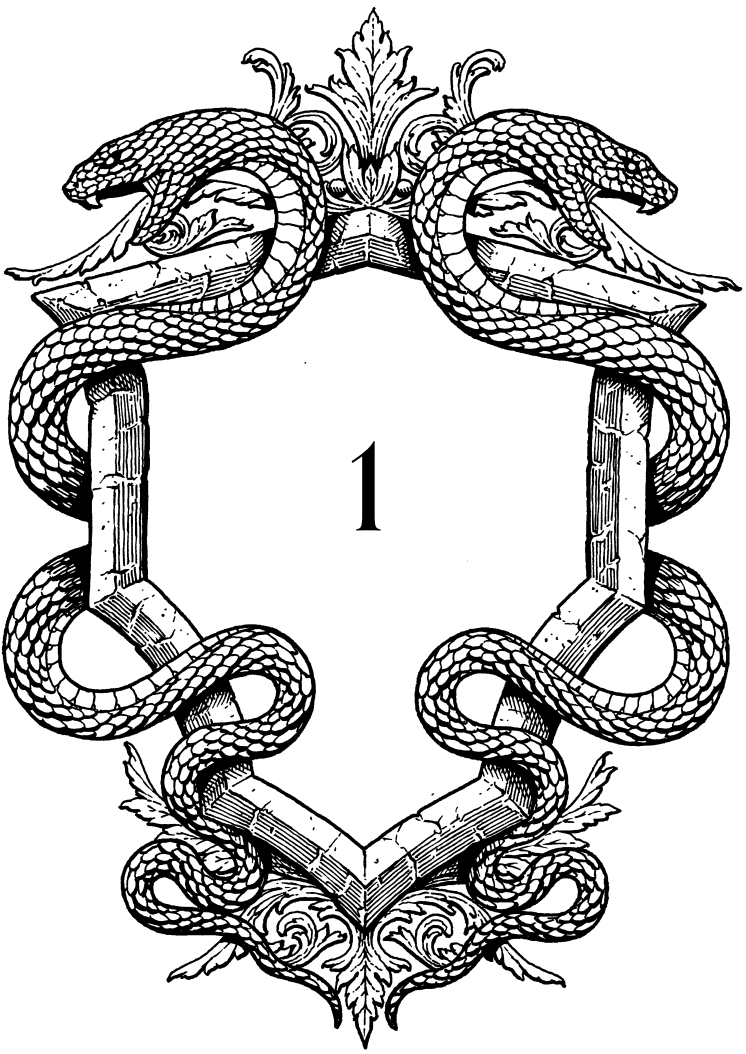
CROSSROADS OF RAVENS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Kaedwen is a land wedged in between the Dragon Mountains from the north, the Blue Mountains from the east, and the impenetrable wastes from the west. It is reigned over by the hereditary monarchs of the Topp dynasty. The first capital 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 balks 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—'

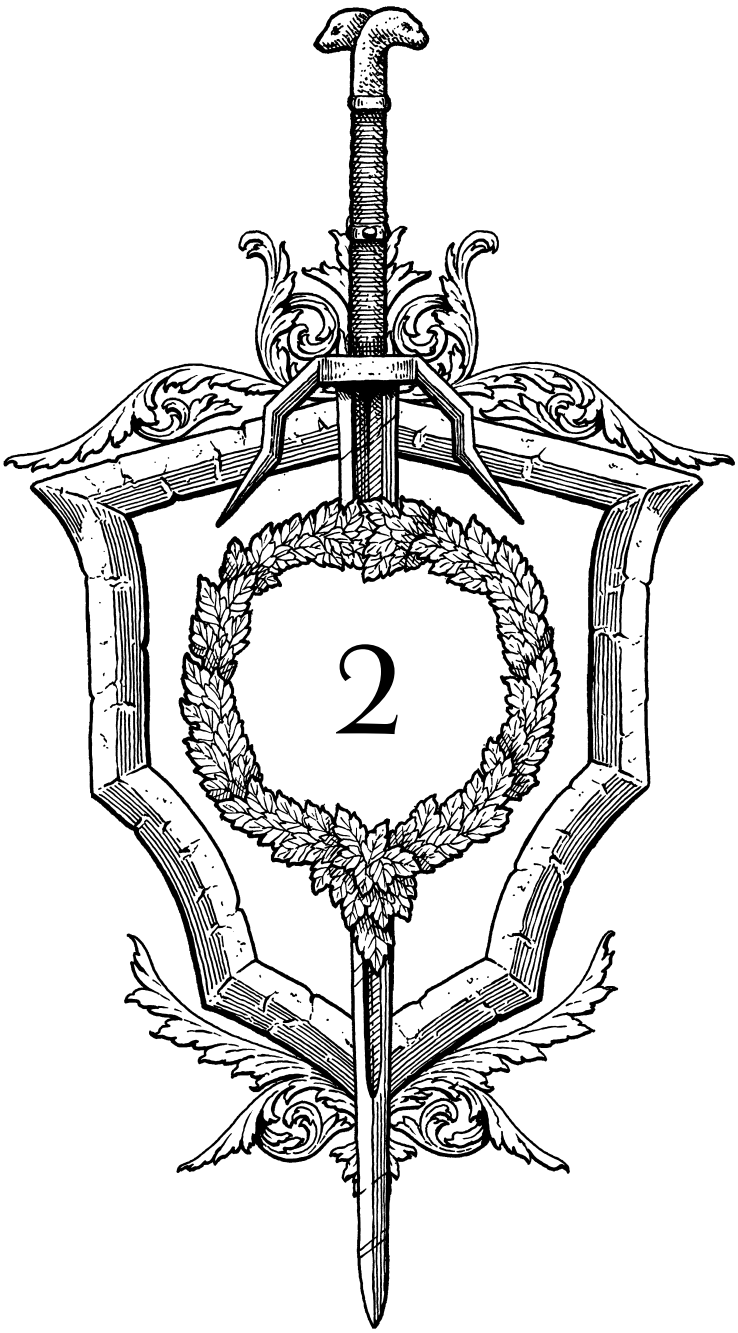
He didn't finish his sentence. The rider called Preston Holt raised one hand and made a short gesture. The air howled and whistled; the peasants covered their ears. The horseman screamed, flew from the saddle, and fell heavily and inertly before the hooves of his companions. Their horses shied, neighed,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

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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".'