



The hit series which inspired the
cult video game THE WITCHER

ANDRZEJ SAPKOWSKI

BAPTISM OF FIRE

'Like Mieville and Gaiman, Sapkowski takes the
old and makes it new' FOUNDATION

BAPTISM OF FIRE

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GOLLANCZ
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CHAPTER ONE

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

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

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

Flourens Delannoy, Tales and Legends

The bushes rustled with birds.

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

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

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

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

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

But she had finally found such a bow. This was of course in the Cidaris Seaside Bazaar, famous for its rich supply of strange and unusual goods brought by sailors from the far corners of the world, everywhere where frigates and galleons could reach. Milva whenever she could, went to visit the bazaar and peruse the arches. This was precisely where she had acquired the arc that she thought was going to serve her for many years, a Zerrikanian Zefhar, reinforced with carved antelope horn. She thought this bow to be perfect. It only lasted a year, for one year later, at the same stall, with the same merchant, she found a veritable wonder.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Milva pouted. The healer was known for her reluctance to talk. But Milva had already had time to hear the accounts from excited Dryads on the Eastern borders of Brokilon, about the events that had occurred two weeks

before. About a chestnut-haired sorceress who had appeared in Brokilon in a flash of magic with a wounded man, his arms and feet broken, clinging to her. The wounded man was the witcher, known as Gwynbleidd, White Wolf.

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

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

...

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

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

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

“You're right, you cannot force me.”

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

Milva knew of the events that took place during July's first new moon on Thanedd, the Scoia'tael talked about it incessantly. During the congress of sorcerers on the island there had been a rebellion, blood was shed and heads had rolled. The armies of Nilfgaard, as if right on cue, struck Aedirn and Lyria, the war had begun. In Temeria, Redania and Kaedwen, all blame fell on the Squirrels. Firstly, being because apparently the Scoia'tael had come to the aid of the rebels and sorcerers on Thanedd isle. Secondly because Vizimir, the king of Redania, murdered with a stylus, was killed at

the hands of an elf or a half-elf. So humans hated the Squirrels. Everywhere seethed like a cauldron, and a river of elven blood flowed ...

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

“Hello, Maria.”

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

“Hail Lady Eithné.”

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

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

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

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

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

“I know. You are tired?”

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

“At my request.”

“Absolutely, at your request.”

“I have another one to make.”

“That's what I thought. The witcher?”

“Help him.”

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

before throwing it to the ground.

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

“Nobody knows the forest paths better than you.”

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

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

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

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

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

“You have contacts.”

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

“You are indebted to me.”

Milva turned her head, biting her lips.

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

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