks there. Go back.*

But for Geralt, the cawing was just cawing. Geralt didn’t hear the warning it contained. He urged Roach on and rode.

Northwards.

The raven cawed.

The man lying bloodied by the side of the road had been smashed violently in the head with a bludgeon or a mace and slashed across his collar bone and chest with a sword.

Geralt rode closer, and looked down at him without dismounting.

The dead man looked like a trapper. The unhitched wain pushed off the road was laden with snares, gins, traps and other paraphernalia of the man’s trade. It was surprising that several bunches of expensive pelts: beaver, fox and marten, were lying on the wain. Whoever had murdered the trapper had clearly not done so with the aim of robbing him.

Had Geralt racked his brain intensively, perhaps he would have guessed why the trapper had died and what among his possessions was of use to the murderers. And had he done so, he would have avoided great misfortune.

But Geralt didn’t. He urged on his horse.

Towards the north. In the direction of the town of Frankthal.

And the temple of the goddess Melitele in Elsborg.

Beyond the town of Frankthal, in the valley of the same name, the beech and oak woods had already partly donned autumn hues, contrasting vividly with the dark green of pines and firs. A stream meandered along the bottom of the valley, and in one of its wide bends could be seen the walled complex of Elsborg, the home of the temple of the goddess Melitele.

A grove of white-trunked birches, a few furlongs from the temple, concealed the ruins of an abandoned farm: a small, derelict brick building and the cheerless remains of wooden outbuildings. It was there that the three riders Geralt was tracking had chosen to rest, and since it was growing dark, were probably planning to stay for the night.

Geralt stopped not far away, in beechwoods.

The time for a decision had come.

There are three of them, thought Geralt, looking at the ruins, among which flickered the flames of a campfire. *Three, and Artamon called one of them a master swordsman. Will I cope?*

He decided to wait until dawn. *Even if one of the three is awake and keeping guard, everyone grows drowsy just before the dawn. Surprise will give me my best chance*, he thought.

He waited. A long time.

A thin band of light appeared over the horizon. The glow of dawn.

Geralt stood up and drew his sword.

He was moving soundlessly, in spite of which their horses must have sensed him, for one of them snorted and stamped its hoof. But that was the only reaction.

The glow of the dying campfire illuminated a breach, a hole gaping in a ruined wall. He directed his steps there. He entered the breach, cautiously passing fragments of bricks. He took one more step. And that step was his downfall.

He stepped on something metal. The jaws of a gin trap snapped shut and seized him by the calf, the sharp teeth penetrating his legging. The pain made him sit down, he dropped his sword and grabbed the jaws in both

hands to try and wrench them open. He couldn't, the iron was gripping too powerfully, the spring wouldn't yield. Just at that moment, somebody leaped out of their hiding place, caught the trap by a chain and tugged it, dragging Geralt across the ground. Geralt arranged his fingers into a Sign, but that same somebody kicked him hard in the elbow and unbalanced him. Two others dashed from the darkness and the witcher came under a hail of blows from iron-bound cudgels. He was struck in the head several times. He was hit in the arm as he raised it to shield himself and heard the bone crunch. He was whacked in the fingers and they immediately went limp. The pain befogged his eyes.

Somebody struck the jaw of the gin with their cudgel, driving the metal teeth deeper into his calf, intensifying the pain. Then one more time in order to reach the bone. Geralt screamed involuntarily. Another cudgel slammed him on the collar bone, another in the ribs, another on the knee, another on his hand again, on his injured fingers. And on his head. And again on his head, very hard. He saw stars, and then the world disintegrated into a shimmering mosaic.

"Enough," said Meritxell. "Enough, or you'll kill him. If you haven't already. Is he still breathing?"

"Aye, he is," said Cibor Ponti, tearing the medallion from the witcher's neck. "He's alive."

"We need a little blood," said Beauregard Frick. "For better effect."

"Headwounds bleed profusely," said Ponti, with the expression of an expert.

"That's worth knowing," said Meritxell, kneeling on the witcher's chest and slashing him broadly across the forehead with a knife, just beneath the hairline. Indeed, blood immediately pumped from the wound, swelled into a wave, and gushed out over his face and neck.

"Will this do?" asked Meritxell, standing up.

"Perfectly," said Frick. "Right, onto the mule with him. Bind him somehow, so he doesn't fall off."

"And to the wicket gate, to the wicket gate. Before it gets fully light."

“You didn’t keep him out of harm’s way, you morons,” said Marchioness Cervia Herrada Graffiacane, coughing almost uncontrollably as she banged her cane against the floor, almost falling over as she did so.

“You let my Artamon die,” she said, still coughing. “It’s because of you, because of your incompetence and stupidity that all that’s left of my Artamon is this urn...”

Meritxell, Cibor Ponti and Beauregard Frick listened obediently. None of them lifted their bowed heads to follow the gaze of the marchioness and look at the urn containing the ashes of the sorcerer Artamon of Asguth on the mantelpiece. The urn was made of black-coloured majolica, and was decorated with the sorcerer’s coat of arms—three gold birds on a blue field, *d’azur à trois merlettes d’or*.

“Indeed,” said the marchioness, gasping and coughing, “I ought to have cast you out... You morons, you ought to have been driven away... But now you have the chance to atone for your guilt... Show what you can do. Listen to my orders!”

The three bowed even lower. The marchioness fell silent and banged her cane on the floor.

“Artamon’s legacy,” she mumbled toothlessly, “must be redeemed. That temple in Elsborg and those priestesses skivvying for the witchers... My Artamon wanted them all to die a terrible death. And that is how they must die, by iron and fire... And that stripling witcher along with them... So, listen to my orders...”

“Open the gate, pious ladies,” moaned Meritxell, sounding truly beside herself. “We bring a wounded witcher, a young witcher, dreadfully injured! We need help!”

“Let us in now!” said Beauregard Frick, who could also have had a career in the theatre. “The witcher is barely breathing, without help he will die!”

A tiny window opened in the wicket gate and somebody looked out. Geralt, set on the trapper’s mule, gathered all his strength to shout, to warn them, but Cibor Ponti, who was holding him, tightened a noose around his neck to prevent him speaking.

“Open up, good ladies,” moaned Meritxell exaggeratedly. “The witcher is bleeding terribly!”

The bar of the gate grated and scratched, and the bolt clanked. Geralt, almost losing consciousness, groped with his injured fingers for the amulet, the metal disk the size of a one-crown coin, in a little pocket of his belt. Gathering what was left of his strength, he pressed three times on the protuberance, the semi-precious stone, the heliodor, also called a golden beryl.

The hinges creaked; the gate began to slowly open. Meritxell and Frick’s hands moved towards their sword hilts.

Suddenly, they heard a loud, seemingly insect-like buzzing, quickly rising to a penetrating crescendo. In front of the temple gate appeared a luminescent oval, and inside it loomed a vague outline. And a moment later, from the oval emerged a short woman dressed in male attire.

Vrai Natteravn realised at once, understood what was happening.

A kind of luminescent fog with tiny sparks like fireflies swarming inside it gushed from the enchantress’s raised hands. Vrai yelled out a spell and the fog shrouded and enveloped first the horses’ muzzles and then the riders’ heads.

All three horses reared up, two of them tossed their riders to the ground. The mule carrying Geralt kicked powerfully, however, and walloped Beauregard Frick’s horse in the flank with both hind hooves. Frick managed to stay in the saddle, but was already yelling, thrashing wildly around, trying with both hands to ward off the fog and the fireflies attacking him viciously like angry bees. He finally gave up, reined around his crazed horse and galloped off yelling into the darkness. The two riderless horses dashed after him, neighing piercingly. Cibor Ponti and Meritxell, lying on the ground, were screaming in terror and pain, brandishing their arms confusedly, trying to drive away the fog and the tiny sparks stinging their faces and ears. Finally, they both fled on foot and ran so swiftly they almost caught up with the horses galloping after Frick. Apart from the kicking, the trapper’s mule carrying Geralt kept calm. In spite of that, Geralt was hanging and would have fallen, but Vrai Natteravn rushed forward and held him up just in time, calling loudly for help. The temple wicket gate opened and some priestesses appeared.

But Geralt didn’t see that. He had drifted off somewhere, somewhere

very far away.



A time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up that which is planted; a time to kill, and a time to heal.

The Book of Ecclesiastes 3:2

He awoke in darkness, lying motionless. With a painfully dry and swollen throat.

And he awoke in pain. The pain shot through him like an arrowhead, in piercing, pulsating spasms radiating from his legs to his spine, his skull, and his eyes.

At times he was conscious. At times he wasn't, but dreamed he was.

At times he thought that he'd died. Then he was suddenly resurrected and thought he was about to die. Or if not right away then tomorrow. Later, the pain came back, and he wished he could die. Wished for the pain to stop, even if through death. For it to be tomorrow. Tomorrow.

And then tomorrow came and it started over again.

He remembered little of that morning.

Somebody was groaning, choking on a groan. It took some time before he grasped that it was he who was making the noise. There was movement around him, he sensed it, shadows flickered in his eyes, there was the flashing of quivering, undulating light, he smelled the wax and smoke of burning candles, stifled by the acrid odour of medicines and elixirs. And the scent of perfumed soaps.

He felt the painful hardness of the table he was lying on under his back. Then the hardness suddenly yielded and he drifted off into the depths, falling, sinking. He was soothed as he sank, for the pain would cease then. For a while.

Around him was that undulating light. And voices. Indistinct voices, somehow distorted, like an echo from under water—or from above water, as though he were submerged.

“Everyone out, it’s too crowded! Only those that know anything about healing can stay!”

“That must mean me.”

“Wonderful. You other ladies should leave; you aren’t needed here.”

“Come on girls, let’s go and pray.”

“Very well, mother.”

“Why, how they’ve butchered him... And it was people; not monsters.”

“For this young witcher, instead of fighting monsters, keeps provoking people. At times, he’s on top, then they... Anyway, it doesn’t matter.”

“Give me your hands, we’ll disinfect them. What’s that, surgical spirit? Pour a little into a glass.”

“There’s no haemorrhaging...”

“Unless it’s internal, we’ll find out later. Feel his skull. Do you sense any depressions? Thank goodness, his head has been badly battered, but I think the skull is intact. But why those convulsions?”

“Look at his eyes. There are disconjugate movements of the pupils...”

“Ice! We need ice, plenty of it... Stop! There’s no time. Give me that pail, I’ll magick the water into ice.”

“I can’t feel his pulse! Shit, I can’t feel his pulse!”

“Listen more closely. He’s a witcher. Twenty beats a minute is normal, ten to fifteen after taking elixirs.”

“The wound on his forehead is deep, we need to sew it up. I’ll wash and anaesthetise it, you put the sutures in. Do you know how?”

“Of course I do.”

“Let’s focus on his arm. The ulna is intact. The radius is broken, displacement has occurred. I’ll have to set it. Help me... You’re good at it. You’re skilled. Have you done it before?”

“Indeed, dear mistress, I have. More than once.”

“What happened to him?”

“He’s fainted. From the pain.”

“I didn’t manage to anaesthetise him... Well, he’s off. Now we’ll have to immobilise the arm. Are there splints and bandages here?”

“Indeed. This is an infirmary. We have everything.”

“His fingers and hands are awfully bruised; they’re swelling before my eyes. But I don’t think they’re broken... His wrists are also intact... But we need to dress them. A dressing, please.”

“What about his leg? How did he get that wound? Has he been bitten?”

“Yes, but by iron. Iron teeth on both sides of the calf. I’ve seen wounds like that before. It was a gin trap for wolves. The tibia’s unbroken...”

“But the fibula’s broken. It’s swelling up rapidly...”

“The shaft of the bone has been fractured. It’s totally crushed... We may be forced to amputate...”

“Don’t even think about it! Use magic. And this elixir.”

“What is it?”

“Don’t ask, just use it.”

“Whatever you say, madam priestess. Now I’ll try to knit the bone, ligate the blood vessels and heal the muscle tissue. Don’t disturb me for a moment, I must focus, it’s an exacting spell...”

“Blood is dripping from your nose...”

“Wipe it, please. My hands need to be free.”

“Well, we’ve done what we could. Time will tell. But I’m hopeful. The body is young, and on top of that he’s a witcher. And he’ll receive first-rate care here, I’ve seen for myself... For we’ve done well, honourable priestess. It went well. Give me that surgical spirit.”

“My name is Nenneke.”

“I’m pleased to meet you. And I am Vrai Natteravn. Healer.”

“And a first-rate one, let me add. An expert, indeed.”

“I had a first-rate assistant. I shall remain here, with your permission, for a few more days. We’ll see how things are when the swelling comes down.”

“You’re welcome. You know the witcher well, I surmise?”

“I made his acquaintance, he worked up a debt of gratitude with me, so to speak. It’s my chance to repay it. I’d have preferred it not to happen, but why, it did. I was afraid of that. This witcher attracts trouble like a magnet.”

“Amen to that.”

“Nenneke?”

“Yes.”

“What you used... That decoction... Foxglove, elderflower, lily of the valley, and anything else? What was it?”

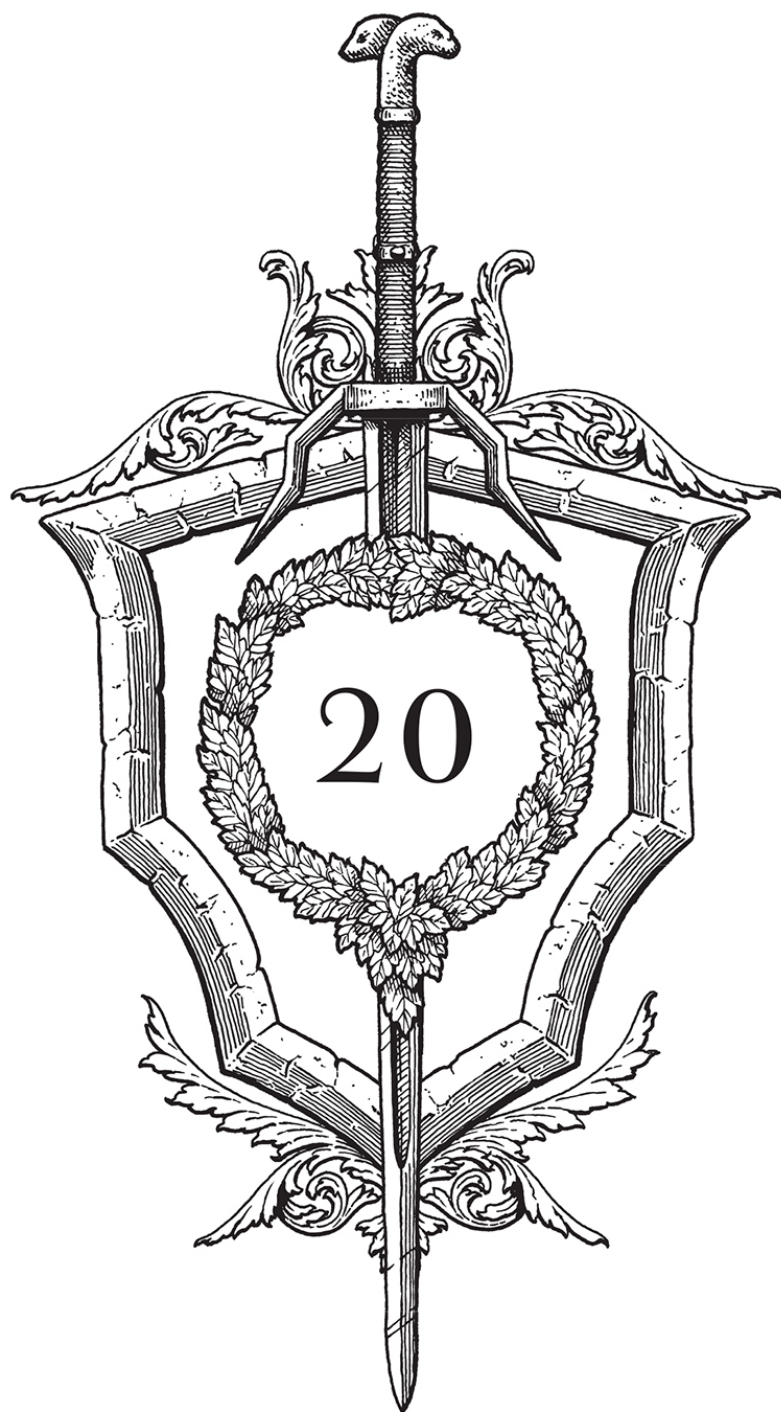
“A witcher elixir. It’s called Black Gull.”

“Do you make it? Here, in the temple?”

“We do. After our shared medical adventure, I’ve taken a liking to you, Vrai. But I still won’t give you the recipe.”

At times, he thought he’d died. And then the pain brought him back to life.

And then tomorrow came and it all began again.



*All is not lost; the unconquerable Will,
And study of revenge, immortal hate,
And courage never to submit or yield:
And what is else not to be overcome?*

John Milton, *Paradise Lost*

You could sense the snow in the air. The witcher took a deep breath—it was as though he'd been stabbed in the lungs.

It's still cold, he thought. *March, the snows are melting, but it's still cold.*

He wrapped himself up in a thick cloak, initially the only men's clothing the temple could offer him. The cloak—of unknown provenance—had been found in a corner of the cellar. It had seen better days. It looked as though it had served as a tarpaulin for a coal wagon for several years, and for the next few had lined a kennel. But it had been laundered, didn't fit too badly, and gave decent protection from the cold.

Of his own clothing, almost nothing was saved. Almost everything—including his beautiful silver-studded jacket and leather leggings—had to be cut off him with scissors, that day the previous September when he had ended up in a sorry state on the temple's treatment table. It took some time before the priestesses gathered together some clothes and boots for him, buying them in the town. Several of the priestesses were skilled with a needle and thread and made alterations to what didn't fit. They had plenty of time to do so. The witcher only managed to drag himself out of bed halfway through December. And afterwards, there were long weeks of healing and convalescing.

He didn't want to remember certain things from that September, nor from the following weeks; he wanted to banish them from his memory. The pain, the humiliating immobilisation in the splints, the braces and the dressings preventing him from carrying out the simplest actions unaided. Beginning with the most banal like being fed with a spoon and given drinks through a straw, to the less banal, but even more humiliating, when Nenneke or one of the priestesses took hold of his penis to guide it into a glass urine vessel. He didn't want to recall waking up with his lips as dry as sawdust, tongue like a pine board and saliva like drying carpenter's glue. He didn't want to recall the agony of being turned over from his back to his belly in order to prevent bedsores.

Later, he would often go outside, not only to carry out rehabilitation exercises. He didn't want to and couldn't face looking at the bed where he had spent thirteen weeks—the most wretched of his life—without revulsion.

Water from melting snow dripped from the branches.

As he was walking to the stable, Roach greeted him with her usual loud snort. Geralt patted the mare on the neck, her muscles twitching beneath the skin. He had recovered his horse a week after the incident, on the eve of the autumn Equinox. The three brigands had in fact stolen the mare along with all of Geralt's belongings, but a week later, the chestnut had suddenly shown up outside the temple wicket gate without a saddle or the rest of her trappings, with only the tattered remains of her rope halter. The witcher, at that time bound to his sickbed, learned of it much later, when Roach was already in the temple stable, feeding on temple oats. There was no way of finding out what the mare's story was, what she had experienced or how the hell she had found her way back to the wicket gate.

The joy at recovering Roach greatly eased Geralt's sorrow at the loss of his swords and medallion, as well as the horse's trappings and saddlebags, but in particular his witcher's elixirs contained in them. The priestesses promised to restore his full complement of elixirs—every last one of them—from the temple laboratory. They laboured over things for an entire month, but, as they had sworn, their efforts were successful. Geralt never had any reason to doubt it.

The loss of his swords and medallion was painful.

He walked along the lane among leafless trees towards the soap workshop. Several novitiates were working there at the vats, which were giving off the scent of chamomile, rosemary, lily of the valley and other fragrant ingredients that the witcher couldn't identify. The novitiates chatted gaily and laughed as they worked. There was a palpably cheerful mood in the temple. Not without reason. The expulsion order placed on the temple by the local authorities had been postponed for an indefinite period. According to the official version, the authorities had taken into consideration the worsening state of health of the Mother Assumpta of Rivia. According to the unofficial version, it was thanks to the intervention by the Margrave of the Upper March, conveyed to the local authorities by the Commandant of the March's security service, Elena Fiachra de Mersault. Commandant de Mersault also broke up the citizens' protests

outside the temple and—word had it—strictly forbade the authorities from organising them in the future. She visited the temple, enquired after Geralt's convalescence, wished the Mother Assumpta good health and gladly accepted a gift in the form of a box of soaps from the temple.

He heard a cough behind his back. He turned around. Priestess Nenneke usually had a very severe expression on her face, more suitable for somebody much older than her fewer than thirty years. Geralt had had enough time to accustom himself to it.

"Cold, isn't it?"

"It's getting warmer."

"But slowly. Let's go inside. I've got something to tell you."

"It's gradually getting warmer," she began, having barely entered. "The snow has almost entirely melted. The roads are passable. I took advantage of that and went to Spynham. Can you guess where?"

Geralt could, but said nothing.

"Madam Pampinea Monteforte remembers you fondly," the priestess continued, allowing herself a faint smirk. "I'd say she holds you in grateful memory. How did you earn such gratitude, eh? Ho, ho, Geralt, the young things of Lorelei are one thing, but to win the, hmm... affection of the madam herself, a person with long years of experience, well, well."

Geralt didn't react, sensing provocation and trickery. He didn't believe that Nenneke had found out the truth. Madam Pampinea firmly insisted on discretion, and had exacted a pledge from the witcher that he wouldn't breathe a word to anyone about their pleasant and clandestine dalliance.

Nenneke maintained the expression of a very-well informed but tactful person; somebody that knows, but won't say. Geralt didn't even flicker an eyelid.

"And on top of that," said the priestess, not giving up, "Mistress Vrai Natteravn, hurrying to help you on wings of magic and saving you with her medical artistry. You must have done something at some time to earn that, I presume. Some good advice for the future, my lad. Keep clear of sorceresses. The further away the better, believe me."

Geralt didn't bat an eyelid that time, either. Nenneke was clearly disappointed.

"Let's, however, return to Spynham and the Lorelei bordello," she began. "I had reason to visit the establishment. Such places are extremely

rich founts of information. Gentlemen can be most talkative in female company; in the sheets, plenty of them brag about their knowledge of secrets in order to boost their importance and status. Thus, when you wish to learn about matters which are whispered about in corridors, speed to the nearest brothel. Would you like to hear what I found out there?”

“I would.”

“I asked, as you can probably guess, about Marchioness Cervia Herrada Graffiacane, the person, who according to your suspicions, was behind the assault on you and the planned attack on the temple. So, we must turn the clocks back well over sixty years, to the later period of King Dagread’s reign. The marchioness—at that time only some Miss Cervia or other and without a title—had an affair with Artamon of Asguth, a mighty sorcerer from the Academy in Ban Ard. She was then seventeen; how old he was, no one knew. Several years later, Cervia was wed to the old Marquess de Graffiacane, but she never broke off her liaison with Artamon, continuing to tryst with him. The marquess later died, and the dowager marchioness gave birth to a child. Officially a posthumous child, he was the rightful son and heir of the marquess, bearing the title of ‘count.’ But it was common knowledge he was Artamon’s bastard.”

“The sorcerer? He fathered a son?”

“It’s not nearly as rare as you think, but also not common. Hence the rumours that the marchioness’s pregnancy was the result of magical experiments conducted by Artamon.

“The young count was the apple of the dowager marchioness’s eye and the sorcerer’s pet. And as is usually the case, grew up to be a scoundrel and a good-for-nothing who was allowed to do anything and whose misdemeanours went unpunished. And there were plenty of them. The whelp took great pleasure in starting fights and got into altercations and brawls. The authorities turned a blind eye, no one dared to risk offending the marchioness, who was a regular visitor at the royal court; or the powerful sorcerer.”

“I imagine it ended badly.”

“Very, actually. One time, the count and two of his comrades started a fracas in a tavern outside Ard Carraigh. A patron who was present at the time, quite an elderly man, severely admonished and chastened the youngsters. They apparently heeded his words and left. But when the patron

went out, they fell on him, meaning to rough him up. They chose the wrong person. The man, it turned out, although old, knew his stuff. He gave the three of them a hiding. The comrades fled, holding bloodied noses, while the count attacked the man with a knife and wounded him. The man—it turned out—had been holding back until then. Only when wounded did he show what he was capable of. He gave the count a terrible hiding, beating him black and blue. With disastrous results. Neither physicians nor magic could help him. The young count died without ever regaining consciousness.”

“And the elderly man?”

“He vanished without trace. And was searched for high and low, because the marchioness was mad with fury and used her influence wherever she could. Artamon likewise. And then somebody started a rumour that the fellow had been a witcher. Whether he was or not, no one knew, but the marchioness and the sorcerer unleashed a campaign to discredit all witchers. They even tendered a petition to the king labelling witchers as criminals and outlawing them. The king—who at that time was Eoin, Dagread’s son—naturally refused. Primo, there was no proof that the killer had indeed been a witcher. Secundo, collective responsibility cannot be applied. Tertio, monsters were bedevilling settlers in the neighbouring marches and witchers were needed.

“But the marchioness and Artamon didn’t let it go, continuing to incriminate witchers for the death of their dear son, and clandestinely spread scurrilous rumours about them. Then several years later, the sorcerer wrote and anonymously published his magnum opus—*The Description of a Monstrum or a Witcher*. The consequences of which you know. Moreover, it’s almost certain that it was Artamon and the marchioness that financed the attack on Kaer Morhen. And armed the mob.

“The results are there for all to see,” sighed the priestess. “Preston Holt found out about Artamon, probably from one of the three men he killed. Artamon departed this life and the inconsolable marchioness planned her revenge. Holt met his end on the scaffold, but both you and our temple were also supposed to take a beating. The old hag did it cunningly, because there’s no proof. The fact that during Holt’s execution you saw one of those brigands in her retinue isn’t enough.”

“It’s enough for me,” drawled Geralt.

“I don’t like the sound of that,” said Nenneke, frowning. “I don’t like what you’re saying, my lad. Revenge only brings joy to vapid and primitive minds. Don’t forget that.”

“It’s hard to forget it. My whole body still hurts.”

“You’re convalescing. Not yet fully recovered. I told you it’s not time to finish the treatment.”

“It is. High time. I’m leaving tomorrow. But before that I’d like to... Is the Mother Assumpta still infirm?”

“Sadly, she is,” said Nenneke and once again her face suddenly became severe. “And sadly, no improvements can be seen. And unfortunately, nothing has changed regarding other matters. The Mother Assumpta still doesn’t want to see you.”

He said nothing for a long time.

“She still...” he suddenly asked. “She still hasn’t said why?”

“She didn’t reveal the reason,” said the priestess, looking right through him. “But before she fell ill, when you were lying barely conscious, she prayed several times and went into a trance. And she sees various things then. I don’t know and don’t want to know what she saw. I don’t want to at all. You, I’d bet my life, also don’t want to at all. So, let’s restrict ourselves to the fact. The Mother Assumpta doesn’t want to see you. And that’s that. I trust what she asked me to tell you will suffice. It’s a few words. Which, I advise, you should take to heart.”

“What words were they?”

“You are at a crossroads, Geralt.”

At a crossroads, thought the witcher. *At the crossroads of the ravens.*

“I’m leaving tomorrow,” he said dryly.

“As you wish,” she responded, just as dryly. “I shan’t stop you.”

The next day, early in the morning, Nenneke walked with him all the way to the wicket gate.

“I have a gift for you,” she said, interrupting the long silence.

“What is it?”

“A band. A headband. With the purpose of hiding that ugly scar on your forehead. A scar like that is conspicuous, by the way; everybody remembers

it. And you, something tells me, would prefer not to be printed in anybody's memory. So wear the headband."

"Thank you."

"Perhaps I shouldn't ask, but I will," she said, looking him in the eyes. "Whither will the gods now lead you?"

"First of all..." said Geralt, in no hurry to reveal either his direction or goal. "First of all, I must call in at Belvoir..."

"You're not up to date." Nenneke, as usual, had guessed right. "Timur Voronoff has moved out of Belvoir. With his entire family. He purchased Holt's former estate and now lives there."

Geralt was surprised, but at the same time gladdened. He wouldn't have to take a roundabout route through the Western March. Rocamora was on his way.

"Thanks for everything. Thank the Mother Assumpta and all the others from me. And bid them farewell."

"May I say a word on parting?"

"Of course," he said, climbing into the saddle. "Of course, Nenneke."

"Revenge," she said, opening the wicket gate, "only brings joy to vapid and primitive minds."

"I know."

"Revenge will place you outside the law."

"I know."

"So go and—"

"Yes?"

"—kill those fuckers."



A merchant was riding through a dense, dark forest; he strayed for a long time and after night fell, became trapped in a swamp with no help at hand. Saddened, he began to despair, when suddenly an evil spirit in human form appeared before him. "Be not saddened, fellow!" he said to the merchant. "I shall haul you from the mud and show you the way home, but under the condition that what you have at home, but know not about, will become mine."

Lucjan Siemieński, *Polish, Ruthenian and Lithuanian Tales and Legends*

At the entrance gate to Rocamora, Geralt was greeted by the same huge bruiser in a cloak made from a large number of rabbit pelts, the erstwhile gatekeeper in Belvoir. The man took care of the witcher's horse, glanced at his back, and was visibly surprised not to see the sword hilts. He handed the reins to a stable lad who came running over, a boy of around ten years old.

Three children were playing noisily in the courtyard, busy sailing toy boats made of bark in an enormous puddle, evidently what was left of the melted snow. They were accompanied by a striped cat. It was the cat that saw the witcher first, miaowed and ran away. The children raised their heads. The youngest began to cry its heart out.

A fair-haired woman came out of the front door to the main house, calling the children loudly to her. She ran over to them, scooped the youngest up under one arm, grabbed the next by the hand and urged on the oldest with a cry, dashing back towards the house, almost falling down and tripping on her skirt. Still yelling, she made it to the door and slammed it behind her. A moment later, the door opened and Timur Voronoff came out. He wasn't wearing his embroidered doublet with metallised thread, fastened with cloth-covered buttons, but a simple, grey, woollen waistcoat.

"Welcome, witcher. It's a pleasure to see you healthy."

"Is something the matter?" asked Geralt gesturing with his head towards the door. "Was that because of me? Did I do anything wrong?"

"No, nothing," said Voronoff, grimacing. "But it's difficult to fight against prejudices... Particularly deep-seated ones. A superstition is doing the rounds. That witchers allegedly snatch children. Or that they suddenly appear to claim what's theirs and demand that a child is given up, because its father made a careless promise... Give me what you have now, but what you don't know about. A surprise, do you understand? You know those legends, don't you?"

"I've heard this and that."

"I've also heard this and that," said the agent, snorting. "You may laugh, but I found out that my youngest was on the way after returning from a long journey, quite unexpectedly. He was the thing I didn't know about, and so on. I hadn't promised anything to anybody, however, and not to any

witchers. But explain that to a woman. So, let's use the servants' entrance to spare my wife any unwanted excitement."

In Holt's day, there was always a member of staff in the great hall. At that moment there wasn't anybody. And there was a bigger mess than previously. Geralt sat down on the bench that Voronoff indicated, and the latter left. He soon returned, with a long bundle under one arm.

"Holt's swords," he declared tersely. "And this is his medallion. He wanted it all to go to Kaer Morhen."

Geralt unwrapped the bundle. He took hold of the silver sword with the gorgeous, round pommel. He unsheathed the blade. It glowed, even in the semi-darkness of the great hall. He had once had a good look at the sword. And knew the runic marks etched into the blade and their meanings.

*Dubhenn haern am glândeal,
morc'h am fhean aiesin.
My glow will cut through the darkness,
my brightness will disperse the gloom.*

Holt's medallion portrayed a viper's head with large fangs.

"Take this and keep it safe," said Geralt, handing the medallion to the agent. "For now. The swords I'll take. I need them."

"It was Holt's wish—"

"I know what his wish was. Heard it from his own mouth. I shall fulfil it. When the time comes. Did Holt leave anything else?"

"A letter. For you."

The letter was sealed with wax bearing an impression of the viper's head from Holt's medallion. Geralt stowed the envelope away in his jacket.

Voronoff coughed, took a handkerchief from his pocket and wiped his mouth.

"News reached me," he said, "about what befell you on the eve of the Equinox. And because you've showed up here a full six months later, I conclude that the results were serious. While the expression on your face shows me I know why you need Holt's swords. It may thus interest you that the Dowager Marchioness de Graffiacane released from her service three persons known to you, whom she had previously sheltered in her palazzo,

giving as the reason their criminal exploits, about which she, the marchioness, had allegedly known nothing. Prefect da Cunha immediately took an interest in the three dismissed individuals, and they, evidently warned, fled, leaving no traces. Finding them won't be easy, if it's possible at all."

"Where there's a will, there's a way," said Geralt, screwing up his face.

"Indeed. In folk proverbs."

"They call the woman Meritxell. And the other two?"

"Cibor Ponti and Beauregard Frick. Ponti is the one with the broken nose. Frick—which may interest you—made himself known as a master of swordsmanship."

"Any other hints?"

"I suspect they've gone in different directions," said Voronoff, wiping his mouth with his handkerchief. "And fled from Kaedwen. They will, however, be searching for sources of income, no doubt each on their own account. Places exist where people like them look for employment. I would interest myself in such places. Do you have any resources at your disposal?"

"Monetary ones? Not really."

"I'll give you fifty marks in cash and one thousand two hundred in traveller's cheques. That's how much I owe Holt after covering some costs he asked to be covered. It mainly concerned compensation for the old staff of Rocamora. Incidentally, the estate isn't called Rocamora any longer. Now it's Sunny Valley."

"Nice enough. Now that Holt is no more, what will you do, if I may ask?"

"One may always ask. I make a living as a commercial representative. But if someone new appears from Kaer Morhen, I'll gladly also take up being a witcher's agent. That applies to you, too, if you wish."

"For now, I don't. Farewell, Voronoff. Thanks for everything."

Holt's letter was written on paper of high quality, pleasant to the touch. The handwriting was clear, as though it had been printed, the ink hadn't soaked in or spilled anywhere.

Geralt,

If you're reading this letter, it means I am no longer among the living. So I have to confess my crime to you—or rather crimes. I wasn't able to do that looking you in the eyes, it will be easier for me with the help of ink.

I, my young witcher, knew for a long time who the author of The Monstrum was, whose coat of arms featured the martlet birds and who wrote the dedication on the copy owned by Master Sergeant Margulies, whom I killed. I knew it was Artamon of Asguth. I meant to kill him. But since my worsening illness hindered—or downright precluded—that aim, I decided to find someone else to carry it out.

Yes, you've guessed right. Our meeting in Neuhold didn't occur by chance and I had a hidden purpose when I rescued you from your difficulties. I purposely and with hidden intent gave you the offer at the crossroads of the ravens. Not without reason did I teach you ways to kill with your bare hands. And it was no accident that the booklet with the dedication came into your possession.

But finally, doubts arose in me. A blacksmith's domain is an anvil and a hammer, do you remember? A witcher's domain is to kill monsters. And punishing crimes is the domain of a shire-reeve and the courts. In the spring, let's be honest, I threw you out of Rocamora. I remember the expression in your eyes. But I had only one thing on my mind then. That I was rescuing you. Saving you. From becoming a killer, just like I was.

But it turns out destiny cannot be hoodwinked.

It wasn't you that killed the sorcerer. And it isn't you who should be punished for it.

I regret what I did.

Farewell,

Preston Holt

Geralt turned over the sheet of paper. There were several drawings on the back, and he examined them for a long time, unable initially to work out what they depicted. He finally understood. The figures, sketched with a few lines, portrayed swordsmen duelling. In the poses of feints and blows. One

figure, he realised, depicted a swordsman in passo largo, another parrying using a porta di ferro. The remaining ones demanded closer attention. In any case, the time for action had come.

He urged Roach onto the road. As usual, the mare yielded wonderfully to his horsemanship; all that was needed was a light pressure of the knees and a gentle touch on her neck with the reins.

The sky in the north darkened.

But he was heading south.

Ard Carraigh's main city gate was wide open, unguarded. Geralt rode in, bowing his head beneath the iron portcullis.

From the town square came the sound of clamour and music; actually, mainly the rhythmic beating of a drum. A parade of people singing and laughing suddenly emerged from a side street. The last person in the procession, a character in a comical three-horned cap, split off, stood against a wall and began to pee.

Geralt waited for him to finish.

"What's going on here?" he finally asked. "Some kind of festivity?"

"Don't you know?" The character in the hat hopped a few times, fastened up his britches and turned around. "Don't you know? Why, good sir, you are surely from somewhere distant? From foreign lands?"

"True, from foreign lands. And distant."

"It has to be so, otherwise you'd have known that indeed there is a great celebration and a feast for the whole capital, why, for the kingdom itself! It's nuptials, good sir, nuptials, and not just any old ones. Two once celebrated and feuding houses are reconciled, the Vaikinens with the Finnegans! The youngling Redfern, son of Count Gordon Finnegan, is today wedding the gorgeous Miss Ludmilla, daughter of Sirius Vaikinen, Margrave of the Lakeland March!"

"What news!"

"Indeed, indeed, and it's a great celebration! The whole capital is making merry, a great number of noblemen have gathered, there's dancing and merriment everywhere, mead and ale are flowing like water, the honourable brewer Grohot has ordered a hundred casks to be set up in the

town square!”

“The brewer Grohot.”

“The very same! For you ought to know, m’lord stranger, that the brewer’s son, young Master Primian, contributed greatly to the young ones’ happiness.”

“Contributed.”

“Indeed, he did. And he was named the happy couple’s best man! Come with us to the town square, you’ll see—”

“I shall, I shall in a moment. But for the moment show me the way, please—”

“I’ll be glad to! Whither?”

“To the Graffiacane palazzo.”

The Dowager Marchioness Cervia Herrada Graffiacane sent away the chamber maid, for she usually carried out the rest of her nightly ritual herself.

She lit an oil lamp on the plinth beside her bed. The light was necessary, for in the darkness of her bedchamber she might have difficulty finding the chamber pot which she had to use during the night, several times.

Sitting before a mirror, she combed what was left of her hair. She took a small crystal carafe from a bedside table and took a large gulp from it. As she did so, she smiled in reminiscence. The emerald-coloured liquid filling the carafe was a sleeping draught, distilled by the sorcerers of Ban Ard from one of the witcher elixirs obtained on the eve of the previous year’s Equinox by the marchioness’s hired thugs. The draught put her to sleep beautifully, also perhaps because the sorcerers laced it copiously with strong alcohol.

The marchioness lay down in bed. Only then—which was also part of the ritual—did she remove from her neck a diamond necklace and hang it on a stand designed for that purpose, beside numerous other necklaces, pendants and chokers. Among them, in a place of honour, hung a medallion depicting a wolf’s head baring its fangs. The marchioness toyed with the medallion, smiling once more. She fondly recalled the moment she had been given the medallion along with an assurance that the witcher who had

once worn it had been clubbed to death.

She fell asleep with the smile on her lips.

She didn't know what woke her. Perhaps a rustle, perhaps a breath of wind. She opened her eyes. And saw in front of her face the medallion, the wolf's head and its bared fangs. She saw a fist holding the medallion's chain.

And eyes with dilated, snake-like pupils.

The witcher surveyed her from above, without moving or uttering a sound.

The marchioness felt warmth and wetness beneath her and realised she had wet the bed in terror. She groaned, screwed up her eyes, and felt a dreadful tightness in her throat and chest.

When a moment later she opened her eyes, neither the witcher, nor the medallion were there. *I did it*, she thought, fighting the constriction in her throat, *he didn't do anything to me, he took fright and ran away. I'll get him yet*, she thought, *I'll make sure he regrets it...*

I'm still alive, she thought.

And died.



Note that you have to be either soft or harsh, because men take offense easily at small insults, but they can't react against harsh measures. When you offend someone, be sure they are incapable of revenge.

Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince*

It was drizzling, but the rain had been going on long enough for the narrow lanes of the river-port of Piana to transform into claggy mud. Here and there lay timber planks, meant in principle to allow people to move around the small town without the risk of getting stuck. The planks were, however, few and far between, and jumping from one to another reminded Geralt of Kaer Morhen and training “on the comb.”

After a dozen leaps, he finally found what he was looking for. A shack with a roof of mouldy thatch covered in moss and a stable abutting it. The entrance to the shack was decorated with a large bundle of straw.

Geralt pushed open the door, which was crooked and stiff, badly hung in the door frame. He took a deep breath and entered. He groped in the darkness and drew aside a hessian curtain stiff with filth. Inside, in the semi-darkness, weakly lit by cressets and candles, sat several men at tables. The innkeeper was wiping a mug with his apron behind a primitive bar.

Geralt hawked and spat on the floor. And waited.

“What do they call you?” the nearest of the men croaked after a lengthy pause, glowering evilly at Geralt from under bushy, grey eyebrows.

“Esau Kelly.”

“Why not. It’ll be your round after Lubodrog’s. Him, what’s sitting over there.”

“Right,” said Geralt, sitting down at a table in the corner. He was already familiar with the custom.

The meeting places for people searching for work as bodyguards were usually alehouses and usually extremely seedy, located in out-of-the-way places, in remote, nasty and dangerous quarters. The sign indicating its presence was a bunch of straw hung on the door.

After entering, the newcomer was struck, as though by a battering ram, by the pungent odour of third-rate beer, sweat, urine, garlic, cabbage, travel-worn footwraps, old boots and the devil only knows what else. One had to stomach it and enter confidently, signalling in so doing that one belonged to the profession.

The bodyguards had their own customs and habits, some of an almost ritual nature. When one entered an inn for the first time, one was supposed to spit copiously on the dirt floor strewn with sawdust. It was a sign of

affiliation to the guild. Anyone else trying to enter was discouraged. Occasionally very emphatically and very robustly.

Any visitors that demonstrated familiarity with the customs were allowed to make themselves at home. They were informed who was last in the queue to be hired and to buy the next round. Then you could do as you pleased. Or sit in the corner and do nothing. Geralt always chose the latter. After looking around, he would sit down and respect the customs.

Among the more outlandish of them included the general shout when someone sneezed of: “You’ve probably followed through!.” If anybody raised a toast to the king, one was supposed to stand and drink his health. Asking which king was considered an indiscretion, and was punished, usually verbally. In the case of using the latrine for a pee, if one was not alone at the time, one had to quickly utter the phrase: “The raven calls fains!,” and anyone who didn’t say it had their boots and trouser-legs pissed on.

The fraternity sat around in the bar, drinking heavily, chatting, reminiscing about past successes and failures, and money earned and lost, playing dice, dozing against the wall or with one’s head on the table, or sitting motionless and staring into space.

From time to time—extremely seldom—somebody would stick their head in and declare loudly how many persons were needed, for what and for how much. The lucky ones, whose turn it was, would leave, or withdraw in favour of the next person on the list, to wait for a better paying offer. It often happened that somebody left the inn and the queue, bored or bent on seeking their fortune somewhere else.

From time to time, a new person would show up. At those moments, Geralt wouldn’t betray the slightest sign of interest, but would observe vigilantly.

He’d acquired the first potential addresses in Kaedwen and some useful information from friends in the Lower March postal service. On the basis of that information, he’d found an establishment frequented by bodyguards seeking work. It was now the first days of April, on the outskirts of the fort and the garrison town of Ban Gleann. But after failing to find any trace of Meritxell, Ponti or Frick there, or in several other Kaedwenian towns, the witcher crossed the border on the River Pontar and visited the town of Rancourt in the Kingdom of Aedirn. Rancourt, located on the trade route

from Ard Carraigh to Vengerberg, was popular both among bodyguards and the travelling merchants who hired them. Every now and then there was a human or equine skeleton lying on the roadside, which encouraged the merchants to invest in protection. Traffic in Rancourt was considerable, but in spite of that, Geralt encountered no sign of his targets there, either. However, surprisingly, his turn came around unexpectedly in the form of escorting a merchant convoy and he travelled to Hagge, which lay on an equally popular route leading all the way to Gors Velen in the Kingdom of Temeria.

Hagge was a grim backwater crouching in the shadow of an immense and even grimmer castle. In the castle was stationed a large military unit, supposedly prepared to repel any further attempts at capturing the borderland territory, embarked upon from time to time by the margraves of the Kaedwenian Lower March. Owing to the presence of the army in the town, there was a prospering brothel there, and deserters weren't uncommon in the alehouse for bodyguards seeking employment. Pigs rooted around in the mud, goats bleated, and ducks paddled in puddles among the dilapidated buildings.

Geralt didn't happen upon anything there, either. And for the first time, he was beset by doubts. His search, he began to fear, was akin to looking for a needle in a haystack, and there was no way of knowing if it was this haystack, this meadow, or even this part of the world.

But he didn't quit. He crossed another frontier and passed into the territory of the Kingdom of Redania, where he resumed his search in the settlement of White Bridge, a river port on the waterway leading to Novigrad.

The bodyguards' alehouse in White Bridge was crowded, but it soon emptied. For the Redanian guard carried out a raid on the dive and arrested over half the regulars, who were wanted for various offences, mainly unpaid fines. Fortunately for Geralt, neither his assumed name, nor his description figured on any wanted posters and he was able to continue his search unmolested.

His next port of call was the outskirts of the small burgh of Travno, also on the Pontar. And there good fortune finally smiled on him—he came across the first spoor and some information. It was admittedly vague, hazy and confusing, but it was something. It wouldn't have done to ignore it.

Geralt set off on the trail. And arrived in the port of Piana.

And that was where he was right then.

The crooked door creaked open.

“My greetings to the fraternity!”

The voice had a strange drone, as though the speaker’s nose was bunged up or crooked. Geralt retreated deeper into the corner and the gloom.

“There’s work!” announced the droning newcomer. “I need two men to join a company, an escort to Rinde, quarter of a crown per day. Any takers?”

“Ponti, don’t be what dangles between a horse’s hind legs,” said the one with the grey eyebrows after a moment. “And word has it you’re still an enormous one of those. We know what you’re about. So go search for fools to join your company somewhere else.”

“You mean no one’s coming?”

“Not with you.”

“Ha, it’s up to you. If you want it, take it. If you don’t you’ll miss out! To hell with you!”

“And you’re still what dangles between a horse’s hind legs.”

The door creaked shut.

Geralt stood up.

It began as soon as he entered the stable.

Cibor Ponti had probably recognised Geralt in the dive or Roach in the stable, for no sooner had he entered than Ponti attacked him with a pitchfork, yelling furiously. Geralt dodged him easily, laughing to himself. It was rather an unwise and downright reckless idea to attack a witcher with something as heavy and unwieldy as a pitchfork. Ponti hadn’t grasped that; he was jumping, bellowing and jabbing, and the witcher was moving aside and avoiding the thrusts like a shadow. When he finally got bored, he darted forward, seized the shaft of the pitchfork, twisted it out of Ponti’s hands and slammed it into his crooked nose. Ponti gave a howl, fell to his knees and grabbed his face. Blood pulsed between his fingers.

“Where are Meritxell and Frick?”

Cibor Ponti droned indistinctly. The blow with the pitchfork had actually

fixed his nose, straightening it out, but in spite of that the thug went on droning, possibly even worse than before. Some plates of cartilage in his nose must have become displaced.

“Where are Meritxell and Frick?”

“Go fuck yourself... You louse... You mutant...”

Geralt snatched from the wall a coil of hempen twine and threw it over Ponti’s neck from the rear. He twisted it and shoved a dowel he picked up from the ground in the loop.

“Where are Meritxell and Frick?”

“Go fuck—”

Geralt pulled the twine tight with his left hand and twisted the dowel with his right.

“Have mercy...” wheezed Ponti. “Don’t kill me—”

“Talk.”

“Beau... was guarding a convoy... it was some big cheese from Oxenfurt... He’s probably still there... I don’t know anything about Meritxell... I swear—”

Geralt turned the dowel another quarter turn.

“She was heading for the sea...” rasped Ponti, impotently clawing and tugging at the noose that was throttling him. “She planned to sail... somewhere far away... Don’t kill me—”

Geralt recalled that September, the eve of the Equinox. Dawn. And Ponti, slamming his fingers and head with the iron-bound cudgel.

He turned the dowel. Vigorously and powerfully, overcoming resistance. Cibor Ponti couldn’t rasp any longer, he just stiffened. Then a sudden stench indicated that his sphincter had relaxed.

Geralt turned the dowel another half-turn. To be certain.

The small university town of Oxenfurt was crowded, noisy, stifling and smelly. Geralt felt he wouldn’t last long in it; he’d had enough of pushing his way through the crowd and choking on the smell. He hadn’t managed to find the bodyguards’ dive marked by a bunch of straw. Perhaps it was for the best that he hadn’t; he wasn’t sure how the fraternity had reacted to finding Ponti’s corpse in the stable. A full week had passed since the

incident.

He asked around—unsuccessfully—in taverns and roadhouses. He decided to eat breakfast in one of them, where that morning his questions were brushed off with shrugs. After breakfast, he planned to clear out, head somewhere far from the town of Oxenfurt and resume his search for Meritxell and Beauregard Frick somewhere else.

But events unfolded differently.

“Witcher?”

Beauregard Frick had altered his appearance. He’d let his hair grow back, but hadn’t trimmed it, owing to which his head was now adorned by an unkempt halo of greyish tufts.

He sat down uninvited opposite, hitching up on his belt a sword which was hindering him.

“You tracked me here,” he said, without mincing his words, “in order to get even with me. For what happened back in Kaedwen. Don’t deny it.”

Geralt didn’t have the slightest intention of denying it.

“You’re stubborn, there’s no doubt,” continued Frick. “In any case, I’m not surprised, I’d have done the same if it had happened to me. But there’s a difficulty. Where fights are concerned, particularly where weapons are involved, the law in Oxenfurt is harsh and ruthless, and the guard is everywhere. So, if you jump me somewhere public and I kill you, they’ll lock me up. Even if it’s in self-defence. Which is why, if you’ve already broken your fast, I suggest we go to some remote place where no one will see us when we sort out our business, and where the law won’t reach us. Agreed?”

“Agreed. And that sword is mine.”

“Not true,” said Frick, shaking his head. “It’s mine. Spoils of war.”

“Criminal loot.”

“Call it what you want. Have you finished?”

“I have.”

“Then let’s go before the sun rises any higher. I don’t like to sort out matters like this in the heat of the day.”

In spite of the rather early hour, Oxenfurt’s main street was already thronged; all the merchants and stallholders had opened their shops and stalls; the foot carts and cookshops had already begun to stink of fat used many times over. The hubbub and racket intensified. Frick, however, led the

witcher into alleyways which were still deserted and quiet. Finally, they turned into a narrow twitchel behind a large granary, into a courtyard closed on four sides.

He looked around, and felt the hardness of the ground with the end of his boot.

"Before we begin," he said, "I have an offer. "The point is," he continued calmly, "that Meritxell, who you are seeking just as diligently as you were me, doesn't wield a sword that ably. She wouldn't have a chance in a fight with you. I care for her; we were once lovers. The offer runs: forswear her. Promise that you'll forswear her and I shall spare your life. I'll let you go."

Geralt said nothing.

"You're young, you have your life ahead of you. You throttled Cibor in Piana, let that suffice. Let that satisfy your thirst for revenge. Deal?"

"No deal."

Frick attacked without warning, perfidiously. Pulling away in a half-turn, he quickly drew his sword and cut from the reverse half-turn, aiming for Geralt's head. Geralt sidestepped it so narrowly that the blade practically brushed him. By then he also had his sword in his hand and thrust, short, aiming for the temple. Frick parried, receiving the blow on the ricasso, and sprang aside.

"You asked for it," he drawled.

Frick swirled his sword around. He executed a rapid long step forward with his right foot and then twisted the blade into a molinetto.

Impossible—the thought flashed through Geralt's head. *That's impossible, it's Holt's sequence. Now the side-strike to the left temple and a repeat molinetto... I must parry...*

He parried the blow.

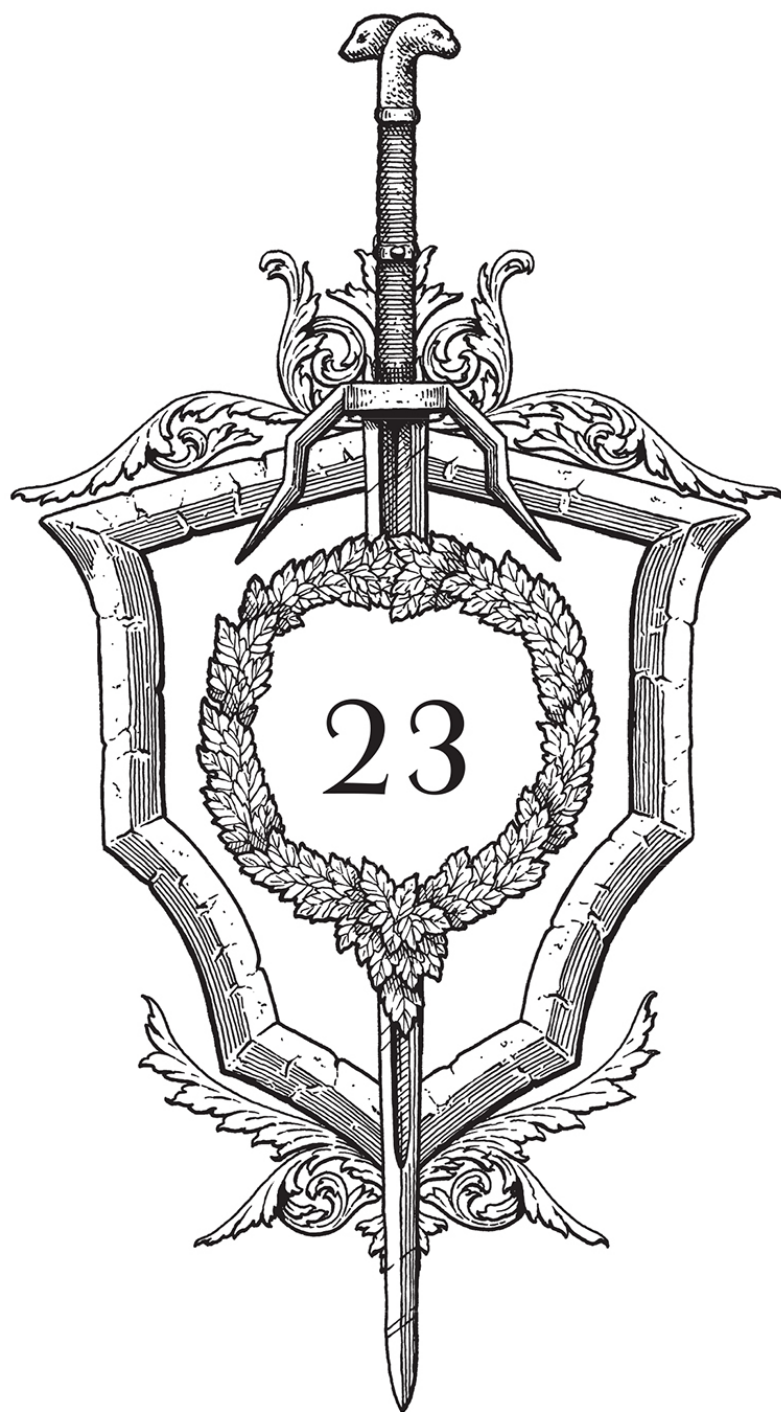
Now it'll be the large lunge with the left foot and swipe, a molinetto and tramazzone. Holt's sequence. A deadly sequence against which there is no defence.

Preston's sketches, he thought. In the letter. The stick figures... The drawings showing...

Frick struck as fast as thought, lunging forward into a passo largo, he flourished a molinetto and arched his torso for the treacherous downward slash of the tramazzone. Geralt didn't parry. He leaped forward, so close he

struck Frick with his chest. And without taking a swing jabbed the crossguard of his sword into Frick's eye. Frick's eyeball gave way with soft, jellylike resistance, and the fragile bones of the eye socket shattered as the steel of the crossguard penetrated his brain. Deeply. Geralt tugged out the sword and jumped aside. Beauregard Frick stood motionless for a moment, his face contorting horrifyingly. Then he toppled over and fell, on his back, like a log.

He was dead before he hit the ground.



He sensed it before he saw it.

The scent borne on a breath of wind was quite new to him, reminded him of nothing he knew, nor was it reminiscent of anything he remembered. Only after a moment, when he stood up in the stirrups, searching for the wind and that scent, did he realise that the blue in the distance was neither the sky nor a fanciful cloud formation. It was the horizon. It was that something he had never looked at until that moment. And which he very much wanted to see.

The ocean.

His first impulse was to spur Roach to a gallop, in order to reach it as quickly as possible, to see it very close up, to better enjoy that scent, to touch it. Taste it.

He curbed the impulse.

There were matters to sort out.

From the hill, the road led downwards, across a natural terrace covered in long grass. Above the terrace towered an old forest, tenebrous, frightening with its dense and sombre thicket. Below ran the road, vanishing into a copse. An isolated farmstead was visible beside the road, hugging the copse. A cottage with fresh, new pine shingles, two sheds, a barn, an even fence around it; behind it a farmyard with chickens scratching in the sand. Smoke drifted up from the chimney of the cottage. Outside the cabin, by a hitching post, stood a grey horse.

Geralt knew who it belonged to.

He also knew—he had purchased that intelligence for ten golden crowns with the likeness of the Novigradian hierarch—who the cottage belonged to. The ringleader of the local smugglers. Anyone who dreamed of setting foot on the deck of one of the little smugglers' craft moored in the nearby bay had first to visit the ringleader and pay a suitably fitting—and quite sizeable—fee. Having paid it, one could sail somewhere far away. Sufficiently far to cover all possible tracks and lose any possible pursuers.

He urged Roach on, riding across the terrace. He heard some high-pitched voices and saw several children playing on a slope, on bright yellow sand, exposed by a rift. The children were busy with their game and paid no attention to him.

He continued downhill to the road.

The cottage door opened and Meritxell stood in the doorway.

She saw the witcher at once and rushed over to her horse. She seized its mane, meaning to leap into the saddle in full flight. The grey shied and shot forward, dragging Meritxell, whose foot was now in the stirrup, across the ground. It looked as though she would be struck by the hooves, but she released the stirrup just in time, and ended up on her belly on the sand. The grey galloped off along the road.

Geralt saw Meritxell punching the ground in anger and heard her yelling, forlornly and furiously.

He didn't hurry. He knew he'd make it in time. That she wouldn't manage to run from him.

He heard a cawing.

At the top of a tall tree in the old, dark forest sat a raven. Croaking loudly.

This time Geralt understood the warning. He caught sight of a movement at the edge of the forest. The grass there moved, swaying strangely. Something in it flickered shimmeringly. Something was crawling down the terrace.

There were bare patches, sand, grit and rocks among the grass. Making it easier to see. A reddish, segmented trunk a good four yards long, each segment equipped with a pair of mobile, bright yellow legs. And a huge, flat, dark-brown head with a pair of long feelers and powerful mandibles.

A scolopendromorph was crawling down the terrace, writhing like a ribbon, raising its head and wiggling its feelers from time to time. It crawled straight towards the children playing on the sand.

The raven cawed.

Meritxell leaped up from the ground and dashed towards her horse, which was standing calmly on the road, a few hundred yards away. She jumped into the saddle, and urged on by her yells the horse broke into a gallop. She soon vanished around a bend in the road.

Geralt didn't look towards her. He had suddenly lost interest.

Something else was more important. A different choice.

He dismounted. Striding briskly, he moved diagonally over the terrace to meet the writhing myriapod. With the aim of intercepting its path in order to cut it off from the children.

He reached above his shoulder and unsheathed the blade.

*Dubhenn haern am glândeal,
morc'h am fhean aiesin.
My glow will cut through the darkness,
my brightness will disperse the gloom.*

The witcher walked across the terrace.
The wind was blowing from the sea.
Grasshoppers scattered before him.

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“THE DAYS OF MY WITCHER GLORY ARE NOW A HYMN OF THE PAST. I WILL NOT NOW VENTURE FORTH WITH SWORDS, NOR WILL THE LUMINOSITY OF MY BLADES, SO TO SPEAK, DISPEL THE DARKNESS. BUT DARKNESS EXISTS, MONSTERS STILL PROWL AROUND AT NIGHT. YOU CAN FACE AND VANQUISH THEM.”

—PRESTON HOLT



“WE DO OUR BEST TO TEACH YOU, BUT YOU STILL DO AS
YOU PLEASE.”

—NENNEKE OF ELSBORG



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