



LA
TORRE
DE LA
GOLONDRINA
ANDRZEJ SAPKOWSKI

 ALAMUT

THE TOWER OF THE SWALLOW

ANDRZEJ SAPKOWSKI

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CHAPTER ONE

‘I can give you everything you desire,’ said the fairy. ‘Wealth, a crown and sceptre, fame, a long happy life. Choose.’

‘I do not desire wealth or fame, a crown or sceptre,’ the witcher replied. ‘I desire a horse that is black as night and as fast as the wind. And I desire a sword that is sharp and as bright as a moonbeam. I want to ride at night on my black horse; I want to defeat the powers of Evil with my bright sword. That is all I desire.’

‘I’ll give you a horse that will be blacker than the night and faster than the wind,’ promised the fairy. ‘I’ll give you a sword, which will be sharp and brighter than a moonbeam. But what little you ask for, witcher, you will have to pay dearly.’

‘With what? In truth I have nothing.’

‘With your blood.’

Flourens Delannoy
Fairytale and Stories.

It was well known that the Universe, as well as life, revolves in a circle. On the rim of this circle, in pairs exactly opposite each other are eight magic points, which give a full rotation, the annual cycle. These points, lying along the rim of the circle in pairs opposite each other, are: Imbaelk that is, Germination, Lammas that is, Maturity, Belleteyn, that is Blossoming, Saovine that is, Withering. The rim of the circle is also marked by two solstices – winter or *Midinvaerne* and summer or *Midaëte*. There are also two equinoxes – spring or *Birke* and autumn or *Velen*. These dates divide the circle into eight parts – and so the elven calendar year is divided.

When Humans landed in the estuary of the Yaruga and the delta of the Pontar, they brought with them their own lunar calendar, dividing the year into twelve months – which cover the full annual cycle of work in the fields – from the beginning of January until the end – in which frost turned the earth into a hard lump. But although humans divided the year and counted the date differently, they accepted the elven circle and the eight points: Imbaelk, Lammas, Belleteyn, Saovine and both solstices and equinoxes and among the humans they became important holidays. Distinguishing themselves among other dates as much as a solitary tree standing out in a meadow.

These dates differ from others by magic.

It was no secret that during these eight dates and nights magical auras intensify dramatically. Nobody is surprised by these magical phenomena and enigmatic events that accompany these eight dates, especially the equinoxes and solstices. Everyone had become accustomed to these phenomena and they seldom gave rise to great sensation.

This year was different.

This year, as humans usually celebrate the autumn equinox festival dinner, during which the table had the largest possible number of fruits from the harvest that year, but no more than a little of each of them. So custom commanded. Once they had prepared the dinner and had thanked the goddess Melitele for the year's harvest, the humans settled down to rest. And then the horror began.

Shortly before midnight a terrible storm broke, the wind blew hellishly, in which could be heard the crackling of broken branches, roof timbers creaking and shutters banging and the sound of ghostly howls, screams and wailing. Even the clouds took on fantastic shapes, among which the most frequently repeated were silhouettes of galloping horses and unicorns. The wind suddenly stopped after about an hour. But silence did not occur, because the night suddenly came alive with the chirping and fluttering of hundreds of nightjars, these mysterious birds, according to popular belief flock to the houses of the dying and sing their mournful song. This night, the chorus of the nightjars was so massive and loud that it seemed as if the whole world were to die.

The nightjars warbled their wild song for the dead while on the horizon the clouds had extinguished the remains of the moonlight. Then all of a sudden the dreadful howling of a Banshee was heard, harbinger of sudden

and violent death, and through the sky rode the Wild Hunt, a procession of ghosts with flaming eyes riding on the backs of skeletal horses, their tattered clothes waving around them like banners. From time to time, the Wild Hunt made its harvest, but it had not been for decades so terrible. In Novigrad it was counted more than twenty people had disappeared without a trace.

When the Hunt and the clouds had dispersed, human eyes where once again able to see the moon, as usual at the time of the equinox, it was waning. But this night it was the color of blood.

Ordinary people had many explanations for the equinoxial phenomena, which differed significantly according to regional demonology. Astrologers, druid and wizards also had their explanations, but were mostly wrong and exaggerated. Few, very few people were able to associate these phenomena with actual facts. For example, on the Skellige Islands, a few superstitious people saw in those events the prophecies of Tedd Deireádh, the end of the world, which is proceeded by the battle of Ragh nar Roog, the final struggle between the forces of Light and Darkness. The superstitious believed that the violent storm on the night of the autumn equinox and the waves that shook the islands with a wave was driven by the monstrous bow of Naglfar from Mörhogg, leading an army of ghosts and demons in a ship built from the finger and toe-nails of the dead. Wiser and better informed people however associated the fury of the elements with the infamous sorceress Yennefer and her terrible death. And still other – even better informed, saw a sign in the stormy sea that someone was dying, in whose veins ran the blood of the Rulers of Skellige and Cintra.

Since the world began, the night of the autumn equinox has also been a night of ghosts, nightmare and apparitions, sudden awakening in the night, with breath and heartbeat caught in fear, between sheets, twisted and wet with perspiration. The apparitions and awakenings did not even spare the clearest of heads, in Nilfgaard, in the Towers of Gold, the emperor himself, Emhyr var Emreis, woke up screaming. Far to the north in Lan Exeter, King Esterad Thyssen jumped out of bed, waking his wife, Queen Zuleyka. In Tretogor, Dijkstra woke up and reached for his knife, waking the Minister of Treasures wife. In the palace of Montecalvo, Philippa Eilhart jumped up from damask bed linens, without waking the wife of Count de Noailles. They awoke – more or less sharply – the dwarf, Yarpen Zigrin in Mahakam, the old witcher Vesemir in the mountain fortress of Kaer Morhen, the

trainee banker, Fabio Sachs in the city of Gors Velen and Crach an Craite on board the ship *'Ringhorn'*. It awoke the witch Fringilla Vigo at the castle of Beauclair, the priestess Sigrdrifa in the temple of the goddess Freya located on the island of Hindarsfjall. It awoke Daniel Etcheverry, Earl of Garramone, at the besieged fortress of Maribor, Lance-corporal Zyvik of the Dun Banner, at the fort of Ban Glean. Businessman Dominik Bombastus Houvenaghel in the town of Claremont, and many others.

Few were able to connect these phenomena with actual events. And with a specific person. As luck would have it, three of these people spent the night of the autumn equinox under one roof. In the temple of the Goddess Melitele in Ellander.

'Nightjars...' moaned the scribe Jarre, while watching the darkness that flooded the park in the sanctuary. 'I think there are thousands of them, a whole flock... They scream for the death of someone... For the death of her... She is dying...'

'Do not talk nonsense,' Triss Merigold, turned abruptly, raised her clenched fist and looked for a moment like she was going to push the boy or hit him in the chest. 'Do you believe in stupid superstitions? September is finished, the birds are gathering to migrate. It is totally natural!'

'She is dying...'

'Nobody is dying!' cried the enchantress, pale with rage. 'Nobody, do you understand? Stop babbling!'

In the library hall, novices were awakened by the natural alarm. Their faces were grave and pale.

'Jarre,' Triss calmed down, she put her hand on the boy's shoulder and squeezed. 'You're the only man in the temple. All are looking to you, looking to you for help. You must not be afraid, do not panic. Control yourself. Do not disappoint us.'

Jarre sighed and with a visible effort tried to suppress the shaking of his hands and lips.

'I'm not afraid...' he whispered, avoiding the eyes of the enchantress. 'It is not fear, just concern. For her. I saw her in a dream...'

'I saw her too,' Triss pursed her lips, 'we had the same dream, you, me and Nenneke. But not a word about it.'

'The blood on her face... So much blood...'

'I have asked you to be quiet. Nenneke is coming.'

The high priestess approached them. Her face was tired. At Triss' silent question, she shook her head. Noticing Jarre opening his mouth, she hastened to speak.

'Unfortunately, nothing. When the Wild Hunt passed over the sanctuary, it awakened almost everyone, but none have had visions. Even as vague as ours. Go to sleep, boy, there is nothing here for you to do. Girls, go back to the dormitory!'

She rubbed her face with both hands.

'Heh... Equinox! Cursed night... Go to sleep, Triss. We cannot do anything.'

'This helplessness drives me crazy,' the enchantress said, clenching her fists. 'Just thinking that she is suffering, bleeding, that she is threatened... The devil, if I know what to do!'

Nenneke, the high priestess of the temple of Melitele, turned.

'And you have tried to pray?'

In the south, far beyond the mountains of Amell, in Ebbing, in the country called Pereplut, in the extensive swamps formed by the intersection of the rivers Velda, Lete and Arete, a place about eight hundred miles as the crow flies from the city of Ellander and the temple of Melitele, as dawn, a nightmare abruptly woke an old hermit named Vysogota. Once awake, Vysogota could not remember any of the content of the dream, but a strange uneasiness kept him from falling back to sleep.

'Cold, cold, cold, brrr,' Vysogota said to himself as he walked along a path through the bushes. 'Cold, cold, cold, brrr.'

The next trap was empty. Not a muskrat. A whole day of hunting with no luck. Vysogota cleaned the mud and the algae covering the trap, muttering curses and sniffing his nose.

'Huh, it is winter' he said, walking towards the swamp. 'And it is not even the end of September. After all, we are barely four days after the equinox. Such cold at this time I cannot remember in my whole life. And I have been alive a long time!'

The next trap, the last one, was also empty. Vysogota had no desire to even curse.

'There is no doubt,' mused the old man, 'that year after year the climate is slowly cooling. And now it seems the cooling effect is accelerating like

an avalanche. Ha, the elves had foreseen this a long time ago, but who believes in the predictions of the elves?’

Above the old man’s head, fluttered wings, and dark silhouettes began to dart. The fog over the marshes rang with the sudden wild shriek of nightjars, and with the rapid flapping of their wings. Vysogota paid no attention to the birds. He was not superstitious and there had always been many nightjars in the swamp, especially at dawn when they flew so close it was a wonder they didn’t collide with his head. Well, they may not have as many as they have this day and not always with this dismal screaming... However, in recent times it was the nature for outrageous antics and strange phenomena which followed one another, each more bizarre than the last.

He was pulling the last snare from the water, also empty, when he heard the neighing of a horse. The nightjars singing stopped as if on command.

Even on the moor, Pereplut had dry thickets located in higher places, ridges covered with black birch, alders, cornejo, dogwood and blackthorn. Most of the groves were surrounded by bogs so that it was completely impossible for any horse or rider who did not know the way to reach them. And yet the neighing – Vysogota heard again – came precisely from one of these groves.

Curiosity overcame caution.

Vysogota did not know much about horses and their breeds, but it was an aesthician and knew how to recognize and appreciate beauty. And the horse’s hair glistened like anthracite, silhouetted against the trunks of birches was extraordinarily beautiful. It was the quintessence of true beauty. It was so beautiful it seemed unreal.

But it was real. And it was real in the way it was trapped, entangled with the halter straps and red blood embrace of the branches of a cornejo.

When Vysogota came closer, the horse pricked up its ears, gracefully shook its head, turned and stamped until the earth trembled. Now he could see that the animal was a trapped mare. The old man saw something else. Something that caused his heart to run away beating and invisible fingers to squeeze his throat.

Behind the horse, in a shallow ditch, lay a corpse.

Vysogota threw his bag on the floor. He was ashamed by that his first thought had been to turn around and run away. He approached with caution, because the black mare stamped the floor and chewed her bit and was apparently only waiting an opportunity to bite or kick a stranger.