The Heart of Alchemy

by LadyStoneheart_76

Summary

One last contract before Eskel is planning to leave for Kaer Morhen. The offer coming from Thalia, an alchemist studying at the Oxenfurt university - escorting an expedition to Kaedwen - sounds just about right. But things take a turn for the worse and the witcher has to sort out the feelings he developed for his employer - while she's trying to snatch him from the jaws of death...

Notes

Hello dear readers,
welcome to my story.
It was originally written in German, you can find it in the archive ("Das Herz der Alchemie").
With the help of my beta-reader OpheliaTheMoth I published this English version. Thank you very much, Ophelia - you are the Best!
I apologize for any mistakes that we might have overseen.
The story is finished and doesn’t end with a cliffhanger.
It is situated after the events in The Witcher III - Wild Hunt. There are also many details referring to the books but it is not necessary to know them.
I hope you will enjoy this story.
Comments are greatly appreciated and welcomed.
• A translation of Das Herz der Alchemie by LadyStoneheart_76
"Come on. Don't make this any harder for us than it has to be. You know how this will end up ..."

The already injured Wyvern backed away, only to strike out with his spiked tail to a mighty blow. Eskel threw himself down with a roll and jumped to his feet again at a safe distance. The Draconid, aware of the danger to his brood, defended the clutch to its last breath. But it had nothing to oppose to the Witcher’s silver sword. Eskel faked an attack from the left side, then went over to a fast pirouette and slammed the sword into the Wyvern’s right side, just below the wing. The beast shrieked and went down.

The Witcher jumped and dealt the deathly blow to the Wyvern. When it was over, he let his breath settle and looked at the scratch on his left arm. The Draconid had struck him with his tail sting. The wound was superficial, but Eskel already felt the burning of the poison under his skin. Fortunately, he had prepared for the confrontation beforehand with a potion that mitigated the toxin's effect.

The season was coming to an end.

The contract situation was even worse this year than in previous years. Mainly, Eskel had taken care of the elimination of Draconids and Necrophages. The most spectacular job had been the hunt for a flutterer who had unsettled the surroundings of Heatherthorn.

Year by year fewer monsters and beasts threatened humans and their livestock. More and more courageous villagers took themselves to the threat and went out against the less frightening creatures in the field with forks, clubs and crossbows.

The greatest danger to humans was man himself. Redania, Temeria and the northern kingdoms had suffered badly during the last decade from the yoke of wars, waged by the powerful on the backs of the inhabitants.

But that was none of the Witchers' business.

Eskel took one of the last two remaining Samum bombs from his pocket. At the beginning of the season it had been twenty. During this years winter break, he would have to make new ones in Kaer Morhen.

He lit the fuse and threw the handy bomb into the Wyvern's nest. Then he took a few steps back and, with the help of the sign Quen, casted a shield that would protect him from the blast and possible rock splinters. He felt the quake of the soil following the detonation. Then he went back to the nest to inspect the destruction. Satisfied, he pulled a cloth out of his pocket and used it to clean the edge of his sword from the Draconid's blood. Then he turned away and called for Scorpion, his Kaedweni warhorse. It was time to receive the reward.

"Well, well, Master Witcher ..." The elder of Mulbrydale scratched at his nose in embarrassment. "The whole village has pooled money, but we only got 42 crowns. No way around it ... " "But we agreed on 50 crowns." "Sure we did. But you know, farmer Hilbertz's cow died yesterday in calving and now he has to buy a new one. How else could he make it over the winter? And that's why his share is missing now. But our blacksmith has given a few good rivets for your sword belt. And a whetstone. Unfortunately, we can't get anything more at the moment. I'm sorry, Master Witcher."

Eskel took a deep breath. Being paid in kind – that's how far it came … If Lambert had been in his place, he'd respond with threats and insults, Geralt would probably still knock out a few crowns with his threatening appearance. But that was not his style. And the elder of Mulbrydale knew.

"I'll come back to your village next spring and pick up the remaining eight crowns. And I advise you to check your finances before our next contract. Otherwise, I'll probably miscount while eliminating the Wyverns' nests and accidentally forget to destroy one or two of them."

The Witcher took the pouch and stowed it in his pocket. There was no need to recount, he knew the elder well enough to know that while he was always trying to press the price or finding excuses why the reward had to be paid by installments, the sum had always been correct in recent years. And with regular customers, Eskel often turned a blind eye.
With a nod, the witcher bid goodbye, mounted Scorpion and spurred the black war horse to trot. On his way through the village, the inhabitants met him with suspicious eyes or looked quickly in the other direction as usual. A heartfelt farewell, in contrast to the reactions in most other villages. Often people spat on the street in front of him, insulted him or struck the signal against the evil eye. Of course, the deep scar that ran through the right side of his face added to the fact that people regarded him with fear, disgust, and mistrust.

Eskel made nothing of it after all these years. When beasts threatened the village, people disappeared in the forest, or the cattle were torn, people were never too good to use his services. The summer had passed a few weeks ago and the autumn blew stormy gusts over the fields. Maybe one or two contracts, depending on the effort. Then it was time to head north, back to Kaer Morhen.

Like most years, Eskel would spend the winter months back in his old home - or at least what came closest. Right after Vesemir's death three years ago, when the Wild Hunt had attacked the fortress, Eskel wanted to turn his back on it and never come back again. Let the castle crumble to dust - since the fight, the damages to the walls were hard to count. But that would not have been what Vesemir wanted. The old Witcher had always stuck to the traditions, the Witchers´ code and the school of the wolf. Whenever there was talk of abandoning Kaer Morhen and giving up the school, he had been outraged and insisted on preserving this last bastion of the once famous school of the wolf.

So Eskel had changed his mind a few weeks later. Weeks in which he had traveled restlessly and aimlessly in Kaedwen. Geralt and Lambert welcomed his decision and supported him in honoring the memory of their old mentor by preserving the home of their order as good as possible. Since Vesemir's death, the only three remaining wolves had spent more time and effort realizing the most necessary renovations and repairs, and protecting the fortress from complete ruin. Although everyone was aware that the glory days of the school were long gone and the future of the witchers was uncertain ...

Eskel was looking forward to seeing his brothers Geralt and Lambert again soon. Unfortunately, in Geralt's case, this brought the company of Yennefer of Vengerberg, who liked to order the Witchers around and constantly mess with Lambert. Geralt now spent most of the year at his vineyard in Toussaint, although every winter he visited Kaer Morhen for a short time. He had earned enough on his last assignment in the duchy to retire. Now he apparently enjoyed the pleasant life there. When they weren't arguing, he and Yennefer were probably living together peacefully. At least if one believed Geralt's stories. But his standards for a harmonious relationship were probably not very high after years of quarrels and divisions, as Eskel suspected ...

Fortunately, they were spared of meeting Keira Metz this winter. After a year traveling with her, Lambert had apparently realized that living side by side with a sorceress seemed to consist mainly in carrying out her instructions and not having much to say otherwise. No wonder that at some point his freedom became more important to the young Witcher than a warm bed and the admittedly agreeable benefits the sorceress gave him.

The only representative of her guild Eskel was looking forward to was Triss Merigold. Although she meanwhile had her main residence in Kovir, she visited Kaer Morhen every winter for old times sake. Although he was well aware that Triss still had feelings for Geralt - and this would probably always stay this way - he still had a weakness for the sorceress.

It wasn't far to Oxenfurt now. There, Eskel would stock up on supplies and look for a new contract. With a bit of luck, even the Academy might have had use for its services. The scholars were often demanding and sometimes had abstruse ideas about hunting for creatures worth researching - but they usually paid decent rewards and did not haggle for a few crowns. And the prospect of a hot meal and a bed in a tavern was tempting, after all the cold nights he had spent in the wilderness of Velen.

Eskel spurred Scorpion to gallop.
The bright red liquid simmered in the bulbous vessel and spread a slightly bitter odor in the lab. Thalia throttled the flame of the burner a little to slow down the process of distillation. Too much heat could damage the valuable ingredients of the mandrake root - a mistake she'd often made in her first years in the alchemical faculty. Patience was not one of her virtues. However, she had developed a great deal of instinct in dealing with the equipment and ingredients by now - if one believed her dean, more than most of her colleagues at the department.

She extinguished the flame, released the collecting jar from the apparatus, and held the liquid against the light that fell in through the window. Satisfied with the result, she filled the distillate into a small bottle, labeled it, and put the retorts into the cleaning basin. After the annoying but necessary cleaning of the vessels, mortar and pestle, she wiped her hands on her apron, loosened the ribbons and smoothed out her simple, green dress. 'Thing's got tight', she thought and looked at her no longer flat stomach. Since Gregor's death two years ago, she had only lived for her work and had neglected herself a bit. A few extra pounds were the result. And it seemed like her work would continue to require most of her attention in the near future.

A knock on the door interrupted her thoughts, which revolved around her upcoming research, like they did so often nowadays. Shani, her friend from the medical faculty, stood in the doorway.

"Greetings, Thalia. Am I interrupting anything important?" Shani looked stunning as always. Her short, red hair and gorgeous smile made many students' hearts beat faster. If she had not been one of the nicest people Thalia knew, she could have been jealous of the winning personality of her colleague. But since Shani introduced her to Gregor five years ago, the two women shared a cordial friendship.

"No, not at all. Come in, I just cleaned up." Shani entered the lab and wrinkled her nose. "What have you been brewing in here? It smells awful ... Tell me, is it true what I've heard? You applied for the professorate?"

"I did." Thalia smiled contentedly and brushed back a strand of her auburn hair that had come off her braid. "Old Professor Heineken's eyes widened when I presented my application to him. He still thinks that women have no business in laboratories except to clean the vessels. But the other professors fully supported me."

"Congratulations," Shani said with genuine pleasure and gave her friend a brief hug. "You really deserve it, you're practically living in the lab. But you still have a competitor, right? Didn't Alric Efferen also express his interest in the promotion?"

"Yes, he did. And unfortunately his chances are much better than mine. Yesterday morning, we received our research assignments. And I'll have you guess which one of us was instructed with producing an antidote for crab spider bites, and which one is to write a treatise on the sublimation of ionic compounds?" A sour smile stole on Thalia's lips. "Oh, come on," Shani said in dismay. "This is rigged in advance. I'll bet Alric's family gave the Academy a 'proper donation' once again …" She shook her head in disappointment. "Do you want to try anyway?"

"Naturally. If I succeed, the deans will have no choice but to accept me in their ranks. Alric's assignment wouldn't justifiy to chose him instead of me in any way. Especially if you consider the recent number of reports regarding crab spider bites. The beasts apparently continue to spread. Many of the victims died - mostly lumberjacks or farmers. With an antidote, which can be administered orally, you could supply the villages and prevent further loss. I already have some ideas how the recipe could work. But the implementation won't be easy …"

"How long do you have time for your research?"

"Five months. That should be enough, I have dealt with toxins and antidotes in the past, I know the
basics. Problem is, all the ingredients I could get here in Oxenfurt this season are either dried or preserved. The basis for the antidote would have to be an enzyme from the crab spider's liver - so I need intact livers and best of all, some of the venom glands to test the effect of the enzyme on the venom. But it is impossible to get such a thing fresh in autumn. I have already visited all merchants in Oxenfurt. And my dean told me I won't succeed in Novigrad either ..." Thalia paused to pursue a thought. "Wait a minute ... Shani, you once told me about a friend of yours. A Witcher. Are you still in touch?"

Shani smiled. The memory of Geralt was still very much alive, even if he had not shown up in Oxenfurt for three years. He probably had found his luck with the sorceress he had fallen for during the time of their short affair. Whatever it was she had shared with Geralt – it hadn't been serious, Shani knew that. However, she would have been happy to meet the white-haired Witcher again ... "Unfortunately no. But the idea of hiring a Witcher is not bad at all. At this time of the year you may still be lucky and find someone looking for crab spiders."

"Hm ... I have never met a Witcher. Are the rumors true? That they are cold-blooded monster slayers? I mean, I can hardly imagine it, otherwise you'd probably not get involved with this Geralt. But these mutations must be fascinating ..."

When Shani thought back to her intimate hours with Geralt - yes, fascinating would be a fitting expression for it. She smiled pensively. "Well, I can only speak for Geralt, but cold-blooded is really not one of the terms I'd use to describe him. Just write the assignment and wait to see who shows up. You can still withdraw the offer, if you have a bad feeling after meeting them. " "You're right." Thalia smiled mischievously. "Seems like I've got a plan ..."

Chapter End Notes

Many thanks to my beta-reader OpheliaTheMoth - your English is so much better than mine. You take all my weird translations and turn them into proper English!
Oxenfurt - the smaller, not quite so run down sister of Novigrad.
After entering the city through the west gate last night, Eskel had sought shelter and enjoyed a warm meal in the "Alchemy". Stjepan, the innkeeper from the Skellige islands, had served him a surprisingly good stew and ham. But even the tasty food and the reasonably comfortable bed had not been able to outweigh Eskel's aversion to larger cities. This morning, after only a few hours, he felt uncomfortable in the midst of the pulsating life of Oxenfurt. His fine Witcher-hearing had difficulty filtering out the citizens' innumerable conversations, everything mingled to a steady sonic mush, which over time exhausted his nerves.
But he did not mean to stay long anyway.
Arriving at the marketplace he went to a herbalist and stocked up on bright essence and white myrtle. The prizes would have been a hefty credit to any dwarf merchant, but when it came to his potions, Eskel would rather not take risks and buy valuable ingredients to ensure quality. From the host of the "Alchemy", he had bought a couple of bottles of hard liquor that he needed to brew his potions. Even as the season drew to an end, he didn't want to have to decline a job because his potion supplies were running low.
The herbal fragrances at the dealer's booth had briefly managed to mask the stench that was usually omnipresent in cities, but as soon as Eskel made his way to the notice board, he was enveloped again in the beguiling mix of sewage, sweat and feces. Although the odors in Oxenfurt were far less repellent than, for example, the exhalations of Novigrad's outer skirts.
The notice board did not have much to offer. A few students' announcements and a purchase offer for used medical books. Nothing interesting ... The lowest attached note, however, caught his attention. An assignment from the alchemical faculty of the university.
They were explicitly looking for a witcher, presumably because they wanted him to extract several organs from a freshly slain creature... Eskel took the note off the board and made his way to the university.
He crossed the bridge that connected the academical area with the rest of the city and faced the guards at the gate. Luckily he could pass without any problem - either the guards had been informed of the possible arrival of a Witcher or they were not taking their job seriously. With the help of a signpost, he quickly found the alchemical faculty, but from here on he didn't exactly know where to go. A group of students was just leaving the building. They were engrossed in a conversation and initially didn't take notice of him.
"Excuse me."
One of the students looked up and stopped immediately, eyes wide with shock. The reaction of his colleagues was quite similar.
Eskel tried to look as friendly as possible, though the long, deep scar naturally caught everyone's attention. No smile in the world - certainly not his - could outweigh the daunting impression of his face. Therefore, Eskel was used to people being frightened of his sight.
"Could you please tell me where I can find ..." He read the notice sheet. "Magister van de
Wintervoord?" "Erm... Best you go to the lab on the first floor ... upstairs and then the third door on the left," stuttered the student closest to Eskel. "Thank you." Eskel nodded and entered the building. He could hear the students talking about him outside in fear, disgust and surprise.

What kind of business did a mutant have at the academy?

In the past, witchers came to Oxenfurt on a regular basis to provide the scientists with rare ingredients - but those days were long gone. The current students had probably never seen a witcher up close before.

Eskel followed the described path and knocked on the wooden entrance.

"Enter," a woman's voice answered from the lab.

He opened the door.

In the room, which was apparently the scene of an extraction process, he could find all kinds of alchemical equipment - Alembicus, serpentines and retorts stood on the tables. The showcases on the walls held countless bottles, cans and jars. An amber-colored liquid evaporated from a glass jar resting on a burner and condensed in the chiller. The window was wide open and the breeze carried the characteristic odors of celandine and hellebore.

At one of the tables stood a rather small woman in an apron who was about to grind something in a mortar. Her auburn hair was put up in an untidy bun, causing a few strands to break loose. When she looked up, she put one of them behind her ear in an unconscious gesture. She looked to be in her early thirties and had a pretty face with big, brown eyes, but all in all she was rather unimpressive. Eskel noticed that the little finger of her right hand was missing - perhaps the result of a failed experiment ... Similar to the students earlier, her eyes widened at the sight of him, but she instantly recovered herself and gave him a friendly smile. "Oh, you must be the Witcher ..."

"Uh, yes, ... I'm looking for Magister van de Wintervoord ..."

"That is me. Thalia van de Wintervoord."

"Oh," Eskel muttered, ashamed at once for this uninspired reply. Although female scientists were not uncommon in Oxenfurt, they still rarely achieved a higher academic degree. Even in the 13th century, the old structures of power distribution were still obvious.

In order to not make a bad impression by his silence, Eskel continued quickly.

"My name is Eskel, Witcher of the school of the wolf. Your offer sounds interesting, but I'll need more information. What kind of monster ingredients do you need exactly?"

" 'Monster ingredients'- that's what you call it? Hm, that's probably the best way to describe it. So ...

The point is this: On behalf of the Academy, I am to research for a universal antidote for poisoning based on crab spider venom. According to my research, the most promising substance can be obtained from the crab spider's liver. This is where you come into plan ..."

"So it's about crab spiders. They are not easy to find and even harder to kill. The effort is big, as is the risk. How much does the university intend to pay as a reward for extracting the organs?"

"300 crowns. That should, as I hope, outweigh your risk."

Eskel thought about it for a moment. With 300 crowns, he could even finish the season prematurely and return earlier to Kaer Morhen than planned.

If he could use the last autumn weeks for repairing the fortress, this years winter should be much more pleasant.

The roof rafters in the north tower had to be renewed urgently - no work that he liked doing in the cold.

Crab spiders, on the other hand, were not exactly pleasant to deal with.

Fighting them was treacherous, especially against the highly poisonous specimens. Witchers were immune to many toxins and could easily survive spider venom attacks - but an overdose would cause considerable damage and could even lead to death unless countermeasures were taken quickly enough.

But for an experienced Witcher as him, the risk was manageable. And the advertised reward was quite appropriate - even slightly higher than Eskel had expected.

"All right then. When do you need the organs?"

"Since I have to present the results of my research in five months, we should get going as soon as
possible." Eskel raised his eyebrows in astonishment. "We?" Thalia nodded with a smile. "Yes, I
will join you. Don’t worry, I won't get in your way, I only want to preserve the liver and glands post-
haste."

"I assure you that I am perfectly capable of cutting out organs without damaging them."
"Surely, but that's not the only reason. They need to be processed as fresh as possible. If you carry
them with you for weeks, the extracts will be too weak to be of use. I planned this very precisely. I
know that crab spiders are most common in warm areas, but: My archeology colleagues have told me
that they saw many specimens during an excavation north of Ard Carraigh. From a safe distance,
naturally.

Since the glands would be unusable within a few days after extraction in a warm climate, I suggest
that we go in search of this colony in Kaedwen. If we really find it there, we only have to travel to
Aedd Gynvael, where I process the organs on the spot. An old acquaintance of mine maintains a
small laboratory in the city, which will not be perfectly equipped, but it should be enough. The
university provides me with two guards to protect me from bandits. They will accompany us.

In Aedd Gynvael there is a branch of the Vivaldi Bank, which means I can pay out your reward right
there after our arrival and release you from your service. This will save you the trip back to Oxenfurt
and you can go back to whatever business a witcher might have at this time of the year. What do you
say to my proposal?"

At first Eskel was speechless about the length and detail of the lecture. The scientist had evidently
planned everything down to the last detail. At least in theory, she seemed well prepared. But the idea
of having to take care of a woman during a week-long journey and possibly being constantly
involved in witty conversation did not suit him at all.

Then again, she seemed to be quite likeable. Intelligent enough to keep herself away from crab
spiders, at least. Nevertheless, her company would mean that he would move much slower than
alone.

The loss of time, however, would be compensated by ending his contract directly in Kaedwen's
north and not having to travel from Oxenfurt to Kaer Morhen again.

If they really were to find a crab spider colony near Ard Carraigh (and Eskel had little doubt that it
was possible, after all, the beasts had adapted more and more to the northern climate over the last few
decades), the journey to the Witchers’ fortress would only take a few days. A welcome shortcut to
his return home ...

Eskel took a deep breath. "All right then. But I must warn you: We'll be on the road for about three
weeks, maybe longer, depending on the weather. And it won' be a comfortable journey, inns and
taverns become scarce as soon as we leave the Pontar area. We'll spend the nights under the open
skies and be on horseback all day. Do you think you can handle that?"

"I am aware it'll not be a pleasant trip. But this is not the first expedition I'm participating in. Please
don't worry about me."

The last expedition she participated in was probably some time ago. According to her light skin, the
alchemist didn't spend much time outdoors. She wasn't in best shape either. Not stout, but also not
really slim or muscular.

Wasn't his concern, though.

She would have to cope by herself with aching muscles and the hardships of a journey on horseback.

Eskel took her outstretched hand in his to seal the contract.

"When shall we leave?"

Chapter End Notes

Again a big hug to my wonderful beta-reader OpheliaTheMoth.
Departure

Chapter Summary

Eskel and Thalia start their journey and they soon discover that this will be getting interesting - for both of them.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"Damn it, why won´t it fit …?"
Thalia tried desperately to cram another book into the saddlebag.
Only after she had unpacked and rearranged its entire belongings, she managed to fasten the belt without the danger of it bursting open again.
She had intended to take only a few personal things with her, even her travelling wardrobe was limited. However, she found it hard to choose the right books she needed for her work. She had already packed some instruments and alchemical substances in the pockets that the packhorse was supposed to carry – ingredients that she probably would not find in Aedd Gynvael.
At the very bottom of her saddlebag rested the prototype of the "Fire-Crossbow", as one of her colleagues had called the metal construction on which Thalia had been working for some time on behalf of the Academy. If she was to finish her research faster than expected, she could use the remaining time she'd spend in the north to further develop the device.
It was already late, and Thalia knew that she was supposed to get some rest for tomorrow. But she was too excited to even think about sleep. Even the lavender broth she liked to drink before bed hadn't changed that.
In a few hours, she would set off on a week-long journey, two guards and a witcher as her only company. When the mutant had suddenly faced her in her laboratory, she had to control herself as to not let her fright show. The gruesome facial injuries of the huge man immediately caught everyone's eye. His strong stature also made him look scary and intimidating. The conversation with him, however, had revised her first impression. Again and again her thoughts drifted away to the moment in which she had touched the Witcher's hand. His skin seemed to radiate a kind of vibration that left a soft, pleasant tingle at her handshake. She had never heard of such a phenomenon. Maybe this was a peculiarity of the witchers? She had to ask Shani about it ...
"Knock, knock."
Thalia turned around. Shani stood in front of the open door to Thalia's chamber. "Well, that's a coincidence. I was just thinking about you."
"Are you packing? What are you up to?"
"I'm going on the expedition we talked about recently."
"You want to travel yourself?! I thought you were only looking for a witcher to get you the ingredience and prepare everything for the experiments here at the university ..."
"That's what I planned at first, but ... I have to make sure that the poison can be extracted in a high concentration and I can only do that if I process the glands right away. I have to extract the liver enzymes before the ingredients decompose. In Aedd Gynvael I can work in Miro's laboratory. He has already answered my message. And with a bit of luck, I'll return with useful results as soon as the mountain passes are passable after the winter."
Shani looked at her questioningly. "Miro? Do you mean Miroslav Kajczak? He lives in Aedd Gynvael now? I did not know that this funny little owl got so far to the north. Is he still devoting himself to ... what did he call it? 'Making substances that move consciousness to higher levels of
perception?"
Thalia sighed. "Probably. But I don't really want to know if I'm being honest. Perhaps I also want to
prove with this trip that I have not become the 'unworldly laboratory witch', many people consider
me here at the academy. Maybe I want to prove it to myself ... But now, knowing I'm leaving
tomorrow, I'm afraid my courage'll fail me."
"Thalia, there's so much more to you than most people see. There's no need to prove yourself. To
anyone."
"I know, but ever since Gregor died, I've been hiding in the lab, barely hearing anything about the
world around me and just plunging into work. Do you know how long it has been since I last
accompanied an expedition? Three years! And that one only lasted for four days.
Shani, if I really should get the professorship - and I say if, because I honestly don't really expect that
I'll succeed - then it means that I probably won't get to see much in the next few years except the
faculty.
I want to see a few parts of the world. Even if it's just the road to Kaedwen ... " Thalia smiled sadly.
"Maybe a few weeks on horseback will help me finish with the past and clear my head. And the
journey will be good for my body too. Besides, this thing is too important to be left solely to a
witcher."
"So you found somebody for the job? What impression did he make?"
"Strangely, a good one. I had expected that such a mutant would be repugnant, but at second glance,
he was actually quite nice. A master Eskel from the School of the Wolf."
"Eskel? Geral told me about him once. As far as I can remember, he is an old friend of his. I'm glad
you've come across someone trustworthy."
"Yeah, it could have been worse ... Tell me, Shani, when you touched Geral - did you have some
kind of tingling sensation on your skin? I can hardly describe it ... "
"Tingle? No. I had butterflies in my stomach, if that's what you mean ... " Shani grinned
mischiefly.
"Oh, stop it. That's not what I meant."
But Shani was right, she was lucky that she found a witcher for the job.
One who seemed to have a good reputation, who was experienced and was able to formulate
complete sentences. And he seemed to have fairly good manners. Traveling in the company of a
dumb ruffian would've certainly been anything but a pleasure. And she still had the two guards from
the faculty to protect her.
In a few weeks she would be working again in a lab in Kaedwen - not quite as comfortable as hers at
the university, but a lab nonetheless. A little adventure on the way would be a welcome change.

The next morning Eskel led Scorpion into the courtyard of the campus, where four horses were
already bridled and saddled, waiting for the departure. The saddlebags were bulging, and a variety of
laboratory equipment and instruments were lashed on the packhorse's back. The three riding horses,
two of them brownish and one with a milk-white coat, were not so heavily loaded, but you could
hear the clinking of bottles, which were stowed in the saddlebags. The alchemist had apparently
cleared half a lab and stashed it in her pockets.
She stood aloof from the two guards and talked to an older man, who was apparently also a scientist
at the Academy. He wished her luck and gave Eskel a slightly disparaging look. The two guards also
scowled at him, with the larger of the two men not even trying to hide what he thought of the
witcher. His companion, a slender, wiry man of medium height, seemed more interested than
repelled, eyeing Eskel's swords on his back and the crossbow attached to Scorpion's saddle as he
passed. Thalia said goodbye to the man in the gown and approached Eskel with a smile.
"Good morning, Master Witcher. This is Olbertz " - she pointed to the taller guard who was already
mounting his horse - "and Jonas." The man greeted him with a nod.
"We're ready to leave," she continued. "Do you think we can make it to Rawia today?"
"We should be able to if we only have a short break at noon today. But we have to keep a tight pace
- I hope you're used to longer rides? "
"I can handle that, do not worry." Thalia smiled and turned to her horse, a well-groomed white mare wearing the crest of the alchemical faculty - a red ermine cross - on her saddle. Eskel watched from the corner of his eye as she climbed into the saddle a little bit awkwardly. Apparently she was not a very experienced rider.

This journey ought to be interesting ...

Thalia rode just behind Eskel across the bridge, heading for Novigrad Gate, followed by the two guards.

In the light of day, the witcher seemed … different than yesterday in the soft light of the laboratory. When she welcomed him Thalia had clearly seen his yellow cat's eyes, the pupils in the sunlight constricted to slits.

The scar, covering almost the entire right side of his face, reinforced the dangerous impression - like a predator that was ready to attack at any time ... But what did not fit in at all was the witcher's kindness and his dark but gentle voice.

As she rode behind him, she could see the two swords on his back - why two? Were witchers fighting with a sword in each hand? The hilt of the right sword looked odd, unlike any swords she had seen so far. But Thalia had never really been interested in weapons, if anything she was curious of the materials that could be used for durable alloys.

The witcher silently rode in front of her until they passed the Novigrad Gate. Then he tightened the pace, apparently expecting his companions to adjust to him. Thalia spurred her mare to a light canter.

Although she had confidently proclaimed her horse riding ability to the Witcher, she was very much worried that she wouldn't be able to keep up with the three men throughout the day.

It was showing that the witcher spent most of his time on horseback and their two companions were experienced expedition guards who had been accompanying explorers to remote sites for many years in the service of the university.

In any case, Thalia had packed a few ointments for sores. She did not want to embarrass herself in front of the men by slowing down the whole group.

Dean Bloomfeld had insisted on saying goodbye to her before the departure and wishing her success. Thalia was fortunate to have him as a supporter at the faculty. Without him, she probably would never have come so far in the hierarchy of scientists in Oxenfurt. She had already said goodbye to her colleagues and friends at the academy last night. Most were surprised that she accompanied an expedition herself - and even one that consisted of only a handful of people, and therefore was at greater risk of being attacked by bandits. Or even worse ...

Well, you wouldn't have expected so of boring Thalia, she thought grinning. Although she didn't want to falsely accuse her friends. Most of them had honestly expressed their regard. Now all she had to do was get back safely, preferably with an effective antidote that would secure her promotion.

When the sun was at its zenith, they took a break off the path. So far, they had made good progress, had passed numerous small villages and farms. At a small stream, they refilled their caskets. Thalia took a long sip of the cool water. Even though the weather was quite pleasant to ride, the hours in the blazing sun had made them sweat. She was glad that she had opted for light riding clothes. Her downside had begun to protest against the saddle two hours ago, but now she had to endure. In a few days she would hopefully get used to riding again.

Olbertz and Jonas sat together on a fallen tree trunk and ate some of their provisions. The horses drank from the stream and ate from the grass that lined the water in lush greenery. The witcher had settled on a large stone and bit heartily into an apple. He had opened his shirt a bit and Thalia caught a glimpse of a silver medallion in the shape of a wolf's head, which lay on his chest. When he noticed her gaze, he pulled the left corner of his mouth slightly upwards. Apparently the only equivalent of a smile that was possible because of his damaged face.

Thalia felt caught and quickly looked to the side. She took herself a bun and a peach from her lunch bag and sat down on a stone near the witcher. He looked at her, pulled out the pendant of his necklace and held out the medallion so she could look at it. "The sign of the Wolf School," he
"Sorry, I did not mean to stare at you," Thalia explained quickly. "It's alright. I'm used to it."
Thalia smiled. Although she was embarrassed that her eyes had struck him, curiosity won - as so often with her.
"I have to admit that I've never met a witcher before you. The few things I know about the witcher schools I gathered from rumors. Along with the fact that Witchers are physically changed ... " All the questions that had been buzzing in her head since yesterday burned on her tongue. "Please excuse my interest in the profession, but how were these ... mutations evoked?"
The Witcher looked at her without responding directly to her question. Thalia was embarrassed - she had forgotten her manners and gone too far.
"Excuse me, I'm too curious. I'm sorry."
"No, no, it's all right. There used to be many witcher schools in the world. But most of them are a remnant of the past and do not train youngsters anymore. There are only a few dozen Witchers left. And the mutations ... I cannot give you any details about that.
I can only tell you that, as children, we were exposed to a number of substances that have changed our bodies. We call this the 'trial of the grasses'. But the knowledge about that is forgotten - and that's probably for the best. No child should have to go through this anymore."
Eskel's voice had become quiet. He seemed absent-minded for a moment, but quickly recovered.
"For an alchemist, a witcher would certainly be an interesting object of research."
"Oh, I ..." Thalia just wanted to justify herself until she noticed his oblique smile. He wanted to tease her? Alright ... "Well, I'd certainly love to examine a witcher's body..."
By all gods, had she really just said that?
The alchemist could feel her ears heating up.
She fervently wished for a heart attack. However, as her body failed to comply, she mumbled something about "have to check the saddle before we head on" and rushed off.
Hurriedly she went to her horse and pretended to control the strap of the saddlebags. Her brisk response had obviously surprised the witcher. Hopefully he wasn't thinking too badly of her now. It had not been her intention to embarrass him and herself with ambiguity. She took a deep breath and tried to clear her mind. This isn't too bad. A failed joke, nothing more ...
As Thalia stowed the provisions back in the saddlebag, she noticed a tingling on her wrist and turned her arm to look. There was a spider on her sleeve – as long as her finger, hairy and black. Thalia screamed and waved her arm quickly to shake off the animal. She succeeded, the spider disappeared in the grass.
Alarmed by her scream, Eskel was immediately at her side. "What's wrong, did you see something?"
Concentrated, he observed their surroundings with all his senses. Thalia sighed. Could this get even more embarrassing? Should she tell him that she saw a frightening creature in the undergrowth? No, she wouldn't lie to him after she had already shown such bad manners.
"There's nothing. I just got frightened."
"By what?"
Thalia sighed again. "Well, there was ... there was a spider crawling on my arm and I ... I'm a little arachnophobic," she explained, slightly embarrassed. The witcher raised his eyebrows. "And ... is the beast gone or should I take care of it?"
"It's all right, I've already scared it away. No work for a witcher for now ... " She smiled sheepishly. Eskel's expression changed suddenly – at first amused he now seemed suddenly serious and highly concentrated. Thalia frowned in confusion.
"Please step over here slowly. Do not turn around and avoid any rapid movements."
Eskel took one step back, then another.
"What is it? Is there something behind me?" A touch of panic seized her, but Thalia did as she was told, stepping forward, her heart pounding.
"Olbertz and Jonas, please step back as well. Go to the grove of trees over there."
Out of the corner of her eye, Thalia saw the two guards fleeing their place on the log, heading for
safety. By all gods, what did they see behind her? A beast just waiting to jump at her? Why didn’t she notice anything?

By now, she and the Witcher were several meters from the source of danger. Eskel seemed to relax slightly as they reached the edge of the clearing.

"Alright, you're safe here. Stay behind the trunks, I have to take care of something ... "

Thalia looked around and peered intently to the spot where she had been standing. She couldn’t see anything except a few shrubs. One of them looked strangely spiky, but she had thought the plant a bolax plant. Wait - The "plant" had moved - but there was no breeze. The spikes seemed to weigh! The thing was alive!

Eskel had since returned to the Echinops. The creature became more and more nervous, the spines began to move in a wave. Eskel casted the sign Axii to prevent the hedgehog-like, almost meter-tall creature, from shooting its spikes. If Thalia had just stepped back, it could have ended badly. The Echinops stopped moving. Eskel drew his silver sword.

Echinops were not really aggressive, but an angered specimen could be very dangerous. And it was sitting right here, where travelers often took to rest - the risk of someone being fatally injured was too high. Eskel took a swing and struck the echinops in two with a mighty blow, right where the head was well concealed in the spiked garb. The animal died without pain.

Behind him, Eskel heard Thalia gasp - apparently she was not used to such sights. He cleaned the sword with a cloth and put it back in the scabbard. Thalia had approached him now, her eyes fixed on the carcass. "What was that, Master Witcher? An Echinops?"

"Yes, it was. It can shoot its spines up to ten feet if it feels threatened. These spines break off when they invade a body. The tips continue to move slowly until they hit a sensitive organ."

Thalia stared at the dead body as she realized the danger she had been in. And they were only a few miles away from Oxenfurt. She began to believe that this expedition probably hadn't been her best idea...

Just like before they took rest, Eskel preceded, the alchemist following him at a distance. The two guards rode behind them, as they liked being by themselves. Eskel could hear them talking to each other about past expeditions, which the two of them had accompanied for the university. Olbertz seemed to be the more experienced one and told some stories that seemed to impress his colleague Jonas. Eskel continued to listen to the man's boasting until it bored him.

What puzzled him was the woman who rode only a few steps behind him. Her conversation at the rest had surprised Eskel - in several ways. He was surprised about himself that he had so willingly told her about the witchers’ school. He heard Vesemir's voice in his ear, preaching to him and his brothers over and over again, to keep the knowledge of the witchers to themselves and never to initiate anyone into the practices of the school. And then he simply told a curious alchemist about the trial of the grasses ...

 Granted, she was quite charming and seemed embarrassed by her own curiosity. So he had tried to use this embarrassment to tease her a little. However, he still did not know for sure what to make of the retort. Fortunately, she had kept her nerves at the Echinops threat.

But this spider situation ... An arachnophobic alchemist on an expedition to find crab spiders. Eskel grinned.

This expedition was getting interesting...

Chapter End Notes

Kudos to my beta-reader OpheliaTheMoth once more!
They had been on the road for five days now.
At the fall of dusk they reached the town of Rinde, the last bigger settlement, before their path would take them to sparsely populated areas.
The day after that they were to reach the Kestrel mountains.
As soon as they got deeper into the wilderness, they had to reckon with bandits and with an increasing number of monsters lurking off the road, waiting to attack heedless travelers.
In the pontar area they had previously passed many villages, thus they always found an inn to enjoy the comfort of a hot meal and a reasonably comfortable bed - at the expense of the Academy’s account.
From next day on they would have to give up this luxury for a while.

For their last night they'd be spending in civilisation, Thalia kept her eyes out for the most well-established tavern the place had to offer, which was crooked and shabby-looking, but would have to suffice.
After the alchemist got them all rooms for the night and let the inn-keeper know that his cook would have to prepare something edible, they brought the horses into the stable and saddled them down.
The two guards grabbed their saddlebags and headed for the main house. Eskel and Thalia looked after the horses. Like every night after a long ride, the witcher groomed his stallion’s black coat, checked his hooves, and patted Scorpion's flank.
Thalia also groomed her mare, but had much less practice than the witcher.
At the university they paid servants to care for the horses the scientists needed for their expeditions. But she didn't want to neglect her mare, after all, it had endured her on it's back for hours the last few days, without any complaint about her inadequate riding skills.
Silently, they walked together to the dining room, with Eskel effortlessly carrying both of their saddlebags on his shoulders.
Thalia was grateful she did not have to bother herself with the luggage.
She had only packed a small bundle of clothes and some other personal belongings, but she had found it hard to decide which of her alchemical tomes would be useful, therefore, the bags were practically bursting.

Eskel brought their belongings upstairs to the sleeping chambers, then went back down into the buzzing taproom.
An olfactory mush of beer, roast meat and sweat permeated the stale air. Many locals and some travelers sat at the tables drinking and gnawing on whatever the inn-keeper brought them.

Olbertz and Jonas lounged at an offside table, eating the last bites of their venison when Eskel and Thalia sat down with them. Their conversation fell silent, giving way to a somewhat oppressive silence in the midst of the chatter of the other guests.
Olbertz finished his beer and looked at the witcher with an unreadable expression. "I'm gonna go hit the hay. Miss van de Wintervoord. Witcher." He nodded to both of them, and stood up. "I'm going, too. Today's been tiring ... .Good night.“ Jonas hurried upstairs, following Olbertz to the upper floor.
"What's wrong with them? Shouldn't I be the tired one instead of our valiant knights in shining armor?", wondered Thalia with a touch of ridicule. During the last few days she had listened to Olbertz's boasting – only because he never got tired of gloating in front of his colleague. According to himself, he had escaped many a dangerous situation on his numerous expeditions - mostly through his superior intellect or his unbridled courage.
But perhaps also more through his flourishing imagination...
The guests sitting at the next table had watched Eskel since they entered the dining room and were
now giving him hostile glances.
"Disgusting mutant. No better than the monsters he’s slaughtering ...", one of the men muttered, just
loud enough to be heard by them. He and his two companions took their plates and mugs and sat
down at a distant bench.
Eskel, his back against the wall, overlooking the entire room, made out many bitter looks that met
him. The usual reaction.
Thalia, however, seemed irritated by the behavior of the other guests.
"Is it always like that?", she asked hesitantly.
"What do you mean?"
"Do people always behave that way when they meet you?"
"Most of the time. Especially here in Rinde. That's probably because many years ago a representative
of our profession had wrecked the city when he tried to fight a djinn together with a sorceress.
People are rather unforgiving when it comes to destroying their homes.
But it doesn't make a big difference, most people come across us with mistrust, fear and disgust. For
many we are callous, brutal monster slayers who do everything for coin. You have to get used to it as
a witcher. Plus, if you look like me ...
"You look like a man who fought many battles in his life, Master Eskel. Each of your scars bears
witness to your courage. And brave men should not be treated that way ...
Thalia looked at him and immediately seemed embarrassed by her own words. She blushed slightly
and averted her eyes.
At a table in the middle of the taproom two travelers played a game of Gwent. Judging by the worn
state of the cards, the two were experienced players. However, one of them apparently miscalculated
his move and let the whole tavern know with horrid cursing.
Eskel didn't know how to respond to Thalia's compliment and was looking for a way to steer the
conversation back into harmless directions. He noticed that he had underestimated Thalia's stamina.
"So far, you have kept yourself well in the saddle. I honestly expected that we would have to ride
slower for you to keep up. But I was wrong," he admitted.
"Thank you. But I'd be lying if I told you that I wasn't exhausted. I have to get used to being on
horseback all day. It's way more tiring than working in the lab," Thalia admitted smiling. All of her
muscles were aching, especially her backside. She was already looking forward to treat herself with
the cooling ointment that she had mixed before the trip and had used every day since then.
The first few days had been the worst - by now her body seemed to have gotten used to the
unfamiliar work and did not report any bruising and tense muscles until the late afternoon.
The innkeeper served roast venison in thick, brown sauce with potatoes and beetroot. After the
hardships of the day, Thalia was looking forward to her meal, but after the first bite she grimaced in
disappointment. Eskel smiled in amusement. "Did you expect something more aromatic?" "Hm ...
There's not a grain of salt and not one single herb in this. Couldn't they at least have used some
marjoram? It even grows wild next to the stable. I almost stepped on it. Well, hunger gets it in ...
", she sighed. Eskel chuckled at Thalia's disappointment. In this inn they served at least edible meat and
only moderately cooked vegetables.
In the areas they would soon be heading to, where food was scarce and people often starved, they'd
be lucky if they found a tavern that actually served normal food. But in order not to worry her, Eskel
remained silent.
The gamblers sitting next to them were now arguing loudly about the interpretation of a certain
Gwent rule. The merchant, who apparently had the better cards, accused his counterpart of an
improperly placed decoy. The dispute ended quickly however and the game continued. Eskel turned
back to his meal.
"In Oxenfurt you're used to better food, of course ... but you're not originally from Redania, are
you?" He had noticed that she spoke the common language with a slight accent of the northern
provinces. She barely softened the usually sharply pronounced consonants, sometimes emphasizing the word endings too much.

"That's true. I grew up in Kovir. But I have been living in Oxenfurt for six years. I actually thought that I had dropped the accent by now ...

"You only hear it if you pay close attention to it. But why did you leave Kovir? I remember your home as a pleasant area with hardly any poverty and even the more remote areas are almost completely free of monsters and beasts. That is why there is hardly any work for witchers. The last time I've been there was four years ago."

"Oh yes, it's beautiful there. I miss Kovir, the beaches, the forests ... But as lush as the vegetation in the north may be, academically it's a wasteland. There are a few scholars in Pont Vanis and Lan Exeter, but no school or university where I could have learned much about alchemy. My parents are merchants in Pont Vanis and wanted me to marry one of the heirs of the shipowner in town. His name was Gustav ... " She smiled at the thought of the dull, but nice young man. "I couldn't imagine being only someone's wife – and nothing else. I wanted to achieve something myself. Alchemy always fascinated me, even as a child. I mean ... Is there anything more interesting than exploring the elements, figuring out how different substances can react with one another and transform into something completely different through transformation processes? Or what effect certain substances have on the human organism? How to cure diseases and ailments by helping the patient's body to heal itself?"

"Isn't that rather the area of the medical profession?"

"Partly, yes, but medics and alchemists work closely together at the academy. The disciplines complement each other. Of course, there are some alchemists who focus on metallurgy, but that has never been my specialty. I'm more interested in the research on drugs ..."

"But you did not escape the engagement with the shipowner's son?" Eskel asked, pointing to the ring on Thalia's finger: Two intertwined strands, one of red gold, the other of white gold - a classic engagement ring in Kovir. Thalia turned a little pale, her face took on a sad expression. "Oh, it wasn't Gustav who gave it to me. It was Gregor ... So much time has passed since then...

Obviously it was difficult for her to continue.

Eskel regretted addressing the delicate topic so awkwardly. But he had noticed the ring at their first meeting, and wondered why the fiancee let his bride-to-be go by herself on such an expedition. Of course, educated women were accustomed to making their own decisions these days and were not scared of risks - but Eskel wondered how anyone could leave the protection of his fiancée to other men without at least convincing himself of their integrity.

A little embarrassed, he ran his fingers over his scar. "Please forgive me. It's none of my business..."

"It's alright ... Gregor was a student in his last semester when we met. I was just in the second year of my studies. A mutual acquaintance from the Faculty of Medicine introduced us to each other. When he graduated and got a job as a doctor in Oxenfurt Hospital, he proposed to me."

Thalia smiled wistfully. "I was very happy and imagined a wonderful future together, like every woman would. But ... things changed ... A colleague had invited him to Novigrad to get his opinion on a medical case. On the way back Gregor came to a village, he needed water and his flask was already empty. He wanted to ask for supplies and heard a groan from one of the huts. He asked if someone was sick and if he could look at them, but the man got angry and told him to go away.

Gregor, however, has always been an altruist, he couldn't just leave when someone so clearly needed his help. So he broke into the hut and found a small child lying in bed, obviously very ill. When he wanted to examine the little one, it bit his arm without any warning.

The child's father grabbed him and threw him out.

Gregor treated the bite and rode off to Oxenfurt. At first it looked as if the wound would heal well and everything would be fine. But after a few days he got feverish, had delusions and fantasized. His colleagues at the hospital diagnosed him with cordoxis. It's a rare disease. He had probably been infected by the child's bite. It begins very suddenly and then takes a long time to torment the infected. Gregor lived for another three months, though his mind, his personality had left him much earlier.
Death had been a salvation ... "
Thalia's voice had become quieter. She took a deep breath and blinked away the tears that had formed in the corners of her eyes.
"That was three years ago. Should have been enough time to get over a loss ... I intend to get to the essence of this damned disease as soon as I'm a professor. Then I'll have the ressources I need to start researching. If I can beat that curse of a disease, then Gregor didn't die in vain."
Eskel did not quite know what to say. He wanted to comfort Thalia, but he knew that no words in this world would be able to. Damn, he was not good at such things ... "I am very sorry for your loss. He certainly loved you very much ... "
"Yes." Thalia pressed her lips together and forced a smile. "Yes, he did. And I loved him too. But that's life. If fate has planned a different path for us, then humans cannot do a thing about it. We can only try accepting it ... It's getting late, I should go to sleep. Do you think I could get hot water for my tea from the inn-keeper?"
From a pocket of her jacket, she pulled out a small, paper-wrapped envelope, from which she drew a lavender and verbena branch. Hence the faint but pleasant fragrance Eskel had perceived throughout their meal. "It helps me getting enough sleep," Thalia said, getting up to have a jug of hot water at the barkeeper's table.
At the next table, the round of Gwent had just come to an end, and the loser went to the bar to get his opponent a beer. The steaming mug in hand, Thalia came back to Eskel's table and dipped the herbs in the hot water. She gave Eskel a warm smile. "Good night, Master Eskel. See you in the morning."
"Good night, Magister."
He liked the way she said his name. Eskel, with a softly spoken S ... He watched her as she walked up the steps to the sleeping quarters.

Chapter End Notes

Kudos for my beta-reader Opheliathemoth.
An unexpected intrigue

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The road was soaked with rain and littered with puddles. They did not progress as fast as they did the day before. Two days ago, they had left behind the densely populated area along the Pontar and were now on the road to the pass in the Kestrel mountains that separated Redania from Kaedwen. Occasionally they passed farms or hunting lodges, but mostly they rode by themselves for hours. Calling the well-trodden but otherwise unpaved path a road was pretty much a euphemism. In the last few days drizzle and heavy rain had alternated. Now the sky cleared slowly and promised at least a few dry hours.

Leaving the still muddy road was not an option, as the surrounding terrain was already rocky and there was scree everywhere, so the horses couldn't trot properly. At dusk, it became increasingly difficult for Thalia and the two guards to avoid the deeper mud puddles. So they set up their camp near a creek not far from the road.

At dusk, it became increasingly difficult for Thalia and the two guards to avoid the deeper mud puddles. So they set up their camp near a creek not far from the road.

When the horses were unsaddled and cared for, Thalia took her bag to the creek to wash some of her laundry. At her request, Jonas had built a makeshift rack from a few nearby branches, on which she could dry her wet clothes near the newly lit campfire.

"Here you are, Magister." Jonas smiled shyly at her as he set up the slightly shaky construction. "Can I ... can I do anything more for you?"

"I'm fine, Jonas. Thank you for your help." Thalia couldn't quite interpret Jonas' expression. What was wrong with the young guard? Before Thalia could ask him if something was worrying him, Jonas turned around and joined Olbertz who already arranged playing cards on a fallen tree trunk at the edge of the camp.

Thalia went to the brook and began to do her laundry. She heard the low voices of the two guards arguing about something – probably those confusing Gwent rules again ... The witcher had announced that he wanted to go hunting in the local area to ensure that they would have something for dinner. He was gone for half an hour now.

The prospect of a hot meal had greatly helped to lift Thalia's mood. Even after the heavy rain at noon today it had drizzled again and again, so that she got chilly despite her travel coat. Luckily it had dried by now.

With her saddlebag lying on the brookside beside her, Thalia rubbed the first pieces of laundry with a bar of soap and washed the dust and sweat of the last days out of the fabric. In her mind, she returned to the conversation she had had with the witcher yesterday. He had stopped his horse for no apparent reason and had gestured to his companions that they should stop as well. He had then listened with high concentration, seeming reassured after a few minutes, and gestured for them to ride on.

When she asked him about it, he answered that he heard a group of Nekkers at about a mile away, but that they'd gone in the opposite direction and didn't pose any danger.

Thalia herself hadn't heard the slightest suspicious sound. Eskel had explained to her that the mutations undergone by witchers in their early youth led to an extremely sensitive sensory perception. Unfortunately, he didn't tell her more about that topic.

Thalia would have been thrilled to ask him about the ways in which these mutations were induced and about their side effects. She was almost bursting with curiosity at the thought of the elixirs that were used.

But to her utmost disappointment Eskel immediately changed the subject. She would not give up so fast however. Surely there'd be another opportunity to ask him again.

A faint sound nearby made her sit up and observe her surroundings carefully. The voices of Jonas and Olbertz had fallen silent. Did one of them go behind the bushes to relieve himself?
There it was again! And it sounded more like a soft but deep chatter - Thalia had never heard such a sound before, that she was certain about. And it was sufficient to give her goose bumps. Stunned, she held her breath and peered out of the corner of her eye into the shrubbery to her left. She gave a piercing shriek as a gray-skinned arm appeared between the leaves.

Eskel grabbed the rabbit's hind legs and tied it to his belt with the other three he had already killed. Although the rodents were rather thin, four would be enough to fill their stomachs. He wiped his hunting knife on the moss that covered the floor and put it back in his bootleg. As he was making his way back, he heard a scream at a distance. He knew exactly who'd let out that yell. An rush of adrenaline went through his body. He jumped up and ran back to the camp as fast as he could.

As soon as he'd passed half the distance he heard it: a snattering sound, still rather silent but undoubtedly notable for an experienced witcher.

Hopefully it wasn't already too late. Hopefully, Jonas and Olbertz would be able to protect the alchemist and keep the Nekkers at bay until he reached the camp.

Why had he been so careless to move so far away from the camp? Yesterday, he had heard a group of Nekkers - at a safe distance, but that should have been warning enough to him. If anything had happened to her then it was his fault, his carelessness ... A loud bang tore him out of his thoughts.

With trembling fingers, Thalia tried to sprinkle the powder into the narrow opening of the pipe - nearly half of the black grains fell next to it and spread on her leg. She crouched on a branch three meters above the ground, trying to ignore the chattering creatures standing around it's trunk, striking at her feet with clawed hands.

Panic had taken hold of her. Her heart was racing, her breath coming in bursts, some sobbing, some whimpering from her mouth. One of the creatures lay on the ground next to the creek, his chest torn to pieces by the lead bullet that she had shot down with the “fire crossbow” on it.

A few seconds after she spotted the first monster in the bushes, her shock-induced paralysis was abruptly gone. Immediately she had reached into the saddlebag, pulled out the device, which had been lying under her dirty laundry, and activated the fire mechanism. Luckily, she'd stowed the prototype ready to shoot in her bag - in case of raids by bandits, she wanted to have at least a chance to defend herself.

What happened next was a surprise to both of them.

During the tests three weeks ago, the sound of the firearm had been much quieter, now it basically roared.

But the device served its purpose. The monster dropped to the ground, its pack backed away. This gave her enough time to reach for her bag, throw it over her shoulder, and climb one of the trees a few yards away.

She would never have thought it possible to climb a tree that fast. First, she slipped a few times on the damp bark, but then she caught a strong branch and pulled herself up. Unfortunately, she had no idea whether these monsters could climb or not. As she tried to get the gun ready for a second shot, she cried out for help as loud as she could. Where was this braggart Olbertz? And where did Jonas go? Did they get caught off guard and perhaps overpowered by the beasts? Hopefully, oh hopefully, the witcher heard her screaming. Why did no one come to help her?

When Eskel reached the camp, he immediately saw her sitting on a crooked tree, surrounded by eight Nekkers and desperately calling for help. One of the Nekkers tried to jump up the tree and hit her leg with his claw. Thalia sent him back to the ground with a strong kick on the head.

While running, Eskel pulled the silver sword out of the scabbard on his back and sent the Nekkers closest to him to the ground with the Aard sigh. The ogroids were unable to put up a defense to his sword. One tried to pounce on him from one side and drive his claws into his shoulder. But Eskel performed a pirouette and separated the head from the Nekker's body. Taking advantage of the
momentum of the spin, he slashed another Nekker's ribs and the next one's arm. The Nekker, that previously had been lying stunned on the ground, slowly straightened up and disappeared, half crawling, half running, into the shrub. Another one was stabbed by the sword into it’s entrails. This sight made sure that the last two attackers lost their courage and they hurried after their already fled comrades as fast as they could.

Eskel listened - the Nekkers covered an ever-growing distance, so they did not lurk in the bushes for the next opportunity to counterattack. In other circumstances, Eskel would have chased them and killed all members of the group. But one look at Thalia was enough to realize that he could not leave her alone now.

Even if she had been prudent enough to save herself in the relative safety of the tree, the panic of the last few minutes now gripped her. Tears ran down her cheeks, she sobbed loudly and looked at him in confusion.

"You can climb down now, they're gone."

It took her a few seconds to react. She tried awkwardly and shakily to get off the tree. Eskel helped her and lent a hand as she jumped down from the lowest branch. To his amazement, she threw her arms around him and held onto him tightly, clung to him just as before to the saving tree trunk. She was shaking. Eskel hesitated for a moment, then put his arms around her and held her until she calmed down.

"They're gone. It's over." Slowly, her breathing calmed. She released herself from the embrace, wiped the tears from her face and took a deep breath. "I'm sorry. I probably lost my nerve. It happened so fast…"

"Where are Jonas and Olbertz?" Eskel asked.

"I have no idea. They were sitting by the fire, I was washing my clothes in the stream and suddenly this beast appeared next to me. What are these creatures? Are those Nekkers?" She squatted next to one of the carcasses to take a closer look at the monster.

"Yes, quite large ones in fact. They’re always hunting in groups. Normally, they stay away from fire and tend to be fearful when they smell more than one person ... "

"I have only seen pictures of such monsters in my books so far. Those claws ... We have to look for Jonas and Olbertz – I hope they were as lucky as I was..."

Despite his sensitive hearing, Eskel could hear no sound from the two guards. He walked a bit further along the course of the stream. Behind a group of trees they had left the horses for the night. But instead of the expected five animals, he only found Scorpion and the alchemist’s mare. There was no trace of the mounts of the two men and the packhorse. A suspicion arose in Eskel ... He went back to the camp and examined the surrounding bushes. There it was - a fine, but perceptible odor. Slightly sweetish, like rotting meat, mixed with pheromones. A Nekker bait. "Looks like our guards and three of the horses are up and away. Their bait attracted the beasts." "What?" Thalia gave him a doubtful look. "I can't believe - Why should they do that? I mean ... I could have been killed by those critters!"

"Look – this bait is made specifically to attract Nekkers. This is not something that happens to lie in the bushes. I bet there are more of them nearby. They were waiting for the right moment - I have been far enough away and you were distracted."

Thalia was still stunned. "But why? Why are they just disappearing with the horses? Oh no - my instruments! My ingredients!" The realization hit her like a shock. "By all Gods. I never thought they would go that far ..."

"Who would not go that far?"

"The Efferens. The family of my competitor at the academy. Alric Efferen has also applied for the professorship. He's been playing unfair all the time, using his family’s relationships and money to gain an advantage. But that he would go so far as to bribe Academy employees to sabotage me - or even kill me ... Those bloody bastards! "

"Well, I couldn't have said it better. We should get out of here. The baits will attract even more Nekkers, this is no longer a safe place. Let's pack everything together. I suggest we ride a little further and setup our camp on one of the small plateaus over there. We should be safe there from any
By the time they reached the new campsite near the road, it was already dark. Thalia had been silent on the way there, the shock of the attack still showing in her face. Eskel quickly picked up a few branches, layered them and lit a fire with Igni. He pulled a blanket out of his saddlebag and put it over Thalia’s shoulders as she sat down near the fire. Her hair, previously tied together into a bun, had loosened, single strands fell in her face.

"Thank you." She managed a small smile, but still seemed to be thinking of what she just experienced. Eskel took a bottle from his luggage, opened it and handed it to Thalia. The aroma of a high-proof liquor clogged her nose. "Here, Magister, take a sip. How are you feeling?"

"I... I've never felt so scared before. Without you these creatures would have torn me to pieces ..."

She took a sip from the bottle. "Oh! What's this? It tastes strange."

"White Gull. A Witchers potion, but harmless. Soothes the mind."

"Just what I need right now, thank you."

She took another sip and took a deep breath.

"I still can not believe what Olbertz and Jonas did. I mean... Did they plan that I would fall victim to the Nekkers or did they think that you would be back in time to prevent the worst? Did they just want me to give up and return to Oxenfurt without equipment?" She gave the witcher an apologetic glance.

"Maybe I just refuse to believe they wanted me dead. It makes me feel better. Where are they now? If the Efferens really are behind this, then they've definitely paid the two guards to settle and start a new life somewhere else. Or if they really think that I got killed maybe they will go back to Oxenfurt ...?"

"You will find out when you return to the academy yourself. With the antidote." She looked so downcast that Eskel felt the need to encourage her. To his relief she smiled at his confident words. Eskel prepared the four rabbits he had hunted before the Nekker accident and fastened to his belt. A little later they were roasting above the fire

Thalia stared straight into the flames.

To distract the alchemist from her own thoughts, Eskel asked her about the firearm with which she had shot the Nekker.

"Oh, that's a prototype I designed. Not quite ready yet. The Redanian Army has commissioned the development of a weapon with a wider range than a crossbow. I have not found the right mixture of ignition powder yet. That's why I took the prototype with me to work on it during my time in Aedd Gynveal. To be honest, I feel bad about developing weapons for the military.

But if I hadn't accepted the assignment, then one of my colleagues would have done it. And at the moment I cannot afford to make a bad impression on my professors by rejecting a task. Aside from the research on remedies, my second passion is pyrochemistry - as you can see..." Thalia held up her right hand with an ironic smile, the little finger was missing above the first limb.

"An accident?" Eskel asked.

"Yes, a few years ago. Adding glycerol to nitric acid and sulfuric acid in a vessel gives a highly explosive mixture that reacts to the slightest shock. Therefore, you should run the glycerin even in small drops on a rod into the vessel, very slowly... Well, I held the rod probably a bit too vertical. The drop rolled down too quickly and hit the surface of the mixture. The explosion cost me my finger and drove some broken glass into my skin.

Fortunately it only got me a few scars. And a valuable experience that taught me never to be too impatient with explosives..." Thalia smiled mischievously at Eskel. Then she stared into the fire again.

"Well, I have more than enough time to improve it now. My equipment is gone. I have no idea how to research the antidote when I am in Aedd Gynveal. Without proper supplies, it will be difficult to extract and process the active ingredients. Miroslav's lab is certainly not equipped well enough for this. He confines himself to the production of... let's call it... herbal extracts. You don't need much for that... Do you think there's a sorcerer in town who could teleport me back to Oxenfurt for a fee?"
"Hm ... portals are a strange matter. Only really good sorcerers are able to create stable and secure portals. In Ban Ard you could be lucky. But the magicians there aren't very accessible, as I've heard. To my knowledge there's only one sorcerer in Aedd Gynvael who could help you. Goes by the name of Istredd. He doesn't like witchers though ..."

Thalia raised an eyebrow. "It's an old story", Eskel explained. "My brother Geralt had a disagreement with him. Because of a woman."

"Oh ..." She took another sip from the bottle. The potion seemed to relax her visibly. She looked at him long and intense. "I am glad that it was you who accepted the assignment."

Eskel raised his eyebrows in surprise at this turn of the conversation. Did the White Gull speak out of her?

"Um, well ..." Eskel was not used to receive compliments. Certainly not from a woman. Thalia's words embarrassed him. "I think dinner's ready."

He hurried to pull the rabbits from the sticks and laid one each for himself and Thalia on a cloth, which he had spread between them on the ground. The rest of the two rabbits he put aside - they would make a tasty lunch tomorrow. Thalia had meanwhile taken some dried herbs out of her bag and sprinkled the brown and crispy roasted meat with it. Having spent more or less of the remnants of their provisions in the last few days, the freshly prepared rabbits tasted delicious. They ate in silence.

Thalia rubbed her eyes and stifled a yawn. "I think I'm going to sleep. The alcohol made me tired."

She returned his blanket to him, took her own out of her saddlebag, and prepared her place to sleep near the fire. Then she curled up on her sleeping mat and covered in her blanket as best she could.

"Good night, Eskel."

"Good night, Thalia. Sleep well." Eskel also lay down, listening to the crackle of the fire and Thalia's steady breathing. Even as she slept deeply and peacefully for a long time, Eskel was still awake, looking up at the stars.

Chapter End Notes

Again a hug and a kiss for my beta-reader Ophelia.
They continued their journey to Ard Carraigh on the next morning. The road had dried overnight, so they no longer had to avoid puddles of mud all the time. Eskel, who only had a light sleep, had noticed during the night that Thalia kept turning uneasily. Surely she was still bothered by yesterday's experiences. Eskel had considered waking her up so she would no longer be trapped in her nightmares, but she quickly calmed down and then went on sleeping deeply and peacefully. Now she seemed to be in a good mood again, rode next to Eskel on Arenaria, as she meanwhile called her previously nameless mare, and chatted cheerfully with him. Although he wasn't sure if she really felt carefree again or simply repressed the experience. 

"... The first nights under the open sky bothered me a bit. Every morning I felt like I got trampled by a horse. But now my back has gotten used to the ground. As a witcher, you are certainly used to this lack of comfort. But for a lab witch like me, that's quite a change ..."

"Lab witch?"

"That's what they call female alchemists behind closed doors at the academy." She gave him a smile. "And in recent years, I really was one. I spent most of my time in the lab or in the library. It was good for me to come out again and see the real world. If you only live in the city, you quickly lose sight of the worries and hardships of the people outside. And also for the beauty of nature. And alchemists in particular should appreciate it."

"That's true. But you are not like a witch anyway."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, witches, or rather sorceresses, are a class of their own. And that's not always meant positively."

"You know many sorceresses?"

"A few. Most of them do their best to live up to their reputation: they are selfish, moody and arrogant. But maybe one will just become like that, if you can bring down a whole house with a gesture and a spell ... A sorceress who deviates from the norm is Triss Merigold. She is the only friendly representative of her profession that I know."

"Triss Merigold ... I think I saw her once in Oxenfurt ... She had long, red hair and was breathtakingly beautiful ..."

Eskel smiled. "Yes, that's Triss. She sometimes visits us witchers in Kaer Morhen."

"Kaer Morhen?"

Eskel hesitated for a moment, then decided it wouldn't hurt to tell Thalia about the fortress. Witchers' secrets or not, but he felt that so many people already knew about the fortress' existence - one person more or less did not make any difference anymore ...

"This is, so to speak, the home of the witchers of the Wolf School. If the assignments are scarce in winter, we usually spend a few months until spring there. It's nice to see familiar faces again if you're on the path all year round. Most people may not find it possible, but witchers also enjoy spending time with friends. And Triss' presence is a welcome change when you've had only two other guys as company for weeks ..."

It seemed to Thalia that Eskel felt more than friendship and respect for the sorceress Merigold, the way he talked about her and how his expression changed. Then again, was it really that surprising? Which man wouldn't be enthusiastic about this beautiful, extraordinary woman?

And besides, she did not care about that, of course. Why did she even waste a thought ...

"Where is this Kaer Morhen?"
"In the north, in the Blue Mountains. When we arrive at Aedd Gynvael, maybe I'll get an assignment there and then set off. The old fortress is not in good condition and before the winter there are still some repairs to do, otherwise the wind will whistle around our ears in the bedrooms."
"Sounds like a cozy place ..."
"One gets used to it."

In the early afternoon dark clouds moved across the sky. Eskel estimated that they might have half an hour left before the storm would reach them. When he set up a farm in the distance, he therefore proposed to rest there. As they rode to the front yard, five children came running towards them, all dressed more or less in rags and of slender, lean stature. "Greetings, children," Eskel called to them. "Is your father or mother near? We would like to stay in your barn until the end of the upcoming storm. And we would also like to buy some food from you."
The children stared at him anxiously. The apparently oldest boy turned and ran towards the barn. "Father! Father! Riders in the yard!"

From the open barn door a gaunt man with thinning hair and a haggard face emerged and walked over to them. His clothes, like those of his children, were in poor condition, patched and stained in many places. He slowly approached the newcomers, gazing suspiciously at the witcher, who was just dismounting his black stallion. Thalia did so as well and gave the man a friendly smile. "Greetings. Can you sell us some food? We still have a long way to go and our supplies are running low."
The man only gave her a glimpse and did not respond to her question. Instead, he stepped in front of Eskel, studying him from head to toe, disparaging. "We have nothing for you. Keep moving," he said in a surprisingly steady voice, looking at the witcher.

"We just wanted to wait for the storm, which will start soon. Could we seek shelter in your barn?"
The farmer grimaced, spat and murmured "I don't mind."
He went back to the barn. Eskel and Thalia led the horses in. The first drops were already falling from the sky. In the barn, hay bundles were stacked and a pile of grain lay in a corner to be threshed. "But I can not sell any food to you. We hardly have anything for ourselves. The harvest was lean this year. I'm glad if I will get all of our children through the winter ...", muttered the farmer.

He then turned to said children, who had now come to the barn and admired their horses and decorated saddles. "And you! Make sure you get the cows milked, lazy bunch! Otherwise, you'll feel the knout!"
Based on the speed with which the children obeyed, Eskel concluded that they probably felt it sometimes before ... The farmer started to pile up the hay bundles again.

"Well, we won't be getting new provisions today, as it seems," Eskel turned to Thalia. "Tomorrow we should reach Galinor, hopefully we'll be more lucky there."
"As skinny as the kids are, I don't believe our hosts have enough for themselves. Did you see how slim the smallest of the girls is? And how emaciated their faces are?"

"Hm. But that's not uncommon in this area. People here don't benefit from the wealth of the Pontar area. The soil is too poor for cultivation, but they try anyway. There is nothing else left for them."
"And he probably won't take my crowns, right? I would like to give the family a few coins."

Eskel shook his head. "Even though they are poor, people here are usually too proud to take alms. Especially from a woman. Or a witcher. Your offer would rather offend him."
The rain had turned into a real cloudburst, but moved on quickly. When the worst was over, they thanked the farmer and said goodbye. Two of the girls stood at the corner of the stable, looking at Thalia, without their father noticing. Their obvious admiration was actually not for the woman, but her wardrobe. Although it was nothing exquisite, Thalia's dress and her travel coat probably resembled royal robes for these children who were dressed in rags. Certainly not many travelers
came here, and not many of them were women. Thalia waved goodbye.
The farmer had now realized that his two daughters were not doing their work as he ordered. With long strides he was with the girls, grabbed them by their hair and pulled them towards the barn. "I warned you, you worthless brats." Still clinging to their pigtails, the two children stumbled helplessly beside him and disappeared into the barn with him.
What followed were the sounds of skin being beaten and the whimpering and crying of the two girls. "Eskel, we have to help them!" Thalia was shocked by how obvious the father was to abuse his daughters, even in the presence of strangers.
"We can't do anything."
"Of course we can. You are twice as strong as him. Help them!"
"And what happens after that? Such men consider it their right to beat their wives and children. Should I break his arm so he can't strike anymore? Who picks up the harvest then and manages the farm? The family can't feed themselves without it. And if I beat him up without leaving lasting damages, he'll give any stroke he's got back to his kids when we're gone."
Eskel spoke from his own experience, but he did not want to talk about that now.
"But…"
"Thalia. I wanna help, I really do. But witchers do not interfere in the affairs of others - not small, not big. We just stay out of other people's business. For the benefit of all concerned." Eskel mounted Scorpion and prepared to trot from the yard.
"That's all? You pretend not to care? That's all you have to say?"
Thalia had run to Scorpion and held him by the reins.
Eskel felt anger building up inside. Who did she think she was, commanding his actions and decisions? Would she bear the consequences for her actions?
Of course not.
The air around them remained silent. The farmer had apparently stopped beating his daughters. The man stepped out in front of the barn and reached for a pitchfork, giving the two travelers a hostile look.
"Thalia, for the last time. We are leaving now. Any interference would only make things worse. This is something you unworldly scholars don't understand."
"Oh right, us 'unworldly scholars'. From what I understand you witnessed two helpless little girls being hurt and you didn't lift a finger to help them. And I also understand now how everyone believes that you witchers have no feelings and that you are just stupid, unscrupulous monster slayers!"
"If I'm denied access to a lodge by its residents, I'm at least smart enough not to force myself in and get infected with a deadly disease!"
Thalia opened her eyes in shock and turned pale. Actually, she had just been about to apologize to him. She regretted her harsh words immediately after she had spoken them. He was right with the farmer, Thalia knew.
But his reply had hit her like a low blow. Her hand dropped from Scorpion's reins. She stared at Eskel for a few more breaths, then turned and wordlessly mounted Arenaria. Without paying him any attention, she rode from the courtyard and on to the road.
Eskel sighed.
Damn, he had gone too far. He had become angry and lost control. For reasons he could only hesitantly admit to himself.
Eskel cursed himself and rode after her.

They spent the following hour silently in the saddle.
Thalia had just kept her eyes fixed on the road, her gaze straight ahead.
It would have been much easier for Eskel if she screamed her rage at him but she just kept quiet. He could not explain himself why he had been so tactless. She had trusted him and told him about
her fiancé and he had misused that knowledge for the sake of a brief triumph. He was ashamed of himself.

When the oppressive silence became more and more difficult to bear, Eskel eventually broke it.

"Thalia ... I'm sorry for what I said. Please, forgive me."

Thalia was still staring straight ahead with an unreadable expression on her face.

"Please say something."

She restrained Arenaria and brought her to a halt. Eskel followed suit. Thalia finally looked at him, reproach and pain in her eyes.

"I entrusted you with something private - something very private and you ... you shamelessly exploited it." She swallowed, tears shimmering in her eyes.

"I'm mortified."

"With good reason."

"I know. I was angry and I forgot myself. That shouldn't have happened. Can you forgive me, please?"

Thalia hesitated. "Why? Why were you so angry? I saw it was hard for you not to intervene. So why were you so angry with me when I insisted on helping?"

"I wasn't angry with you. I was angry with myself. You know, us witchers, we have a principle that demands us to stay out of any trouble that doesn't immediately concern us. Doesn't always work, of course. If there's a way to clearly distinguish black and white, you can try to ignore that rule and do whatever you think is right. But life isn't really just black and white, is it?

It's a carpet, a grey rug, woven of black and white thread."

The witcher cleared his throat.

"I was forced to decide once. And I did - with ... with terrible consequences." Eskel was gazing thoughtfully in the distance, lost in memories. He took a deep breath, repressing the images of the past. "But that's an old story. And not a good excuse for my behavior today."

"No excuse, but maybe an explanation. Why don't you tell me?"

Eskel looked at Thalia. Her gaze was clear, interested.

His fingertips followed the scar that ran through the right side of his face. The memory of how the blades cut through his flesh was still overwhelming. Never in the past thirty-two years he had spoken to anyone about what had happened, not to his brothers who'd been there, nor anyone else. He buried the events, the guilt of those days, deep inside of him - without the hope of ever being able to free himself from it. Still, the thought of telling Thalia about it somehow ... really felt right.

He felt the urge to speak of the pain. Would she see him with different eyes if she knew?

Eskel sighed, hesitated ...

"Are you familiar with the Law of Surprise? It's how we... get... our apprentices."

"I once read that witchers are claiming the children of the clients as a reward for their services - but I thought that was a rumor of questionable reliability."

Eskel had to smile about her way of expression. "Well, there's a grain of truth in it. If we save a person's life, we have the right to claim whatever they first lay their eyes on once they get home. That can be anything, a new cat in the household, a freshly born calf or a child. I was so reckless in pronouncing that sentence as saving the life of a man who was threatened by a horde of Bobolaks. As it turned out, he was the Crown Prince of Caingorn - and what he found at home was his child. After six years, we should receive our so-called "child of destiny" - which means, tear it from his family and take it to our witchers school. But I couldn't force myself to do it. I already told you about the "Trial of the Grasses" that turns normal children into mutants - if they survive it. And not many of them do. And even if you survive the mutations, you face a hard life after a hard training. To fight beasts for the rest of your days just to be despised and hated in return. Not necessarily a fate that one would wish for a small child who would otherwise have a good life without suffering.

So, for sixteen years, I avoided Caingorn and threw destiny to the winds. Since the child was a girl, as I learned later, it would not have been suitable for the witchers' education anyway. Girls have no chance to survive the mutations. This girl, however, had the misfortune to have been born under the "Curse of the Black Sun". You
"The prophecy of the sorcerer Eltibald? Wasn’t that just an intrigue of the sorcerers that ruined ordinary girls’ lives?"

"That’s never been clarified, really. Some say the girls have been particularly cruel by birth, inclined to violence and have unnatural powers. But all that could have been just rumors, or just the consequences of the treatment given to them. Anyone who is treated as a monster all their life may become a monster themselves. However, Deidre fled Caingorn when she was 19 years old. Her brother and the sorceress Sabrina Glevissig were on her heels. And to whom did she flee to seek protection? To me. She felt a special connection between us and hoped that I would oppose her family and the sorceress to protect her. But her brother, Prince Mervin, carried a letter of safe conduct from King Henselt, which made it clear that anyone standing in the way of Mervin and Sabrina Glevissig and not surrender Deidre would have to bear the consequences. Vesemir, the oldest witcher of our school and our mentor, insisted on maintaining the neutrality of the witchers. If we messed up with Henselt, it could have bad consequences - not just for the Wolf School but for all witchers. But since Deidre was my child of destiny, it was my decision whether to protect her from her brother and the sorceress or to surrender her to them.

Of course, I could understand Vesemir’s behaviour - we protect people from beasts, but stay out of politics and the affairs of others. But Deidre trusted me. Although she had never met me before, she felt connected to me. I couldn’t disappoint her, nor could I expose my brothers to the danger of opposing the king’s command.

So I decided to help her escape. But Deidre felt abandoned and betrayed by me. She attacked me and cut my face ...

Eskel touched the deep scar that reached from his temple to his lips. "I wasn't prepared for it, I didn't even try to fend off her attack. After that she fled.

Sabrina Glevissig was, of course, outraged. She predicted that we would take the blame for all the victims that Deidre would have on her conscience when she would wreak even more havoc. And the sorceress was right. Deidre joined a gang of bandits and quickly became their leader. She terrorized Kaedwen cruelly and relentlessly until she died two years later.

By then, however, she had killed dozens of innocents.

Their blood stains my hands. I still don't know if my decisions were right.

I often see her face in front of me, the disappointment and desperation with which she looked at me when I told her that I couldn’t protect her ...

At that time, I decided what I deemed the lesser evil. But - as my brother Geralt always says - evil is evil, only the perspective varies. Witchers aren't noble knights fighting for justice. We kill monsters, that's our way, our destiny. Every time we deviated from this path, nothing good came of it.

Today, in the yard, I have also decided for the lesser evil, at least I'd like to believe it. But was it the right decision? I don’t know ..."

Eskel looked down, lost in thoughts. He had not told Thalia the whole story. But the rest was too painful for him to talk about.

When he lifted his gaze and looked Thalia in the eyes, he saw no anger and no reproach in it, but understanding and compassion.

"Sometimes ..." she said in a soft voice. "Sometimes there is no right or wrong, no black or white. We can only choose a shade of gray that we are most likely to live with.

Eskel, I have to apologize to you, too. I'm sorry for what I called you earlier. Please forgive me."

"I already have."

At night it cooled down noticeably. When the fire was almost burnt down and only the remnants of the glow lit up the darkness, Eskel woke up from restless sleep. He glanced over at Thalia, who was
curled up on her sleeping mat on the other side of the campfire, covering herself with her blanket and travel coat, her face turned away from him. She was shivering in her sleep. Eskel even thought he heard the soft clatter of her teeth.

He got up and rekindled the fire by placing dry pieces of branches in the embers, which he had previously laid aside. As the flames flared higher, he lay down again on his mat.

Thalia woke up by the faint sounds he'd caused.

"Eskel?" She asked softly.

"What is it?"

She turned to him. "I'm completely frozen. Would it be okay with you if I lie down next to you?"

"Of course." He moved a little farther from the fire so she could lie down in front of him. She spread her sleeping mat next to him, turned to face the fire, and covered herself. Eskel also put part of his blanket over them to shield them from the chill of the night. At first she kept a slight distance to him. As her breathing became calm and even, she moved closer to him as she slept, nestling her back against his chest. Eskel felt her warmth. He smelled the light scent of her hair and skin. He did not dare to put an arm around her to warm her even more.

Thalia's body, snuggled close to him, rose a longing in him that he hadn't felt for a long time. But also he felt great respect for the intelligent, friendly alchemist whose company he had come to appreciate more and more in the last few days.

Thalia trusted him. He would not disappoint her. He would get her the crab spider organs, bring her safely to Aedd Gynvael, and make sure she came back to Oxenfurt by portal, back to her small, safe academic world.

Women like her didn't belong in his world of monsters, of constant dangers and privations. She'd have a good future at the academy, would enjoy a high reputation as a professor, and devote her life to researching and curing diseases.

There was no room for a witcher in her life.

But maybe he would visit her next year when he was looking for assignments in Oxenfurt. Maybe she would even be glad to see him again.

Suddenly he realized how ridiculous his thoughts were.

It was time to get this job done.

Chapter End Notes

Many thanks to OpheliaTheMoth for the beta-read and her wonderful support!
Three days later, they reached Ard Carraigh, the bustling capital of Kaedwen. After spending the night in a hostel and buying new provisions in the morning, Thalia went looking for the local pharmacist to buy cans where she could store the spiders’ organs in. Her own had been in the pockets of the now missing packhorse. After that they left heading north. According to the archaeologists from Oxenfurt, the crab-spider colony was located in a forest near the village of Loina. Thalia had marked the place on a map where the expedition had been attacked by the arachnids a few months ago. As soon as they got there, Eskel dismounted from Scorpion and looked around, searching the area for signs that indicated crab spiders. "The arachnids mostly live in caves and tunnels underground," he told Thalia. "If something or someone moves in their hunting territory, they feel the vibrations of the ground and attack in an instant, crawling out of their hides. Unlike ordinary spiders, however, they hunt cooperatively. Mostly, three to four crab spiders in one pack." Thalia was clearly uncomfortable with the idea that the giant spiders did not move far below their feet under the earth. But Eskel had made sure they stood on firm rock bottom. So there was no imminent danger. "Can you spot any tracks?" "I do. Back where the forest begins, there's a bit of woven fabric glistening in the sun. They seal the entrances of their tunnels with this. We found the right place." Thalia took a deep breath. "What do we do now? Are we waiting somewhere in hide and watch the spiders from afar?" "We won't do anything. I will prepare for the fight with the crab spiders and then go where the forest gets dense. You'll wait with the horses up there on the hill at a safe distance." "Don't worry, I don't have the slightest desire to face such a creature. I leave that up to you. After all, you're the expert on monsters and beasts." "Good to know we're in agreement here ..." Eskel opened his saddlebag and pulled out his potion bottles, which were rolled up in a cloth. "Are these your witcher potions? Would you care to enlighten me what ingredients they're made from?" Thalia could barely restrain her interest in the potions formulas. "I'm sorry, but this is a secret I can't let you draw from the witchers schools," Eskel replied, well aware that he'd already revealed too many of the witchers' mysteries to the alchemist. "Since most of our potions are highly toxic to all ordinary people and work only with our witcher metabolism, knowing the composition wouldn't do you much good anyway. But as you can imagine, I have to protect myself from the poison before fighting crab spiders. Witchers are not as vulnerable as non-mutants, and immune to most poisons. But in higher doses the poison of these creatures can cause damage to us too." He opened a bottle and took a sip. The liquid shone golden in the sun. Eskel stowed the bottle again and closed his eyes briefly. The strong alcohol scratched in his throat. A few seconds later, the potion began to work. He felt an inwardly rising warmth and a tingling sensation in his stomach, which, however, quickly faded as his body absorbed the active ingredients. After a few seconds, he reached for another bottle and drank from it too. Thalia watched him closely, observing in fascination as the veins appeared under Eskel's skin for a few seconds. He took several deep breaths, after which the impression of the transparency of his skin had faded. Thalia swayed between professional fascination and concern. "Are you all right? What did you take the second potion for?"
"It sharpens the senses and speeds up my reflexes. Since crab spiders always appear in packs, I have to face several opponents at the same time. Good preparation is indispensable before you go into such a fight."

"Have ... Have you often fought against crab spiders before?"

"A few times. But since they always attack from their hiding place, you never know in advance how many you'll be facing and how large the specimens are."

He noticed that Thalia had turned pale. She looked at him anxiously.

"Don’t worry," he hurried to say. "I've been on the path for a while. I already coped with griffins, chorts and basilisks. A few crab spiders shouldn't be too big of a deal."

"Let’s hope so, for goodness sake ... Eskel, please be careful anyway. Don't put yourself in unnecessary danger. If there's too many of them..."

"It'll be fine, trust me. Keep the containers ready. You'll have your ingredients in no time ..."

Eskel moved quietly through the undergrowth. The fight would not be as easy as he wanted to make Thalia believe. Inexperienced witchers tended to underestimate monsters. A mistake Eskel was sure to avoid after spending seven decades traveling on the path. There was always something unforeseen that could happen, and crab spiders were no easy opponents in terms of their speed, their poison and their habit of attacking in groups. But he had felt Thalia's concern and wanted to reassure her. Surely she would blame herself if someone was harmed on her behalf, even if it was a witcher who should be capable of taking care of himself.

Before leaving Thalia behind with the horses on the hill, he had carefully brushed his silver sword with insectoid oil, hooked his crossbow into his sword belt, and fastened a samum and a grapeshot bomb to his belt. Since the latter wouldn't leave much usable parts of the spiders, he wanted to only use the bombs if it was absolutely necessary. In hindsight he probably should've made new northern wind bombs. His supply had run out during the season. The witcher sighed. It couldn't be helped now.

He had discovered filaments on a bush - a sure sign that he was in the right place. He treaded softly and carefully as not to catch the attention of his prey too soon. First, he wanted to find a place where he could keep his back protected. At the edge of the forest, a rockface towered up on one side. There he would retire after the first attack of the crab spiders, to prevent an attack from behind. Then he stepped back into the forest a few feet and stomped with his foot several times. "Come on, you eight-legged beasts. Here's a big, heavy delicacy waiting for you ..."

He didn't have to wait long. His senses, sharpened to the utmost by the potion, became aware of a movement to his right. He drew the crossbow and aimed for the carapaced body he could make out among the trees in the undergrowth. When fighting crab spiders, and especially the highly venomous specimens, it was important to stay away as long as possible to avoid the poisonous mist they sprayed when attacking. As soon as he fired the first shot, the Arachnids would be heading towards him. He had spotted a second and third spider on his left, farther away than their companion. A slight movement in the shrubbery to his right, almost a hundred yards away, made him assume there was a fourth one.

Eskel got ready. He took a deep breath and aimed.

The bolt penetrated deep into the Arachnid's carapace, the animal uttering a bestial scream. Immediately, the witcher hooked the crossbow into his belt - there was no time to reload. With a flowing movement he pulled his silver sword out of the scabbard. The injured animal went on the attack and overcame the distance to Eskel with high speed. The other three crab spiders had changed their positions as well.

With quick steps the witcher backed away to the rockface before his opponents could circle him. He positioned himself, weight on his left foot, ready to strike. The beasts now came out of the forest. There were four of them - all stately specimens of their kind, none of them a cub that would have made a lighter opponent. Eskel cursed softly. The injured spider was one of the highly toxic variant -
less heavily carapaced than its companions, but even more dangerous. The bladder on the back of the monster was filled with poison. At the first opportunity, the spider would spew it's contents on him. The injured animal, irritated to the utmost, attacked first and jumped towards Eskel. With a quick turn, he avoided the claws and struck his sword strongly on the side of the carapace, which had already cracked from the bolt of the crossbow. The soft abdomen of the Arachnid came to sight as the carapace broke completely. However, before Eskel could put an end to the first enemy, the second spider attacked from the side. The injured beast moved back and stopped a few yards away. To slow down the new attacker and keep it at a distance, Eskel hit the spider with the sign Yrden. The animal remained paralyzed inside the luminous circle. The third beast, however, seized the opportunity and invaded from the right side. The animal stood on its hind legs and spat on him its highly toxic venom. Eskel ducked sideways, avoiding the toxin but not one of the claws. The razor-sharp claw first slipped on the reinforced leather and the fitting of his jerkin, but then penetrated between his sleeve and glove deep into his skin. Eskel grimaced painfully and cursed, but turned quickly in the opposite direction and slashed the Arachnid's belly that laid bare. The animal let out a shriek and collapsed. One done, three left. The injured spider stayed at a distance, the poison bladder vibrated with rage. The animal, however, seemed to be badly wounded, it gave a raging sound. Apparently the lungs had been injured by the bolt or the sword.

One of the other beasts started to jump and tried to bring Eskel down. He cut off two claws with a fluid movement and sent the animal to the ground several meters away with the help of the sign Aard. The Arachnid, however, immediately came back on its remaining legs, covered the distance to the enemy and spewed out its poison. Eskel threw himself sideways to the ground and out of a role he jumped directly back into combat position. While moving he slashed the carapace with his sword and caused a fracture. With a pirouette, he got behind the beast and managed to hit the same spot again. The sword penetrated deep into the body of the spider and put a sudden end to it. The fourth, uninjured spider had taken the time to get in position and threw a sticky web of filaments on him. Eskel dodged the attack with a quick spin and casted Igni. The mighty hail of fire torched the Arachnid, who shrieked. The animal jumped to Eskel - a deadly fireball that wanted to drag his tormentor to death. Eskel ducked and slashed the burning spider from below. Stinking, sticky liquid spilled onto the forest floor, which Eskel could dodge just in time. The witcher tried to catch his breath. That was close. He would not have had the power to cast another sign.

Out of the corner of his eye he noticed a fast movement. The last remaining, injured spider, who had kept in the background in the last minutes, had obviously mobilized all its reserves of strength and jumped at him from the side, spraying a poisonous cloud. Although Eskel's quick reaction prevented him from getting hit by the full load, he felt the fine mist on his skin. Instinctively, he exhaled to prevent the poison from entering his airways. With a quick, powerful punch, his sword pierced the already damaged carapace and pushed into the exposed abdomen. The spider rattle out its last breath and died, twitching its limbs.

Eskel lowered his sword. It took him a while to calm his breath. Damn, that was a harder fight than expected. He was annoyed that he had underestimated the injured animal. He should not have made such a mistake. Eskel cursed. Only beginners and bunglers left an injured beast out of sight. Just his quick reaction had saved him from major injuries.

He looked at the corpses of the crab spiders. With a bit of luck, most of the organs that Thalia needed should have been preserved. Eskel removed his stiletto from his bootleg and began to elute the livers and venom glands.

Thalia peered intently towards the forest where Eskel was probably fighting the arachnids. It was too overgrown for her to see anything, however the few shrieks she’d heard sent shivers down her spine. The mere idea of facing a man-sized spider got her goosebumps. She’d probably have nightmares for the rest of her life if any of these monsters got near to her. And Eskel faced these creatures right now, at this moment.
Was that a column of smoke rising up over there?
The uncertainty about what was going on felt like pure torture. Of course Eskel had assured her that he could handle the crab spiders easily. But due to the way he had prepared himself, he seemed to expect a prolonged fight. If something happened to him, just because she had decided to get this professorship ...

Her small, academic world just seemed to be so far away that the reason of her journey seemed more and more unimportant to her. If only he came back from the forest at last ...

Scorpion snorted and stepped impatiently from one hoof to the other. Thalia walked over to the black stallion, stroking his neck. The witcher had told her that the Kaedweni only let a few people come close - apparently Thalia had meanwhile earned this trust.

"You're worried too, aren't you, dear? He'll be fine. Your master is very careful... " Her reassuring tone was intended to comfort the horse, but hearing herself talk in such a confident way calmed her down as well.

When she looked back at the forest and saw the witcher move in her direction, she released a breath she didn't realize she was holding.

When Eskel reached the top of the hill, Thalia ran to meet him. "Is everything alright?"

"It's fine. I have four livers and six venom glands. Plus some liquid poison, if you have use for it."

He held up a small bottle into which he had filled a residue of the toxin from the spider's venom bladder. He had carefully placed the organs in two leather pouches and laid them down on the floor.

"And you? What about you? Are you hurt?"

"Just a scratch, nothing more."

Thalia smiled at him with relief. "It really pays off to hire a specialist," she said mischievously. "Shall I take a look at your injury?"

"I think I can manage. I have a little experience in patching myself up."

"If you say so." She turned to the wrapped loot. "Then I'd like to wrap that up..."

After carefully placing the livers and glands in the containers with the help of pliers, she put them in her saddlebag together with the vial of poison (which she had wrapped in a clean cloth to avoid accidental contact with the toxin).

Eskel took a sip of water from his bottle. Then he poured the rest over his head and arms to wash the poison off his skin. He had to prevent a larger amount of the toxin from entering his body.

He then cleaned the little wound on his arm, drizzled it with Golden Oriole and put on a bandage.

It was time to leave this area. The side effects of the potions would occur in a few hours at the latest and put him out of action. Until then, he wanted to be in a safe place with Thalia. He turned to the alchemist who had stashed all the containers.

"If we get going right away, we should reach the next village before dusk. A bed or at least a straw mattress in a barn would do me good tonight."

Already two hours later, they rode through the gate in the palisade, which surrounded the village of Loina. They didn't find an inn in the village, but the local farmer was willing to let them spend the night in his barn. Meanwhile, Eskel felt a tingling sensation in his arm, where the arachnid claw had pierced his skin. Maybe the beast had dampened his claws with poison before it attacked him. That would be the most harmless option...

They made themselves comfortable in the hay and ate and drank from their provisions. Eskel brought out his potion bottles. The selection was getting slim. He took the potion Swallow, which would regenerate his powers. He also took a few sips of White Honey to intensify the toxin-neutralizing effect.

Thalia watched him attentively. "Is everything alright? You look exhausted"

"Well, fighting four man-sized crab spiders tends to be draining."
Thalia smiled at his sarcastic tone. "I'm sorry…"
"Never mind. I just have to rest now. I'll probably get a little sick from taking so many potions. If I'm sleeping restlessly and rolling around a lot, that's normal. Unfortunately, the potions also have unwanted side effects. Just let me sleep in."
"Alright. Rest well, Eskel...
"I will. Good night."

When he had already fallen asleep, Thalia, who lay besides him, still watched him. He seemed used to the after effects of the potions, apparently using them frequently. In the long run, however, that couldn't be healthy even for a witcher. From time to time, Eskel's face looked tense, almost painfully distorted. After about an hour, he relaxed.
As daylight faded, Thalia finally found to sleep.

Chapter End Notes

Once more I thank my wonderful beta-reader OpheliaTheMoth.

Comments are greatly welcomed!
When Thalia woke up the next morning, Eskel was still asleep. As predicted by him, he had been restless during the night. Thalia sometimes had woken up by his movements. She had bent over him several times to make sure he wasn't showing any signs of poisoning. Even if he had assured her that everything was alright, he certainly had been exposed to the poison of the crab spiders, at least in small quantities. A normal human could be killed by only a few drops of the toxin in a very short time. The witcher, of course, was much more resilient and had taken his potions as well. But were witchers actually immune to poisons or was their tolerance level simply higher? Since the potions also showed side effects, Thalia was not able to distinguish them from possible poisoning.

Now, in the light of the sunbeams falling into the barn, Eskel's skin was much paler than it had been yesterday. Her worried hand caressed his forehead. He didn't seem to have a fever, so as far as she could tell without proper examination, the wound shouldn't be infected. Not wanting to wake him up, she didn't dare to remove the bandage.

When she opened the barn door, the cool morning air sent a shiver over her skin. A goat nibbled on a tuft of grass and looked up briefly as Thalia passed. At the well she filled up her and Eskel's waterskins.

Of course, her concern and interest in Eskel's resistance was only due to her professional curiosity - she almost managed to convince herself that this was the only reason. Everything else would be completely irrational and inappropriate. Of all the men she had met since Gregor's death, the witcher was by far the least suitable for a romantic relationship. Not that she assumed he was interested ... He was certainly just kind to her, as he would be to any person who traveled with him. She was careful not to interpret too much into a glance or a gesture. Yet her heart rate quickened every time he smiled at her or said something nice to her. He was so completely different from all the men she had known so far ... His quiet manner, keen mind, and friendly nature were in strong contrast to his outward appearance and profession. It infuriated her how badly he was treated by most people. Those who met him with disgust and hatred did not even have half as much courage and wit as he did. Yet he was constantly risking his life to protect this scum from beasts.

She went back to the barn. Meanwhile, Eskel was awake and sat on a hay bale, his head resting on his hands. When Thalia entered, he looked up and tried to show her a weak smile.

"Good morning, Eskel. How are you feeling today?" Thalia looked at him with a worried expression.

"I have a terrible hangover - another side effect of the potions. It'll probably pass in a few hours, though."

"What about your injury? Did it get infected?"

"No, I've just checked."

"You didn't get poisoned, then?"

"I already told you witchers react much weaker to poison than normal people."

"All right, then ... So shall we travel further to Aedd Gynvael?"

"The sooner the better."

The road connecting Ard Carraigh and Aedd Gynvael was highly frequented. Most travelers and traders moved in the opposite direction, from the small town in the far north to Ard Carraigh and from there to the south. Many of them took benefit of the last weeks of autumn, when the passes in
the Kestrel Mountains were easily passable. In the late afternoon they reached the Buina, the great river that arose in the Blue Mountains and led to Blaviken. The narrow bridge over the river was busy. They had to find their way between the wagons, riders and pedestrians. By the time they reached the other shore of the river it was already dawning.

They camped by the wayside, not far from a group of traders and merchants. After caring for Scorpion and Arenaria, Thalia apologized for washing in the brook cascading a few yards away from a crevice.

She looked forward to a proper bath, instead of these constant "catlicks". In Aedd Gynvael, she would finally be able to enjoy the comfort of civilization again.

She untied her braid, washed her hair, and carefully combed out the damp strands. To dry it quicker, she let her hair fall open over her shoulders. For a brief moment she pondered whether she could show herself to the witcher like this - after all, only whores and sorceresses usually wore their hair loose. But since he seemed more likely to associate with sorceresses, he probably wouldn't mind. Not that she'd be able to compete with such a woman ...

She straightened her clothes. Surprisingly, the long hours on horseback and the rationed provisions already had their effect: her clothes were much looser than when they departed. At home in Oxenfurt she would probably have to buy new clothes or sew her wardrobe tighter ...

Meanwhile, Eskel lit a fire and prepared their camp. During the day he had tried to suppress the symptoms, but when he was finally able to settle on the floor and relax a bit, he had undoubtedly become aware of the progressive poisoning.

Eskel clearly felt the effect of the toxin in his body. As he had feared yesterday, a larger quantity of the poisonous fog that had coated him in the last attack of the crab spider had infiltrated the open wound. The Oriole had apparently not neutralized everything. Not to worry Thalia - and yes, not to admit his mishap for her – he kept it a secret. She couldn't help him anyway. No healer could. There was no cure for poisoning with crab spider venom.

Thanks to his mutations and potions he only had noticed mild signs of intoxication by now. He felt significantly weaker than usual, his senses were less sensitive and he felt a little dizzy. But what would have killed a human already took much longer in the body of a witcher to work. In the end, however, the toxin would kill him too - if he did not get the help in time, which he could only find in Kaer Morhen. Geralt and Lambert would make fun of him for the next couple of years that he made such a stupid mistake and get poisoned by a crab spider ... But that should be the least of his worries now.

Since Aedd Gynvael was already on his way, he would first take Thalia there and then follow the river Gwenllech to the Blue Mountains by the quickest route. It was not far to Kaer Morhen. While Thalia was out of sight, he had taken the rest of the Swallow potion. He would have to brew a few bottles of it in the city before leaving for Kaer Morhen. Normally he took his time to make his potions, but this time he had to do it Lambert's way and shorten the procedure.

Violent headaches let him pull a wry face. However, as the alchemist approached their camp, he instantly wore the mask of serenity again.

Thalia sat down opposite him, took one of the apples from her saddlebag and bit into it. After the first bites she turned to Eskel.

"I did not thank you for your commitment yesterday. You risked your life to get those organs for me ...
"

"Fighting beasts is my job, that's why you hired me. Don't have to thank me for that."

"I cannot imagine what it must be like ... constantly facing such horrible beings, having to fight all the time. Do you like being a witcher or do you sometimes wish to leave it all behind?"

Eskel hesitated for a moment before answering. "No one chooses to become a witcher. Either our parents make the decision for us or, as some believe, destiny. But even if most people greet us with
hostility and don't show any gratitude for our work - what we do is necessary. We protect humans from beasts. We do not kill harmless creatures and are no hired contract killers. Even if a few renegades didn't take this seriously. Dragged our reputation through the mud.

Without us, witchers, there is no one who stands between the humans and the beasts. It's what I was trained for. If I had not been accomodated by the witchers, I probably would have starved as a child. And one does not just stop being a witcher – it's a vocation for life. There are only a few of us left. With our deaths the centuries-old tradition will end. Until then, I try to do my profession as good as I can ... "

"And you´re an honor for your profession," Thalia said quietly. "I was wondering ... These ... these signs you used against the Nekkers ... and also when you light a fire ... Do witchers practice magic?"

"Most of us are just weakly talented for magic. For the signs, it is enough to execute the gestures carefully and concentrate." He remembered the time in Kaer Morhen when the fortress was full of life. The use of signs had already been his strength during his training. In sword fighting, some of the others - at least in the beginning - had outdone him, especially Geralt, but hardly anyone could match him with the signs - and that stayed this way until this very day. Even now, he was able to tease Geralt with the fact that he was unable to sustain Quen for more than 20 seconds.

Thalia interrupted his thoughts. "May I ask you something?"

"Go ahead."

"When ... when you helped me down the tree after the Nekkers attacked and I touched your hand - I felt that light tingle on my skin again ... even when we met for the first time and shook our hands, I felt it. Do you radiate some sort of ... aura or something?" The question surprised Eskel. As far as he knew, only magically gifted people were able to feel the emanations that witchers emitted. He himself emanated stronger than most other witchers, but this should not be noticeable to a non-magician. "Um ... well, witchers emit a faint magical field. But only a few people can perceive that. More specifically, only people who have magical talent themselves... " "That explains it. I was once tested as a child, but I only achieved the first degree with a lot of effort. With such poor talent a glorious career as a sorceress would not have been possible for me, so my parents decided not to send me to Aretuza. I almost forgot about it ... " She seemed lost in thoughts before continuing.

"Could I ... could I learn how to use those signs? Would you show me?"

Eskel hesitated. The Witchers’ codex provided clear rules – under no circumstances should their secrets be passed on to outsiders. However ... The age of the witchers was over, the knowledge became more and more forgotten. And what harm could it do to teach the alchemist a few simple signs?

It had been so many decades ago that Eskel had taught someone how to use them – he briefly remembered the novices at the Kaer.

Vesemir's voice appeared in his mind, admonishing him and the other young witchers to keep the secrets of the Wolf School to themselves ... But Vesemir was gone, just as the Wolf School would soon be.

"So ... to create a pressure wave, you have to bend your fingers like that ... no, lift your index finger a bit more. Yes, exactly like that."

Thalia tried to imitate the position of the fingers Eskel had demonstrated with her right hand. As her little finger ended just below the first phalanx, she could not fullfill the gesture completely.

"Shall I try it with my left hand?" she asked Eskel. "Hm, it's worth a try. In this case, the gesture must be carried out... like that. And now ..." Eskel laid a branch on the ground in front of Thalia.

"Concentrate. Imagine a storm gust that pushes the branch away from you. Try to focus your energy and then spontaneously release ... "

As expected, nothing happened at first. The branch remained calm, it did not even wobble.

Nevertheless, Thalia was eager and tried it again and again. As Aard failed, Eskel showed her Igni. When she succeeded in producing a small spark on the twelfth attempt, she rejoiced with joy. The twig, once again the target, did not catch fire, but on closer inspection, one could spot a small burnt spot. Tiny, but noticable.

Eskel smiled satisfied. "You learn quickly."
"You are a good teacher." Thalia beamed. Her gaze lingered on Eskel and transformed into an expression he could not quite interpret.
The firelight was reflecting in her big, brown eyes. Her hair was dry now, falling in a cascade of wild curls around her shoulders that seemed red in the light of the flames. Red like fire. A very pretty sight, Eskel thought ...
He felt his normally steady heartbeat accelerate. And this time it was not due to a potion or poisoning.
He remembered their first meeting - over two weeks ago. How could he ever have thought her inconspicuous? Maybe he should just tell her what an extraordinary woman she was to him ... But wouldn’t he just make a fool of himself?
A witcher was hardly suitable for a woman like her. She deserved a sophisticated scholar at her side. Someone as her fiancé had been ...
Suddenly he realized that the Swallow’s strong alcohol was already clouding his senses. And he surely didn't wanna say or do anything in this condition that he would regret afterwards. If he misinterpreted the situation or went too far ...
"Um, if we want to reach Aedd Gynvael tomorrow at noon, we have to leave early," he interrupted the silence. "We should go to sleep now."
The expression in Thalia's eyes disappeared slowly.
"Yes, you’re right. Of course ... "

As soon as she woke up the next morning, Thalia noticed that something was wrong. Eskel's skin was pale, he was breathing shallowly and shivered slightly in his sleep. Thalia was wide awake immediately and touched his forehead. It was cool - maybe a bit too cool ... Her impression that something was wrong with him had been true, then. Why'd he been pretending all the time?
Eskel woke up by the light touch of her hand.
"Eskel, how do you feel? Please tell me the truth. Did a crab spider poison you?"
Eskel swallowed and sat up carefully. "I was hoping my potions would handle it, I was sure I'd make it a few more days before the symptoms get too strong, but... It seems I got too much of the damn spider's toxin in my veins," he admitted.
"Please let me take a look at your wound." Resigning, Eskel held out his injured arm. As she unwrapped the bandage and became aware of the wound, she took a sharp breath. "Eskel ..." She had seen many injuries in her life, infected, gangrenous, with necrotic tissue. This was clearly one of the worst kind. The skin around the wound was bluish, in some places almost gray. The surrounding blood vessels were dark. The poison had spread from there.
"Why didn’t you tell me how bad it is? I would have ..."
"You couldn't have done anything. The only help I can get is in Kaer Morhen. In our lab, we have some potions that might be useful. My brother Lambert actually wanted to be back by this time of the year. He can monitor my condition when I take the substances. As soon as I have brought you to Aedd Gynvael, I'm on my way to the fortress."
Thalia looked at him in disbelief. He couldn’t possibly be serious ...
"Eskel, I won't let you ride alone through the wilderness in your condition. If we go straight from here to Kaer Morhen, how long will it take us?"
"From here? Maybe three days ..."
"That’s too long," Thalia thought, looking for a solution. "Eskel, do you think a sorcerer might be able to help you?"
"I dont know. Maybe my metabolism could be slowed down by magic, so I would gain time ..."
"We have to try this way then. We only need a few hours to go to Aedd Gynvael. Then I will look for this Istredd - you said he should be quite capable. This is our best chance."
Eskel considered her offer for a moment, then nodded. "You're right. The poisoning has progressed faster than I expected. I am not sure if I will sustain it another three days. Let's get going..."
He tried to get up, almost losing his balance. Thalia supported him immediately. Carefully, he got to his feet, but staggered alarmingly. He tried to go to Scorpion but had to be helped by Thalia. Before he reached his horse, he sank to one knee.

"Eskel, you can not possibly ride for several hours. Lie down and rest for a moment. I'm trying to get a ride on one of the merchants' vehicles for you. They are getting ready to leave."

She helped Eskel to lie down and then walked over to the traders' camp. One of them was about to make his horses and carriage ready.

Even though she was upset and worried, she tried to stay calm and put on a friendly smile.

"Greetings. Are you on your way to Aedd Gynvael?"

The man frowned at her. "Yes, I am."

"My companion and I are in dire straits. He was wounded and can not ride, but he urgently needs to get to a healer. Is there some space left on your carriage so he could ride with you? I'll pay for it, of course."

The man glanced over at Eskel, his face darkening. "That's a witcher," he said morosely. "Yes, that's right. He was wounded in fulfilling a contract."

"I have no space on my car for a witcher. Go find someone else."

"Please ... I implore you. He is a respectable man, I am a scientist from Oxenfurt. We need help urgently."

"I would help you, but not him. How do I know this mutant does not carry any plague on my carriage? For no money in the world would I let this abnormality near my goods."

Thalia realized that she would not get any further here. She mumbled a curse and hurried to the next trader, who also turned her down. She became more and more desperate. And even more angry.

The sixth merchant she spoke to did not dismiss her immediately, which sparked a tiny bit of hope.

"Well, I suppose that should work, my lady. What would you pay for the ride?"

"I still have ..." Thalia calculated shortly. "30 Crowns and 20 Lintars."

The trader's expression darkened. What else did he want? That was a very high charge for a few hours on his carriage.

"No deal then, I'm sorry. Do you have anything else that you could offer me?"

Thalia thought about it. Her alchemical instruments made of copper would have been quite valuable - if she still had them. Most of the other vendors had already left. If she did not manage to come to terms with her counterpart, her chances were slim. She had nothing left that could have been of any value. Only...

Reluctantly, she removed her ring. The ring Gregor had given her on this wonderful evening. Was it really worth it? Was there any other way? On the other hand ... it was just a ring. Only a piece of metal. Of course she'd cherish the memory of Gregor until the end of her days. But when she thought of him, her heart wasn't as heavy as it had been a few months ago. It was time to let go of the past ... And if she had the power to save Eskel, she should not waste any time ... If he died simply because she could not part with her ring, she would never forgive herself. Thalia took a deep breath.

"I will give you this. White gold and red gold, forged by one of the best goldsmiths in Pont Vanis. It is worth at least three hundred Crowns. That should be more than enough for your inconvenience ..."

The dealer looked at the ring critically, then nodded and held out his hand to Thalia. "We are in business, my lady."

Five hours later, they arrived in Aedd Gynvael. Thalia rode on Arenaria beside the carriage, leading Scorpion by the reins. Although this was really unnecessary, the stallion did not leave his master's side and trotted quietly beside the car. As agreed, the dealer brought her to the address she had given him - the residence of her former fellow student Miroslav Kajczak. The three-storey town house testified to a certain wealth that Thalia's old acquaintance must have earned. She tied the horses to the porch railing. Eskel cautiously climbed off the car. Thalia supported him. Without a word of farewell, the dealer left.

Thalia used the doorknocker and waited. A few moments later, a small, slender but well-dressed man
with strikingly large, prominent eyes opened the door. Miro had visibly aged, but otherwise had hardly changed since Thalia had last seen him four years ago. At the sight of her his expression brightened.

"Thalia! There you are, finally!" He approached her to give her a hug - which turned out to be difficult as Eskel's arm was still over her shoulders so he would not lose his balance. "Hello, Miro. Nice to see you again." Thalia was really happy to see a familiar face after all the hardships and fears of the last few days.

"Excuse me, but could we go in directly? This is Eskel and he is not doing well ... " Miroslav, who had previously paid little attention to the man next to Thalia, looked up to Eskel. When he recognized him as a witcher, his eyes widened a little more. "Uh, of course, of course. What ... What's wrong with him? Looks like he had a little too much, eh? ... I'm sure I can find a remedy, not to worry! Come in, come in!"

Thalia continued to support Eskel as he walked shakily to the house, which was exceptionally modern and luxurious. Furniture made of dark precious wood and curtains made of the finest Serricanian silk blend perfectly with artfully woven wall hangings. The facility must have cost a fortune. Apparently, Miro had continued to pursue and professionalize his business idea, which at the time had made him leave the academy ... Thalia led Eskel to a velvet-covered, wide sofa bed in the drawing-room. "May he lie down here?" Thalia asked.

"Sure, sure. What did he take?"

"He did not take anything. He was poisoned by a crab spider. I urgently need to go to this sorcerer who lives somewhere in this city. Maybe he can help Eskel."

Miroslav raised his eyebrows in astonishment. "A crab spider? Alas, that sounds bad. Well, probably an occupational hazard for witchers ... You want to go to this sorcerer, yes? Well, he lives near the market place. It’s not far. But I’m not sure if he will help you ..."

"I have to try. He may be our only chance ..."

Thalia only hoped that the sorcerer's aversion to witchers – caused by his meeting many years ago with Eskel's colleague Geralt - would not bar the way ...

Chapter End Notes

Thanks to my beta-reader OpheliaTheMoth once more!
Comments are greatly welcomed.
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The magician's house was easy to find - it was right on the marketplace, nestled between the warehouse and the arsenal.

Thalia stepped to the threshold and took a deep breath. It would not be easy to convince the sorcerer to help Eskel. Members of his profession were never said to be particularly sociable, and his anger with Eskel's witcher-brother had apparently never faded ... But she had to try.

She knocked on the door, hoping that the sorcerer was at home.

At least this hope wasn't disappointed.

A handsome middle-aged man opened the door.

He eyed Thalia critically. Only then did she realize that perhaps she should have taken the time to wash away the dust of the journey, straighten her hair and change her clothes. Worried about Eskel, she hadn't thought about her appearance at all and she probably looked a little seedy. She blushed slightly in shame.

"What do you want?" The sorcerer's voice was sharp, dismissive.

"I ... my name is Thalia van de Windervoord. I'm a Magister at the alchemical faculty of the Academy of Oxenfurt. Are you Master Istredd, the well-known sorcerer?"

Thalia had never heard of Istredd before Eskel's story, but a little flattery could not hurt ...

The man raised an eyebrow. "I am. Which concern brings you here?"

"I am very happy to meet you here, Master Istredd. Overjoyed in fact. You are my last hope to help a friend who has suffered a severe poisoning. Please, Master Istredd, I'm begging you to help me. I am indebted to this man, without me he would never have gotten into this situation. I myself cannot help him, so I brought him to this city because I hoped that you could aid him with your skills. Please, may I lead you to my friend? It is not far and every minute counts... "

Istredd seemed to think for a moment, lips tightening and still not convinced.

"Please excuse my appearance", Thalia hurried to explain. "I didn't want to waste any time, so I came to you as soon as we arrived."

"What proof do you have that you are who you claim to be?"

Thalia pulled the escort letter from the academy out of her bag, which granted every scientist secure travelling across borders. It showed the seal of the alchemical faculty - which Istredd evidently knew well. His expression became a little less conceited.

"Alright then. I will help you and your friend, Magister. However, you certainly understand that even a sorcerer has to make a living. What amount does the Academy intend to spend on the health of its employee?"

This greedy, arrogant ... Thalia, judging by the rumors about the character of sorcerers, had given herself as submissively and respectfully as possible. Although she had expected that the magician would not be averse to a payment, she had not offered it directly. Possibly he would have felt offended in his honor if he was assumed to help someone in need only for payment. Apparently, the magician did not find it dishonorable to make his help dependent on adequate payment. Well, she didn't want to haggle - the man's goodwill was too important to her.

"I have 300 crowns available on the account of the faculty. Is that enough to pay for your help?"

"Hm ... sure. A poisoning you said. What poison is it?"

"My friend was wounded by a crab spider. I know the poison is deadly and there is no effective therapy. However, my friend is very ... resilient. Maybe you can slow down his metabolism with a spell so that we have a little more time left?"

"A little more time? Why do you want to delay the inevitable, my dear? The longer he perseveres, the harder his agony will be. Forgive my frankness, but I would like to protect you from deceptive
illusions."
Well. Apparently now was the time to tell the truth to the sorcerer. "There is a place where my friend
can get the help he needs to recover. However, he is too weak to survive the journey. If you could
give us some more time, I could bring him there and we may still have a chance to save his life."
The sorcerer looked at her skeptically. As the perception was gaining ground, who the patient was,
his expression darkened.
"Your explanations, my Lady, are a little bit confusing. Tell me, would it be possible that your
"friend" is a witcher? A mutant who, in all his unnaturalness, has survived much longer than a
human with this poisoning ever could?"
Thalia sighed. "Your assumption is correct, Master Istredd. He is a witcher. His name is Eskel. He is
a close friend of the sorceress Triss Merigold, who you certainly know well. If you don't want to
help him for his own sake or mine, and not for the 300 Crowns that I offer you, please do it for Miss
Merigold."
Oh, please, let him be a friend of the sorceress too. Thalia had no idea how Triss Merigold and
Istredd were related. She just hoped that the sorcerer would not risk to annoy a member of his guild.
And she seemed right.
Istredd sighed. "All right then. I will see what I can do for your witcher. But I can't promise that it is
in my power to help him."
"I only ask for you to try, Master Istredd."
"You alchemists always amaze me. With your tinctures, essences and distillates, you think you can
compete with us sorcerers. Not only in the arts of healing but in many other areas too. But when you
have reached your limits with your little knowledge, you come to us, asking again for the help of us
sorcerers. You think you can explain everything in the world with your ridiculous laws of nature.
You have not even understood a fraction of what we sorcerers practice every day."
Thalia bit her tongue. She could not afford to annoy the presumptuous sorcerer, so she preferred to
continue playing the submissive petitioner. "Of course you are right, Master Istredd. Well, in front of
you stands such an alchemist who humbly solicits your help. Please follow me, I'll bring you to the
patient."

When they returned to Miro's house, he opened the door with a very worried expression on his face.
"Thalia, it's good you come. Your friend is feeling worse ..."
Thalia rushed past Miro into the salon and hurried to Eskel's side. He still laid on the sofa bed and
didn't seem conscious. His skin seemed almost transparent, streaked with veins. His breath went flat.
It hurt Thalia to see him like that. She grabbed his hand and held it tight.
Hopefully it was not too late ... She blinked when she felt hot tears spilling into her eyes. She had to
be strong now, for him.
"Master Istredd, please hurry."
The sorcerer had slowly stepped into the drawing room and looked at the witcher in front of him
with an unreadable expression. Then he seemed to overcome his displeasure and went to the bed. He
lifted one of Eskel's eyelids and examined the pupil, felt the pulse and put a hand on Eskel's chest.
"We're not a minute too early, Magister. Stand back and let me do my work."
Thalia did as he said, released Eskel's hand and stepped back a few steps. The sorcerer continued to
touch Eskel's chest with one hand and his forehead with the other, reciting several spells that were
incomprehensible to Thalia. A pale glow seemed to wander through his fingers into Eskel's body, at
first weak, but gaining in intensity. Eskel took a deep breath. His skin regained some color, the
translucent veins faded. After a time that felt like an eternity for Thalia, Eskel opened his eyes. At
first he did not seem to know where he was, looking at the sorcerer in wonder, who still let magic
flow into his body. Then his eyes focused on Thalia and he seemed to relax.
The sorcerer continued to work for several minutes before stepping back from his patient. He was visibly pleased. "Well, Magister, I did what I could," he said to Thalia. "His metabolism is really amazing. Actually, he should have been dead by now. Anyway, I was able to push back the symptoms and slow down the poisoning process. He should therefore have gained a few days time. But, please forgive my curiosity, how are you going to bring him to Kaer Morhen in such a short time? Because that is undoubtedly your destination or am I wrong?"

"You are not," Thalia admitted, surprised that the sorcerer knew about the witchers´ fortress. She glanced at Eskel, who was already sitting up. His condition had improved more than clearly. "Please give me your assessment: will he be able to ride? Will he be able to travel the way to the Blue Mountains?"

"Hard to say. I think if he can rest for an hour or two, he can ride - the only question is how long."

"Master Istredd, it’s not easy for me to ask you for a favor, but I do not see any other chance. Would you be able to send him and me to Kaer Morhen by portal?"

The magician raised both eyebrows in astonishment. "You're truly persistent, my dear. Yes, I can create a portal. But only to places that I myself have personally visited and from which I can visualize an internal image - or places that provide an anchor. The witchers’ fortress is neither the one nor the other. I can only teleport you near, where the river Gwenllech passes into the mountains. That would spare you at least two to three days."

"Oh, please, would you? Is it possible to go through the portal together with our two horses?"

"This is possible - as long as the horses are convinced to enter the portal. However, creating a portal requires a lot of power - even from a capable wizard like me. Of course this would have to be reflected in my expense allowance ...

"Of course it will. What amount would be suitable to compensate your strain?"

"I would say, another 300 Crowns could fill me with so much joy that I will quickly overcome the effort ...

Thalia swallowed. She would have to overdraw the Academy's account to pay for the sorcerer. But she would not fail because of money. "Then please prepare everything, Master Istredd. I'll get the money right away."

She went back to Eskel, who now sat on the sofa bed and rubbed his obviously tense neck. "How do you feel?"

He looked up at her and forced a smile. "Have been better, but also much worse. How did you persuade him to help me?"

Thalia smiled mischievously. "If something is really important to me, I can be quite persistent. I am glad that you are feeling better. Did you follow my conversation with Istredd?"

"Yes, I did. You want to bring me to Kaer Morhen by portal. It might even work. I feel good enough to cover the rest of the way. From the place the sorcerer has described, it is not far away. You don't have to come with me, I should be able to do it on my own."

"Don’t even think about it. I will not let you ride alone."

Eskel looked into her eyes. "Thanks, Thalia. Without you, I would probably have died in a few hours ...

"Without me you would not have been wounded at all. It's my fault you have to fight for your life now. So the least I can do is to try everything to help you. Rest a while now, I still have to pay for our selfless arcane Master."

One our later Thalia had arranged the transfer of 600 crowns on the account of the sorcerer. Luckily, the branch of Vivaldi Bank was in close proximity to Miro's residential district. After her return to Oxenfurt, she would have to explain to the Dean, why she had overdrawn her budget for the expedition by more than a third. Maybe this would cost her even her chance to become a professor ... But if that was the price for Eskel's life, then so be it. The witcher had recovered remarkably well within the last hour. He still looked like a shadow of his
former self, but he could stand on his own and seemed confident that he could make the ride to Kaer Morhen. In order not to lose any time, they would leave immediately. Of course, Thalia wanted to thank Miro before her departure. She hugged her old classmate goodbye. "Thank you, Miro. I am sorry that everything has turned out differently now than it was planned. It was so generous of you to offer me your lab for my research ..."
"And now you're going to leave again, as soon as you've arrived." Miro smiled wistfully. "Promise me that you take good care of yourself. And if you need accommodation on the way back or maybe you want to use my lab - you know where to find me."
"Thank you my friend. If I can manage somehow, I'll come visit you on the way home. Then we'll have a chance to talk about old times."
"I am looking forward to it, Thalia. And I wish you all the best for your witcher."

She went to the end of the alley, where Eskel and the two horses were already waiting for her. Istredd had positioned several crystals on the floor. According to him, these were needed to create a portal of the required size and stability to teleport both two persons and two horses.
"I hope for your own sake that the horses keep their nerves."
The magician did not seem to be enthusiastic that animals would use his portal.
"If the hacks panic in the passage, it could have bad consequences for anyone in the portal."
"Do not worry. Scorpion has often followed me through portals, he trusts me. As for the mare ..."
Eskel casted the sign Axii to calm Arenaria. Istredd opened the portal with several complicated gestures and intoned the necessary spell.
As confident as Thalia had been until now, the idea of stepping through that magical gate without being sure of the destination scared her.
Eskel looked at her. "Ready?"
She hesitated for a moment, then nodded. "Ready."
Eskel stepped into the swirling, shimmering light of the portal, leading Scorpion by the bridle. The stallion bristled for a second, but then followed his master. Thalia took a deep breath. "Come on, Arenaria. Let's show the men what a girl can do ..." Arenarias reins tightly wrapped around her hand, she entered the portal ...

Chapter End Notes

Maybe you recognize Istredd from the shortstory „Shard of Ice“ where he is the former lover of Yennefer. Well, since then he doesn’t like witchers too much...

Thanks to my beta-reader OpheliaTheMoth once more!
So close and yet out of reach

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

After a second in which she thought she could not breathe Thalia found herself in the middle of a clearing in the forest. Arenaria snorted beside her. Relieved, Thalia softly exhaled. A few meters away stood Eskel. Scorpion next to him looked quite relaxed again and nibbled on the grass at his feet.

"Everything alright? How do you feel?"
"Quite good, actually", Thalia replied. "I'm a little dizzy, but ... Ohhh ..." From one moment to the other she felt a violent nausea. She hurried behind the next bushes and vomited. When the cramping stopped, she stepped back into the clearing.
"I'm sorry. I'm feeling better now ...
"Eskel smiled understandingly. "Don't worry about it. Happens to almost everyone the first time they use a portal."
Thalia realized that she could hear the splashing of a creek or a small river not far away - this had to be the Gwenllech.
"How far is it from here to Kaer Morhen?"
"We should be there in about three hours. Let's get going right away. In two hours the sun goes down and it would be better if we had already made the biggest part of the way at that time."

They rode for two and a half hours now. Eskel would probably have found the way blindfolded, but for Thalia the junctions and paths through the forest looked all the same. She'd get hopelessly lost on her own.
Eskel kept upright in the saddle, but Thalia feared that the symptoms of poisoning had become stronger again. When he felt unobserved by her, an expression of pain crept onto his face, which vanished as soon as he felt her sight on him. Thalia was glad they were about to reach the witchers' fortress soon. Hopefully, this witcher who Eskel had mentioned was already there. Lombard or something like that ... Otherwise she would have to try to find her way around the fortress's laboratory and search the substances and mutagens that Eskel described. She could no longer rely on Eskel's help.
If only she had a little more time! One or two weeks maybe and she would be able to make an initial sample of the antidote from the crab spiders' organs. Whether this would work on witchers was not clear at all ... But it was nonsensical to even think about it. Eskel would never go on for a week. Suddenly, without warning, Eskel slid sideways out of the saddle and hit hard on the ground. Thalia immediately jumped from Arenaria's back and hurried to him. He was half unconscious and groaned painfully - whether by the fall or the poisoning Thalia could not say.
By all gods, please ... Not so close to their destination, not after she finally had hope that everything would go well!
"Eskel! Eskel, can you hear me? We're so close now to Kaer Morhen. You just have to hold on a bit. Please, try holding on!"
She tried to suppress the rising panic. She had to find a way to get him to Kaer Morhen as soon as possible. But how could she find the way alone? The last light of dusk would soon give way to the darkness of the night - then it would be impossible to find the hidden fortress without a guide. Maybe Scorpion knew the way? Surely he had come here before many times with his master ...
Thalia got up and walked over to the stallion. "Scorpion, big boy. Eskel needs you now. I need you now. Come here, my dear. Go down. Yes, that's right, that's good." Surprisingly, the animal obeyed her and dropped to his knees. Somehow she had to get Eskel lain over the saddle. He had lost
consciousness completely, but his pulse was still strong. As she put his arm around her shoulders and tried to lift him, she realized that her plan would not succeed. She barely managed to lift his upper body off the ground. With all her strength she tried to lift him onto Scorpion's back - why was he so tall and muscular? And why the heck was she not stronger? After two more tries she gave up. It just didn't work.

Breathless, she laid Eskel back on the floor, spread out his sleeping mat next to him and rolled him on it, then wrapped the blanket around him so he would not chill.

What should she do? Just staying here and waiting for the night was not an option. Leave Eskel behind and try to find her way alone with Scorpion's help? As a last alternative, maybe, but what if there was no one in the fortress to help her? What if she got lost in the wild despite Scorpions lead? If she did not find the way back to Eskel? If something happened to him during her absence, if he would be attacked by wild animals?

What if he would die alone here? The thought of that caused her to choke up, so she quickly banished it.

She had to think of something better ...

If this Lombard was already in the fortress and they really were in the immediate vicinity, she somehow had to attract the other witcher's attention. Maybe then he would come to her to check what was going on ... Only a weak hope, as she was well aware. But an option that could put into action. What she needed was a beacon. And not a small, weak, short-lived one that could easily be overlooked. It had to burn so long and bright to attract all attention in a wide radius.

Thalia took new courage. A concrete problem, a task she had to solve - she could handle that. She wondered what ingredients she would need and which of them were available to her. Eskel still had some of the bombs he had attached to his belt before the fight with the crab spiders. She rummaged through his saddlebags in search of the handy bullets. There, there they were. Thalia carefully turned the sealing cap and sniffed. Saltpeter. Ether. Rebis. And phosphorus, if she was not mistaken. Perfect. This could work. Just a few ingredients were missing ...

In her own bag she found what she was looking for: the "Fire Crossbow" and the vial of ignition powder. The coal, potassium nitrate, and sulfur contained in it were said to react with the contents of the bombs when ignited, creating a beacon that was second to none ...

The tube of the firearm should be suitable as a container to create an upward beam.

In a small bowl, she gently mixed the ingredients. To ignite the powder later, she removed the flint from the firing device of the weapon.

It was almost dark. It irked Thalia that in the last light of day she had just missed to collect firewood. But with the recent downpour, she probably wouldn't have found dry wood anyway. Thalia dug a small hole into the ground with her bare hands, into which she stuck the pipe and pressed the earth around it. She tore a page out of one of her precious books, forming a makeshift funnel to fill the powder into the tube. When she wanted to use the flint to create a spark to ignite the paper, it slipped from her fingers.

No, that should not have happened! Frantically, she groped the ground - which was full of small stones! How could she find the flint under the pebbles without light?

Tears came to her eyes. Think, Thalia, think ... she did not have a second flint. Olbertz and Jonas had the others in their luggage. Eskel would not have one in his pockets, he could just kindle a fire with Igni ...

Thalia's eyes widened. That was the solution! She recalled the gesture. Eskel had shown her the signs so patiently ... only yesterday, when she still hoped that everything was fine. She formed the sign with her left hand and concentrated. Was that right? Nothing happened ... She kept trying, over and over, closing her eyes, trying to imagine a spark, a fire that blazed powerfully.

And finally, after what felt like an eternity, she managed to create a small spark. Ridiculous compared to the ray of fire that Eskel could create so easily. But it was enough to light the paper. Thalia was so surprised by her success that for a few seconds she just stared at the burning sheet. Then she quickly took the ready-laid pliers and stuck the blazing paper into the tube. Immediately, the mixture ignited. A gleaming beam of greenish luminescent light shot up into the sky and
illuminated the surroundings.
Thalia let out a cry of joy. The relief that her plan had succeeded gave her new strength.
She glanced over at Eskel, who was wrapped in blankets a few feet away. She went to him, knelt
beside him and bed his head on her lap. She tenderly stroked a strand of hair from his forehead. He
looked deathly pale in the green glow of the beacon. He moaned softly, muttering a few
incomprehensible words. Thalia leaned closer to him.
"... your hair shines like fire ... so beautiful ..."
Thalia swallowed. Eskel seemed to dream. From a beautiful woman with red hair. The sorceress
Merigold probably.
Whether she wanted it or not, it made her feel sad thinking about him longing for this woman.
Although she was aware that she had no right to. Had she really believed he'd develop feelings for
her? Ironically, a witcher of all people? She was his client, of course he had been nice to her. She
called herself a fool that she seemed to have mistaken friendliness with something ... something else.
But did it make any difference? If no one saw the beacon, this would be the end anyway.

"Shit, what is THAT?" Lambert put down the ax with which he had just chopped firewood in the
yard. Even if the winter was still to come, it was already bitterly cold in the evening in the fortress.
That's why he had wanted to create a small supply for the next few days.
But the greenish ray of light that pierced the black, starless sky caught his attention.
For a moment, Lambert thought about going in, sitting by the fire and turn to the cozy part of the
evening with a bottle of vodka. Why freezing his balls off for whatever ... But the origin of the light
seemed to be in the immediate vicinity.
Lambert fought briefly with himself. Then he went to the stables ...

It had been getting colder in the last half hour. Thalia had stretched out close to Eskel on the blanket
to keep him warm. There was nothing left of her euphoria after the lighting of the beacon. The light
had gradually faded until it finally went out a few minutes ago. She had to admit it: there would be
no help. Eskel would die here in the forest, his home so close yet out of reach. And there was
nothing left she could do to help him. It was all her fault.
"I'm sorry, Eskel." She tried in vain to suppress a sob and put her arms around him. "I'm so sorry."
Her voice failed her service.
"Oh, shit ... Eskel?"
Thalia sat up immediately. It was pitch black, she could not see anything in the moonless night. Was
someone there? Had someone just spoken nearby?
"Ha ... Hello? Who are you?" No answer. The one whose movements she could hear quietly in the
bushes did not seem to need light to orientate himself. Maybe he was ...?
She heard a horse snorting, whether his or one of hers she could not tell.
The man, whom she could now vaguely recognize, had squatted beside Eskel.
"Who are you? And why is Eskel laying unconscious on the ground?" The man had a jarring voice.
Thalia let out a sigh of relieve. "Are you ... are you Lombard?"
"Lambert. What happened to him?"
"We have to get him to the fortress as soon as possible. Eskel was poisoned by crab spiders, he
desperately needs help."
"Crab spiders? How did this idiot let that happen? And where did he get near one of those anyway?
There are no crab spiders around here."
"Close to Aard Carraigh. The attack happened a few days ago. We have come to Aedd Gynvael,
from where a magician sent us to the forest near the Gwenllech via portal."
She heard a derogatory snort. "If you say so ... we'll get him home right away." Thalia heard a
scraping noise, as if a sword was being pushed back into its holder. Lambert put Eskel's arm over his
shoulders and carried him over to Scorpion. He pushed the unconscious over the saddle. What Thalia had just failed to do, he apparently managed effortlessly.

"Once again, who are you?"

"I ... I am Thalia van de Wintervoord, alchemist from Oxenfurt ..."

"So, Thalia van de Wintervoord, alchemist from Oxenfurt, you can't see a thing right now, can you? Here, give me your hand. Here is your horse. Take Scorpion's reins, I'll take yours. We'll form a chain. It's not far, we'll get there in a quarter of an hour. Then Merigold can take care of Eskel."

Merigold. The sorceress was in Kaer Morhen! So many mixed emotions fought in Thalia's chest. On one hand, she hoped that the sorceress might be able to help Eskel. On the other hand ...

She suppressed this thought. As long as Eskel survived, nothing else mattered to her.

She left it to Lambert to show them the way.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks again to my wonderful beta-reader OpheliaTheMoth.
In the darkness of the night the half-ruined fortress was barely visible to the naked eye. Not until they were only a few hundred yards away Thalia could make out vague outlines. No torch lit the way, no lantern illuminated the gate, through no window a light beamed out. Kaer Morhen was not very inviting at all. But Thalia felt immense relief as they rode across the bridge and passed the great gate to the courtyard.

It was pitch black in the yard, which obviously did not prevent Lambert from orienting himself. Thalia had stopped wondering about the witchers' night vision. Already on the way to the fortress she could barely see her surroundings while Lambert had easily taken over the leadership of their small column.

"Get off the horse and wait here," she heard him say nearby. He had a rough, slightly scratchy voice – so unlike Eskel. When she had dismounted, he apparently led Arenaria and his own horse further, while Thalia continued to hold Scorpion's reins. She fumbled blindly for Eskel, who was lying over Scorpion's back and was still unconscious. When she found his carotid artery and felt his powerful pulse, she breathed in relief. Luckily it wasn't too late.

From a distance she saw a light coming closer. Lambert had lit a torch, probably because of her, and was now walking in her direction.

"Give me the reins, we'll bring him to the hall," explained Lambert. He handed her the torch and led Scorpion himself up the path to the main building. Thalia followed suit.

Once at the top, Lambert lifted Eskel from the back of his horse and put his arm around his shoulders. Thalia hurried to open the huge wooden door so that Lambert could carry the unconscious man in unhindered.

"Merigold!" Lambert's voice echoed in the great hall. He laid Eskel on one of the beds that stood against the wall near the fireplace. The blazing fire spread a pleasant warmth. Thalia put the torch in a holder on the wall and immediately stepped over to Eskel.

"Merigold!"

Thalia touched Eskel's hand - his skin was cold, but she could clearly feel the emanation of magic that radiated from him. She opened the straps that lay over his chest and put the two swords on the floor beside his bed.

She was about to turn to Lambert to ask him what to do next, when he shouted the sorceress's name for the third time.

"It's alright, Lambert, I'm coming already," she heard a soft voice somewhere from the back of the hall, from where a staircase led to higher floors.

As the person called approached, Thalia could not help but admire the woman's appearance. The sorceress wore only a light, long nightshirt that looked like a regal robe and suggested a breathtaking figure. The red hair seemed perfectly coiffed and fell as a fiery mane around the woman's delicate shoulders. Although she had apparently already gone to bed, eyeliner and mascara emphasized the radiant, cornflower-blue eyes, the sensual lips were gleaming. She moved with such grace that she seemed to float rather than walk. Thalia suddenly felt inconspicuous like a mouse. Hopefully, this woman's abilities were in no way inferior to her beauty and she was able to help Eskel.

When the sorceress saw who was lying on the bed, her eyes widened and she quickened her pace. "Eskel! What happened to him?"

Thalia explained what she had told Lambert earlier on the way. The sorceress' expression darkened during Thalia's narration.

She moved closer to Eskel, touching his forehead and chest. A pale glow seemed to spring from her
fingertips. Triss Merigold closed her eyes, concentrating entirely on the magical probing.
"He is very weak. The poison has already damaged some organs. I can not cure him - not alone. For
this I'll need help. But I can put his body in stasis so the poison will not cause any further damage."
The glow gained in intensity, changing the color from white-ish to a bright blue. Eskel's entire body
was enveloped by this glow, it seemed to penetrate him and then faded again until it finally
disappeared completely. The sorceress seemed visibly exhausted as she released the touch and turned
to Thalia.
"You were lucky that you convinced Istredd to stabilize him – at the very least, it granted Eskel more
time. But even if he is a very capable sorcerer, he seems to know only little about healing magic. His
treatment has only repressed the effects of poisoning instead of ceasing it. The stasis now at least
ensures that no further deterioration occurs."
She turned to Lambert. "Yennefer and Geralt planned to arrive in a few weeks, but under these
circumstances I'll contact them immediately. Together with Yennefer I can try some spells that might
help. I suppose the megascope is still working?"
Lambert suddenly seemed embarrassed. "It did three years ago ....," he mumbled.
The sorceress was about to rush to the tower when Thalia touched her arm and held her back.
"Please ... Ms. Merigold ...
"Call me Triss."
"Triss, please tell me, how is he doing? Is there really a chance to heal him with magic?"
Triss looked seriously at Thalia for a long time. "I don't know," she finally confessed. "We can only
try."
Thalia took a deep breath. "I understand."
The sorceress made her way to the tower to contact her colleague.
Thalia turned to Lambert. "I would like to start working on the antidote in the lab. I do not know
how fast I can get on with it and if I will succeed at all, but since I can do nothing else for him ...
"Lambert nodded. He kept his eyes fixed on Eskel, who lay motionless on the bed. "Crab spiders ...
ninetyfour years old and poisoned by crab spiders. If that had happened to me, he would tease me
with this forever."
Thalia hesitated. Ninetyfour years? Eskel did not look older than a man in the middle or late thirtys.
Should the mutations be responsible? Or was the witcher joking?
"By the way, you've scared the hell out of me with the beacon. I thought it would have opened a
portal to another world and such a mess as the Wild Hunt would come right back here," Lambert
said casually.
"Uh ... I'm sorry." Thalia was slightly irritated and had no idea what the witcher was talking about. "I
did not have much hope that anyone would ever see the signal. Eskel wasn't sure if you would
already be here. I had briefly considered trying to get Scorpion to the fortress, but I would have had
to leave Eskel alone for that. Unfortunately, I did not manage to get him on horseback."
Lambert laughed jarringly. "Does not surprise me. The guy has recently grown quite a bit, sideways,
that is. But that would not have worked anyway. The black beast does not let anyone ride him except
his master. By the way, it's still in front of the gate. I'll take care of the hack.
Choose one of the beds. You can also get a room in the tower, but it's freezing cold there now.
Tomorrow morning, I'll show you the lab."
Lambert left the hall, leaving Thalia alone with Eskel. She walked over to his bedside and decided to
make it a little more comfortable for him, even if he probably wasn't able to notice it in his present
condition. She opened his jerkin, took off his boots and then covered him. Eskel's face now looked
relaxed, peaceful. She put her hand to his unscathed cheek. "Sleep well, Eskel."
Lambert was right, she should rest now – tomorrow morning she would start working in the lab. She
took off her coat and boots and lay down in the bed next to Eskel. Maybe he would feel, despite the
stasis, that he wasn't alone? She climbed back out of bed and pushed hers a little closer to Eskels.
When Lambert came back half an hour later, after taking care of the horses, he already found Thalia
asleep, facing Eskel and holding his hand.
The next day, Thalia awoke by the voices of a man and a woman standing next to Eskel's bed. Thalia blinked the sleep from her eyes and sat up. It was already morning she could tell by the sunlight that fell into the hall. The man turned his attention to her. No doubt he was a witcher, too. But with his white hair, his gaunt face, and his piercing predator's eyes, he seemed far more threatening than the other witchers. Or maybe she had just become used to Eskel. And she had only seen Lambert in the dim light of the braziers yesterday.

"You must be Thalia," he now addressed her in an unpleasant voice. "Lambert and Triss told us what happened. Thank you for bringing Eskel to Kaer Morhen."

Thalia got out of the bed, straightened her dress and her hair - she was sure to look ghastly torn off. But she had no patience to worry about that. She wanted to start working in the lab as soon as possible.

"That ... that was self-evident. Please tell me, can you help him? Sorceress Merigold was not sure yesterday if magic could heal him. Maybe you can find something in your lab that helps him? Eskel spoke of potions and mutagens ..."

"We will try both. You are an alchemist, aren't you?"

Thalia nodded. "Eskel has procured crab spider organs for me - if I hadn't hired him, then all this would not have happened ... I would like to try to make an antidote from the liver enzymes. Do you think that could work on a witcher?"

"Seems worth a try."

Thalia turned her attention to the sorceress, who bent over Eskel and examined him. Dressed in black and white, with curly black hair and stunningly beautiful. This had to be Yennefer, of whom Ms. Merigold had spoken yesterday. As fast as the witcher and the sorceress had arrived, they seemed to be traveling via portal as well.

"Triss has done a good job," said the woman, who radiated a natural authority. "His condition is now stable, the stasis keeps him alive and prevents further damage. At least for a while. Geralt, I will discuss with Triss how we can reduce the poisoning. I'll see you later." She disappeared in the direction of the staircase, without paying any attention to Thalia.

So this was Geralt, of whom Eskel had often told and whom her friend Shani had kept in good memory - even if her affair had lasted only a short time. Thalia felt the initial discomfort she had developed in the witcher's presence settle. This man was Eskel's friend, his brother. That meant she, too, could trust him.

She saw that her saddlebags were beside her bed - presumably Lambert had dropped them there yesterday.

The younger witcher also entered the hall. Apparently he came out of the kitchen, a piece of roasted meat in his hand, from which he bit off heartily. Thalia felt a bit hungry, but that was not the kind of breakfast she preferred.

She took her bags - better start right now.

"Master Lambert. Master Geralt. Could I have a look at the lab please? I do not want to waste any time and process the organs as quickly as possible and start researching."

"Sure," mumbled Lambert, chewing. "Come along, I'll show you the way."

"Thanks." She nodded to the white-haired witcher. "Master Geralt."

He returned her greeting.

She followed Lambert to a staircase that led to the basement. The air smelled slightly stale and damp here. Fortunately, Lambert had taken a torch to light her the way. He led her into a large room where he lit the lanterns in the wall mounts with Igni.

Thalia took a deep breath.

Gradually, the displaced shadows revealed a lab that would make any alchemist's heart beat faster. Distilleries, alembics, retorts, and flasks stood on the dusty tables, and the shelves were filled with
countless bottles, tins, and jars. Thalia immediately felt comfortable in this large room. It was obvious that no one had worked here for a long time. A circumstance that Thalia wanted to change. With a practiced look, she had quickly realized that all the equipment she needed was there. Lambert bowed with a mocking gesture. "Welcome to the Wolf School's lab. We hope our modest premises prove to be worth the attendance of an educated alchemist of the Academy."
"Thank you," Thalia replied, deliberately ignoring the sarcasm. "The lab is perfect. Although a little dirty."
"Don't think that I'll help you with the cleaning. A special sense of cleanliness is supposed to be one of the most useful female qualities." Thalia sighed annoyed. She often met this attitude at the university too ...
"Do not worry, I'll do it alone. If I hurry, I should be able to cope with the extraction of the enzymes today. Maybe I could use some help afterwards. Eskel mentioned that you also have some mutagens in your inventory. Unfortunately, I do not know anything about it at all, but it could possibly cause a better uptake of the enzymes' properties in the body. What do you think?"
"Could be - or it kills you. We still have a few old stocks of mutagens. But most of the knowledge about them has been lost long ago ...
Unfortunately, Eskel is the one of us who's best at alchemy. Geralt once told me that even during their education Eskel always took forever to finish his potions. Brought Geralt to the brink of desperation with that. But his potions were already the strongest even then. Always pleased old Vesemir that at least one of us worked carefully and patient. I'm more the fast guy. Eskel always makes fun of me brewing my potions. Well, now he's the one who's fighting poisoning. Holy shit…"
Lambert's lips tightened.
Thalia began to clear all necessary equipment on the large work table. It was obvious that she was skilled in dealing with the items. After her arrival last night, Lambert had been skeptical at first whether to trust the woman. Her story made sense, but since Eskel could not comment on it in his condition, they only had the word of a stranger. So when Lambert had taken care of the horses, he had searched her baggage and found the University escort letter, which seemed to confirm her identity. After consulting Geralt earlier this morning, when she was still asleep, they had decided to trust the alchemist - at least for now. Besides, he would keep an eye on her in the lab for safety's sake. Evidently she was worried about Eskel - a bit too worried for a simple client who felt responsible. Should Eskel have taken a chance and offered the "lady in distress" not only his services as a witcher? At the thought of that a mocking grin stole on Lambert's face. Actually, the dutiful Eskel always followed his principles - and one of them was not to build relationships with customers. Although Lambert had always suspected that this principle was more of a justification if he and Geralt boasted of their conquests ...
But what were principles still worth today anyway?
"I'll pick out all the ingredients that may be useful. And there may be some old tome in the library that might interest you. Fuck secret witchers' knowledge."

Geralt looked down at his brother, frowning worriedly. He had pulled out a chair next to Eskel's bed. At the moment, he could do nothing to help his oldest friend, and his powerlessness drained his nerves. Last night, when Yen and he had gone to bed, the megascope that Yen had installed in their bedroom had been activated. The projected image of Triss immediately put Geralt on alert. For a few years now, he and Yen still had regular contact with their old friend, but a call in the middle of the night could mean nothing good. For a brief moment, Geralt had feared that Triss might have hoped to find him alone - to once again confess her feelings. But he had rejected the thought immediately when he had noticed the sorceress' worried expression.
Yen and he left immediately after they had packed the bare necessities. The route between Toussaint
and Kaer Morhen was too long for a single teleport, so Yen had used several intermediate stations. Even after all these years, Geralt hated to travel that way. But as time was pressing, he had agreed without protesting. When they arrived at the fortress, he could clearly see how much the creation of the portals had exhausted Yen. They had moved into their old room, high up in the tower, which they used whenever they paid a visit to Kaer Morhen. After Geralt had fanned the fireplace, it had quickly become tolerably warm, so they had spent the night clinging tightly together and wrapped in blankets in bed.

Now Yen was consulting Triss about spells that might help Eskel. Lambert helped the alchemist in the lab. He had nothing meaningful left to do but to keep company with his brother.

He was aware of the irony of the situation ... Earlier, when Eskel and he had shared a sleeping chamber during their training, Eskel had always watched over his bed while Geralt had recovered from the further mutations to which he had been subjected. Together with a handful of other "lucky ones" Geralt had been selected for experiments. In addition to the changes experienced by all the young witchers who survived the Trial of the Grases, he and the other boys had been given more potions, mutagens, and spells.

Geralt had been the only one of the subjects who had survived the procedure. When he was brought back to the other young witchers, his hair had turned white and his body even less human than it had been after the first trial.

Worse than the physical changes, however, were the psychological consequences of the treatment. Geralt was apathetic, no longer taking part in the usual life in the fortress and he hardly slept. For nights he stared silently at the ceiling, trapped in the horrors that had crept into his soul. There were no feelings left in him except an unruly, crippling rage. And sadness.

The only one that had connected him with the real world back then had been Eskel. The other juvenile witchers had avoided Geralt - but not his roommate. Eskel had tirelessly tried to get through to Geralt, talking to him all night, trying to lead him out of his apathy with self-invented stories. And his persistence had shown success. After several weeks, the corner of Geralt’s mouth had flinched when Eskel had told him a - actually silly - story. When Geralt commented on the punchline after weeks of silence, Eskel was startled. Geralt would never forget the subsequent relieved expression on his friend's face.

As Geralt gradually returned to the normal life in the fortress, others still met him with skepticism and suspicion. But Eskel, who enjoyed quite a great deal of popularity and respect among their mates, had succeeded in getting Geralt accepted as one of their own by the young witchers over time.

Geralt wondered what would have become of him if he hadn’t had a friend as good as Eskel back then ...

But now he could do nothing for him - no silly story in the world would help Eskel now. But maybe the sound of a familiar voice still got through to him and gave him a little comfort. Geralt quietly began to talk...

Chapter End Notes

A big hug to my wonderful beta-reader OpheliaTheMoth.
The blue glow that seemed to flow from Triss's fingertips gained intensity, spreading and mingling with the magical field Yennefer created. The effect was enhanced by two amulets, which the sorceresses had placed on Eskel's chest. For more than an hour, the two had already worked together to repair the damage caused by the poison. Triss had suspended the stasis Eskel's body had been in for the last three days.

The sorceresses intoned a common spell, a litany that differed in every third verse, then merged into a single line.

Yennefer had suggested to try the ancient healing spell "Alornis' Hope" which was taught to all students in Aretusa in their last year, provided they completed healing magic. The common intonation ended, the glow died.

Triss sighed. "I cannot find any significant improvement. Did we do it wrong?"

Yennefer shook her head, black curls dancing around her shoulders. "No, the spell was done correctly, otherwise the streams would not have merged. It was simply not enough."

She looked out of the window, lost in her thoughts, without evenicing the view of the mountains at all. They had moved Eskel into one of the tower rooms after Geralt and Lambert made it habitable and heated the fireplace.

"I don't know what to do anymore. Put him back in stasis, Triss. I need a break. Maybe we can come up with a solution if we are a little more rested."

In the Great Hall, Yennefer and Triss found the two witchers and the alchemist engrossed in a lively discussion about the formula of a special potion. Distributed on the table were countless books and folios, some of them open. Thalia had filled a few sheets of paper with notes and added a quick sketch that represented the manufacturing process.

"It cannot work like that, Lambert. If we add the essence here ..." Thalia pointed to a specific passage in the sketch. "... then it gains too much heat and forfeits most of the active ingredients."

Lambert rolled his eyes in annoyment and pulled out a particularly thick, large-format tome among the other books. "But that's exactly what it says in 'Master Gorlan's Compendium of Healing Potions'. That is exactly how we brew our potions for several generations of witchers. And our potions work.

Just because you poisoners in Oxenfurt do everything differently does not mean it's that much better."

"All I'm saying is that your potions might work even better if you add the essence in the end ..." Geralt, seated on the bench opposite Thalia and Lambert, his head clasped in his hands, sighed.

"Stop arguing. Lambert, do you see any reason why it might be bad to add the essence at the end? Because I do not see it. If Thalia thinks it's that much better and it does not cause any disadvantages, let's do it that way. Even Vesemir has often changed master Gorlan's recipes ..."

"All right, fine, let's do it this way." Lambert gave the tome a nasty push that let it slide to the edge of the table.

Yennefer sat down next to Geralt. "Are you making progress?"

"So it seems. Although very small, we're progressing nonetheless. Thalia has isolated the liver enzymes of crab spiders. Since these enzymes in the body of the spiders ensure that their own poison is defanged, we should be able to use their help to produce an effective antidote ..."

"The problem is ..." Thalia interrupted him. "... that we still have to find a way to get the enzymes absorbed by the body as effectively as possible. There are a few interesting approaches in the old witchers' recipes. Mutagens seem to be the most promising - at least if the patient has already been
physically altered, which is the case with witchers. But since I've never worked with mutagens before, I do not have any experience with them."
"That's why the educated alchemist might want to hear the advice of the witchers who probably know better," interjected Lambert. Thalia gave him a critical look, an eyebrow raised. "As much as a certain witcher has told me, you do not have much experience with the production and use of mutagens, if I remember correctly ..."
She turned back to one of the books on the stack in front of her - an apparently very old copy. Yennefer read the coined title on the cover: "The Use of Mutagens to Assimilate Draconid Self-Healing. A treatise by Idarran of Ulivo“ Alzur's student himself - his name had a bad connotation. In search of knowledge, his teacher and he himself had literally gone over dead bodies and had no scruples while testing their theories. Nonetheless, they had achieved amazing results that had revolutionized the existing knowledge of spells and alchemy.
Thalia opened the book at a previously marked page. "I think we should try this. It seems that Ulivo has also worked with enzymes so the results should be comparable ... "
Geralt turned to Yennefer. "Did you achieve something with your magic?"
Yennefer shook her head in resignation, Triss pressed her lips together. "It doesn't seem to work," Yennefer said. "By now we have tried almost everything that could be promising. We can not maintain his condition for a long time. Two days ago I was pretty sure that we could heal him."
Lambert leaned back and crossed his arms. "Again, a new chapter in the long story 'The boundless self-overestimation of the sorceresses',"
"Lambert! Drop it!“ Geralt gave the young witcher an irritated look. "Crab spider venom is one of the strongest known toxins and the poisoning was well advanced before Yen and Triss could even intervene. They do their best, so restrain yourself!"
Thalia had already noticed that Lambert was particularly dismissive, even offensive to the sorceresses. Of course, his rugged nature had also affected her, but in comparison to this behaviour towards the sorceresses he restrained himself. Surely there was a previous history she did not know - and perhaps did not want to know. In any case, they had no time to lose, certainly not with hostility and childishness. She took Master of Ulivo's work, pinched a finger between the pages so as not to lose the relevant part, and stood up. "Would the witchers be so kind as to accompany me to the lab? There is a lot of work ahead of us and I would be glad for your help ...
"
Drop by drop, the carrier of the mutagens fell into the greenish fluid that was already in the glass vessel. The substances mingled, reacted together ... Thalia sighed and bit her lip. Did they do everything right? Had the active ingredients not gotten too much heat? Was the relationship between enzymes and mutagens correct? The instructions in the old book were unfortunately only very vague, some passages were hardly understandable. Often, Thalia had to rely on her instinct and experience in dealing with toxins and enzymes. Without Geralt’s and Lambert's help, she would almost have despaired several times.
Geralt had retired with Yennefer after spending half the night with Thalia and Lambert in the lab. Like the days and sometimes nights before that. Numerous setbacks had dampened the initial euphoria following the discovery of Ulivo's treatise.
Lambert leaned against one of the tables. "Call it a day, Thalia. It does not drip any faster by simply staring at it."
Thalia sighed. "You're right, we just can't do anything more right now. I'll go visit Eskel again. See you later, Lambert."
She went up the stone staircase that led to the sleeping section of the fortress. She hesitated at the door to Eskel's chamber. Whenever she had taken a break from lab work in the last few days, she had visited Eskel.
The stasis had slowed down his metabolism so much that the poison could hardly do more harm. But seeing him like that - almost deathly pale and unconscious - caused her to choke up for a second. That's how it had been with Gregor back then - when he was ravaged by the Cordoxia and she hadn't been able to do anything to help him. She took a deep breath and opened the door.

Firewood still glowed in the fireplace and spread a pleasant warmth in the room. Thalia put two more logs on to keep the fire from going out. Only then, hesitating, did she turn to the man on the bed.

Every time she saw him, she was afraid that it might already be too late. That she had not found the solution fast enough. Dark veins appeared under his pale, waxy skin. He had grown a dense beard in the last few days. Since he always shaved so carefully, the difference was particularly noticeable.

Eskel's shirt was slightly open, revealing his scarred chest.

She sat down next to him on the bed and pulled the blanket a little higher. Then she leaned close to him. "It'll be done soon, Eskel," she whispered. "We have the antidote. It will be ready in a few hours. And then you'll feel better soon ..."

If only she really could believe it herself.

She gave in to the impulse and kissed him gently on the forehead.

At first she did not know exactly what it was that suddenly disturbed her. His skin felt pleasantly warm. Then she realized what she had felt - or rather had not felt: the gentle magical aura that usually emanated from Eskel, and which she had always felt as a light, pleasant tingle when she touched him.

Thalia felt a shiver run down her spine. She put her hand on Eskel's unscathed cheek. There it was - but much weaker than usual, barely perceptible. Was this a side-effect of the stasis his body was in?

Thalia didn't quite believe it. Something was wrong.

She rushed out of the room and shouted for Yennefer and Triss.

The flame of the burner blazed under the distilling flask. The mounted alembic collected the condensate. The precious liquid, in which they put so much hope, dripped slowly into a receptacle.

"All this waiting is driving me crazy!" Thalia leaned heavily on the lab bench.

Geralt and Lambert joined the alchemist in the lab, while Yennefer and Triss made another attempt to improve Eskel's condition with magic. Both had been discussing an old folio in Kaer Morhen's library when Thalia had alarmed them and had rushed to their patient immediately. Since then they had no choice but to wait - and finish the antidote.

Lambert leaned against one of the shelves, his brow sceptical. "I was wondering, Thalia: How did you even realize that Eskel hardly emanates anymore? Ordinary people don't actually notice it ... " Thalia continued to watch the distillation process while she replied absent-minded. "Oh, I am weakly magically gifted. Extremely weak, to be exact. But I already noticed that tingle on my skin when I touched Eskel for the first time."

"Oh ho ho ... Our otherwise so reticent friend seems to have lost no time. Silent waters run deep ..." Thalia was confused at first. Then the blush shot into her face. "I did not mean it like that. We are not ...

"No? Only you two, alone for weeks, in the wilderness ... It's no wonder that our scarred friend got weak. Even if you don't have horns ..."

Thalia shot him a withering look.

"Shut it, Lambert," Geralt interposed. "This is not the time for teasing."

"Why not? She better knows that Eskel likes succubi."

"Lambert!"

"It's okay, Geralt," Thalia soothed. "Lambert can't shock me with such allusions. I'm lucky it wasn't him who took the job, but a witcher with much better manners. After several weeks alone in the wild with Lambert, I would probably have grown horns ...

Lambert acknowledged this remark by crossing his arms and raising an eyebrow. The last drops fell out of the distillation tube, forming concentric circles on the surface of the greenish liquid. Thalia
extinguished the burner and freed the glass jar from its holder. Briefly, she checked the smell and clarity of the contents, then corked the bottle and set it on the table with a sigh. "I think that's the best result we can achieve so far..."

As glad she was to have made a seemingly usable potion – she didn't want to be too confident in her abilities, the fear of having made a mistake still burned in her chest. Geralt, who had risen from his chair and approached the table, also inspected the liquid by holding it against the light of the candle flame.

"Yennefer and Triss have been with him for a while. Certainly not a good sign," Thalia remarked softly.

"Now we have at least an alternative," said Geralt. "Eskel is tough. He can take a lot." "Talk about 'taking a lot' ...

Geralt listened, raising his hand to cut Lambert off. "Yennefer is coming."

A little later, the sorceress appeared at the entrance to the lab. The exhaustion was evident to her, though her appearance was as immaculate as ever. Her expression left no doubt that her efforts had failed.

"How is he?" Thalia asked.

"He is getting weaker. The stasis cannot stop the poisoning much longer. We tried everything, but our magic can't help him anymore. I'm sorry ..."

Thalia took a deep breath. Although they now had a potential antidote available, she had hoped that the sorceresses would find a way.

"Then we have to try the potion." Thalia sighed. "I would be more comfortable if we had the time to do a test. I'm not a friend of animal experiments, because the results are often not transferable, but in this case ..."

"It would be no help," Geralt interjected. "A witcher's body reacts quite differently to poisons than an animal or a monster we might find around here. We also do not have the time for experiments. We have to take the risk and find out if the noble drop we brewed works or not."

"I prefer not to think about the other option. Eskel is so weak that a wrong mixture could kill him ..."

"But he can't last much longer without it," said Geralt. He hesitated for a moment. Then he uncorked the bottle and took a small sip from it.

Yennefer rushed toward him immediately. "What are you doing?" Her expression reflected both anger and fear and worry.

"I make myself available as an experimental animal. Although we still don't know whether the potion is working, we can at least judge how much the side effects affect a witcher. We'll wait an hour. If I'm not showing any symptoms, we'll give him the antidote. It's the only chance he has."

After an hour of waiting, everyone gathered in Eskel's chamber. The side effects on Geralt were limited to nausea, mild stomach cramps and hot flashes - the usual after effects of the witchers' potions. Yennefer, still angry with him, stood at his side and leaned against him, one arm around his hip. She knew how worried Geralt was about his friend, even though he tried not to show his feelings.

Triss took away the stasis so that Eskel's organism could process the antidote. It was up to Thalia to give him the potion. With a pipette she dripped the greenish liquid into his mouth. Triss controlled his condition and seemed satisfied for the moment. She smiled encouragingly at Thalia. "It will work soon. Maybe we'll know more in a few hours."

"I can't get rid of the thought that I may have just killed him," Thalia replied in a strangled voice. Geralt put a hand on her shoulder. "You did your best and as far as I can see, that was pretty good. Now we have no choice but to trust that Eskel is recovering."

Lambert snorted. "In a few days, the guy will annoy us all again with his old stories. Or worse, he pushes us again to continue with the repairs to this dump. 'Lambert, repair the roof truss. Lambert, you still haven't taken care of the wall on the north tower. Lambert, why is it still raining down the
stairs? That's how it went all winter last year. So we should better enjoy the quiet hours, before he wakes up."
Thalia had to laugh, but then it turned to a sob. Tears were breaking. Triss hugged her. After a short time Thalia had recovered again. "I'm sorry. I haven't slept much in the last few days ..."
"I know," Triss said. "Rest a bit. We can't do anything now but wait."
Lambert sat down in a chair near the fireplace. "Go to sleep, Thalia. I'll stay here and take care of the old guy."
"All right. But please call me immediately if something in his condition changes."
When Thalia had left to lie down in her room, Triss turned to Lambert. "So understanding? Didn't you once say you hate it when women cry?"
"Oh, shut up, Merigold."

Of course, Thalia did not manage to even close one eye. Fully clothed, she lay on her bed in her room, staring at the ceiling. Her previous emotional outburst was terribly embarrassing, but exhaustion and worry had made her lose control. As sleep was out of reach and she could not distract herself otherwise, she got up and went back to Eskel's room.
Two hours had now passed, in which the antidote had had time to take effect - possibly an improvement of his condition would be noted. If they had made no mistake and his altered body responded to the potion as they hoped.
Through the open door she saw that Lambert had evidently vacated his post. Triss sat on the edge of Eskel's bed and held his hand. Something in Thalia's stomach cramped at the sight. That Eskel had feelings for the sorceress had been undoubtedly by the way he told about her. And who could blame him?
The way the sorceress touched Eskel's cheek now suggested that there was more than just friendly feelings between them on her part as well. Triss had also often gone to her limits in recent days to help Eskel.
Thalia wondered for a moment if she should turn back, but she finally wanted to know if the potion had any effect and if Eskel's condition had improved or if she had to expect the worst.
When she entered the room, Triss glanced at her with a smile, still holding Eskel's hand. "Thalia! It seems to work! His heartbeat has become stronger. Look, he looks much more alive again."
Thalia stepped closer. Now she could see the change too. Eskel's skin had returned to a healthy tone, the previously clearly visible veins had faded. His breathing was calm and deep. The stasis had given way to a sound sleep. So they actually did it!
Eskel moved. Thalia saw his hand lightly squeeze Triss's hand. Although she was immensely pleased that he was on the road to recovery, that gesture simultaneously struck her. Still, the relief outweighed everything else.
"It's good. Very good."
Eskel's eyelids twitched, he turned his head and groaned softly. Then he opened his eyes. He seemed to need a few seconds to get aware of where he was. When his eyes fell on Triss, he seemed confused at first, then smiled at the sorceress.
"Triss. Good to see you."
Triss giggled and wiped a tear from her eyes.
"Eskel. Do you know how much you scared us?"
She squeezed his hand and looked at Thalia. Now Eskel turned his head in her direction, but hardly seemed to recognize her. He narrowed his eyes to gain a clearer sight. "Thalia? Is that you?"
"Yes. Yes it's me. I'm so glad you're feeling better."
But Eskel had already fallen back to sleep.

Chapter End Notes
Thanks to OpheliaTheMoth for the beta-reading.
The blade moved in a straight line across his throat, making a faint, scratching noise. Eskel briefly ran his thumb over his cheek. The shaving on the edges of his scar required special care, but through years of practice, he didn't need much time for the procedure. Satisfied with the result, he cleaned the blade in the washbowl and folded the razor.

Someone knocked at the door. Eskel wiped his skin with a towel and opened. Even if he hadn't heard the soft footsteps on the stairs, the sight of the person standing outside wouldn't have been much of a surprise. Triss.

She smiled at him, beautiful as ever. "Good morning, Eskel. How are you?"
"Good. Better than yesterday." Eskel grabbed his shirt and pulled it over.
"I'd like to check again if your body has further degraded the poison, if you allow..."
"Sure."

Eskel sat down in the chair beside his bed. Triss put one of her magical amulets over his head and softly chanted a spell. As she put her hand on his chest, just above the heart, the soft glow from her fingertips went through his skin into his body. Eskel was now used to the tingling sensation of magical probing. In the last few days Triss had repeatedly subjected him to this procedure. It was not unpleasant - quite the contrary. However, Eskel once again wondered if these frequent checks were really necessary because he felt notably better. But since he didn't want to offend Triss, he said nothing and let her do it.
"The poison has apparently completely disappeared from your body. I cannot feel it anymore and the amulet isn't reacting at all. You made it, Eskel." Triss pulled her hand back with a smile.

Eskel buttoned his shirt. "I also feel much better. It's about time for me to get out of this room..."

He got up and reached for his jacket. After three days in bed, recovering from the aftermath of the poisoning, he now wanted to leave as quickly as possible.
"Careful, Eskel. You still have to recover. The poison had already done a lot of damage. It will take a few more days for your body to fully regenerate," Triss warned.

"Don't worry, I'll take care of myself. But if I have to spend another day in this bed, I'll go insane."

When he and Triss walked into the great hall, Lambert was there mending one of his shirts. He was sitting on the wide bench by the dining table, his feet comfortably resting on a chair. A long tear drew through the white fabric of the shirt, which lay on his lap. He apparently closed it with only little patience and skill. When he heard Triss and Eskel, he looked up.
"Oh, look at that! Someone raised from the dead!" Lambert put his sewing work aside, stood up and hugged Eskel. "Nice to see you on your feet again, brother. Being half dead, you've looked even scarier than you normally already do."
"Well, you'll have to endure my sight a little longer," countered Eskel, who returned the hug. "Is Thalia in the lab?"

For the past few days she had only visited him briefly at his bedside. Apparently she was very engrossed in her work and spent most of her time in the lab of Kaer Morhen. During her visits, she had always been quite restrained - possibly because Triss had been there every time. Perhaps Thalia felt unsettled by Triss's presence. It was obvious that she had great respect for the sorceress. But Eskel had not meant to be rude to Triss by asking her to leave.
The sorceress had been with him almost constantly for the past few days to monitor his condition. As much as he valued her company - he was glad to escape the constant chatter now.
Last winter, when Triss had spent a few weeks in Kaer Morhen to keep her old friends company, there had been a time when Eskel had been more than pleased by the attention she had given him. As
always, he and Triss had been friendly with each other. But then she started flirting with him – prudent at first, then more and more unequivocal. Eskel had been flattered and began to imagine what it would be like to be more than just a friend for Triss.

Until he realized that she didn't really care for him. She wanted to make Geralt jealous. When she tried to seduce him, he had withdrawn from her. He could have had quick, meaningless sex with a prostitute or a woman he barely knew - but with Triss it would matter and change everything. At least for him.

He had been very close of putting aside his misgivings - he had dreamed for so long to come close to her. But luckily his mind got the upper hand. To throw himself into emotional chaos and put their friendship at stake – it wouldn't be worth it. But even though he had tried to deal with Triss like before, that time of hope and disappointment had changed his feelings for her. He still enjoyed spending time with her and saw a friend in her – and her sight still made his pulse quicken too often. But at the same time, he was aware that she was pursuing her own goals, regardless of others. As long as she was not over Geralt it would not have been a good idea to get involved with her. That she cared so much for him during his recovery irritated him, and he was not sure about her motivation. But he didn't want to do her wrong by assuming her predictable behavior again.

If he was honest to himself, he had missed Thalia in the last few days. He could try to convince himself that this was simply because she had been around him day and night over the last few weeks, just getting used to her presence. But his power of persuasion was not strong enough.

Lambert picked up his shirt again and took a look at his needle work. Far from 'as good as new', but it would probably do ...

"Thalia has just gone out. She wanted to harvest some herbs in the garden, I think."

What Lambert euphemistically called 'the garden' was nothing more than a weedy overgrown bed of medicinal plants under a small, bricked canopy that begged for attention in the outer yard, but was consistently ignored by the witchers. Vesemir had been the gardener among them. Eskel decided to take care of it soon. One more point on a long list, albeit one that ranked far behind. Further ahead, however, was the increase in food supplies for the winter. And that was exactly what Eskel wanted to take care of first. He reached for his swords and closed the strap over his chest.

"Then I'll take advantage of the good weather and get us some meat."

"Eskel," Triss warned. "Don't take on too much."

"I just want to hunt some deer, not monsters. I'll be back this afternoon, hopefully with some good venison."

Arriving in the stable Eskel welcomed Scorpion. The black stallion was visibly pleased to see him again. The animal had of course noticed his condition. Eskel ran his hand over the smooth, silky fur and spoke softly and quietly with his 'horse of destiny', as he liked to call Scorpion.

"Well, big boy, did someone take care of you when I was in bed? You look good."

He patted Scorpion's neck and the animal clearly enjoyed the attention. Eskel heard someone approaching and judging by the light, short steps it was the person whom he longed to see anyway.

Thalia stepped around the corner of the open stable, a bundle of herbs in her hand. Lavender and Verbena, regarding to the scent. She would probably brew her sleeping tea again tonight. She wore a green dress that, despite or perhaps because of its simplicity, emphasized her physical qualities. Her auburn hair fell open in large curls around her shoulders, single strands shone like copper in the sunlight.

Thalia approached him with a beaming smile. "Good to see you. You seem to feel better."

"I am. A little tired, maybe, but I'm back to my usual self again. I owe that to you, Thalia. Thank you for everything."

Thalia blushed slightly. "That goes without saying. After all, it was my fault you got into that situation."

"Injuries can happen with every contract. But that a client cares so much about a wounded witcher is rare," joked Eskel. "So I'll say it again: Thank you."
Eskel hesitated, looked down at the ground, and stroked his scar. "Um, well, Triss told me that she offered to send you back to Oxenfurt via portal. So ... will you leave us soon?"
"I would like to stay for a few more days and have a closer look to your library. As long as I have not found a solution to replace the mutagens, the antidote can not be used on ordinary people. Maybe I’ll find a useful approach in some of your old books. That is, if it is alright with you..."
"It'll be our pleasure. Stay as long as you like. I just hoped you would ... " He paused, hesitating.
"Well, I hope you find the solution and get your professorship. You deserve it."
"Thank you."
Embarrassing silence arose when neither of them knew what to say. Eskel changed the subject. "I ... I heard that Lambert helped you in the lab. I hope he behaved well. He's not typically well-mannered."
"Oh, don't worry, he was nice to me, according to his possibilities," Thalia laughed. "Without his and Geralt's help it would have taken much longer to find my way around your lab. Lambert can even be entertaining. He told me about a few of your monster hunts. You seem to be a specialist for succubi ... "
She smiled mischievously as Eskel slapped his hands over his face. "Oh no. I don’t want to know what he said. Please don't believe any stories he tells you about me."
"It's fine, there was nothing that shocked me. Although ..."
She winked at him impishly, then turned and walked back to the main building. Over her shoulder she called to him: "I'll get back to work. By the way, the beard looked good on you."
Eskel smiled and stroked his now again smooth cheek. Should he have waited with the shave ...?
Being reminded of the old succubus story, he silently swore to himself never to drink as much - ever again. It was no surprise that Lambert had dug it out.
He watched Thalia as she made her way up to the inner courtyard.
He almost asked her to stay a little longer in Kaer Morhen. The prospect of having to say goodbye to her in a few days made his stomach drop. But what could he have said? 'I want you to stay because I like you more than I should? Because I'll miss you?' She was able to carry on her work much better in her own laboratory in Oxenfurt. What reason could there be for her to stay in a draughty, half-ruined fortress in the company of mutants and sorceresses?
Besides, he didn't think she was interested on him - not in that way. She had always treated him normally, as if he were not a mutant, not a curiosity. But that was simply because she was too intelligent and unprejudiced to be suspicious of anything unknown.
Sometimes she flirted with him, for sure, but her advances were hardly serious. She just liked to tease him. It didn't mean she was considering a disfigured witcher as her partner.
Sometimes he had thought about one of her comments - but he wanted to avoid reading too much into it. Even though he did not like to admit it, being rejected by her would be very ... hurtful. He also feared she would feel embarrassed if he told her about his feelings.
But maybe she would like him to visit her in Oxenfurt next year. Then it wouldn't be a farewell forever, only for a few months. The prospect brightened his mood noticeably.
"Hey, mind if I come with you? My horse needs some exercise too."
Eskel had not paid any attention to the approaching steps, his thoughts had distracted him too much. When Lambert approached him, swords on his back, he was brought back into the here and now. Lambert's sullen expression suggested that it was not his own idea to accompany him on the hunt.
"Let me guess: Triss has incited you to come with me and be my nanny."
"Nothing gets past you!" replied Lambert sarcastically.
"Since when do you let a sorceress give you orders?"
"If it'd only been Triss alone ... Yennefer started to yell how I could dare to let you ride alone. They would have pestered me all day. Before listening to this nagging, I prefer to listen to your soft voice as you tell me about your exciting adventures on the path." Lambert's voice dripped with derision.
"You can only talk shit, you great hero, thought Eskel. Just because he himself could not boast with contracts as spectacular as Geralt's, and did not beef up his stories with bragging inventions like Lambert, that youngster better not be thinking his sword made acquaintance only with drowners and
wyverns. "You'd better listen properly when I tell you about my experiences on the path, Lambert. You could learn from a simple witcher like me."

Sunbeams pierced the dense foliage of the trees and fell on the undergrowth and acorns that covered the forest floor. A noise made a murmur in the twittering of birds, like the breaking of a dry branch. The deer raised its head, listened, turned its ears in the direction that the sound suggested. It hesitated, uncertain whether to run from a danger or to stay were it was. Then it decided to be careful and jumped with a long leap into the bushes nearby.

Eskel snorted in annoyance. "Very good, Lambert! Silent as always ..."
The younger witcher showed only a mildly guilty look. "Let it be. I was not keen on escorting you on your little hunting trip anyway. My head is still pounding after last night ..."

Eskel rolled his eyes. "A hangover should be nothing new to you. But thanks to you, our dinner is now up and away."

"There's enough prey around. The longer we stand here and talk, the colder my feet get. Go on."

They had left their horses in a nearby clearing and went on foot into the forest.

In search of further tracks they walked slowly through the dense bushes, Eskel ahead, Lambert in some distance behind him. Every now and then Lambert moaned softly. Last night he had probably overdone with the vodka again. Now he had to live with the consequences ...

"Damn cold. It's not even winter and my ass freezes off. And it's not any better in our dump of a fortress. In my chamber, there is a draught out of all the wall cracks. And instead of a woman warming my bed, only vodka is left to kill the cold. Can only hope that we're not gonna run out of alcohol ..."

"Well, as always, only Geralt is fortunate enough to have his bed warmed by a lady."

"I thought that you and Thalia were already at this point as well ..."

Eskel stopped abruptly. He pressed his lips together. Not an issue he wanted to talk about to Lambert ...

But if he simply didn’t refer to the comment, Lambert would continue teasing him all day.

"Thalia is not a woman who immediately throws herself at a man. She is classy. But probably you've rarely met such women ..."

Lambert snorted. "Maybe. But she did bust a gut to find the antidote for you."

"She is a good person. She felt responsible for my poisoning, even though it's nonsense, of course."

"Possible. But she has a soft spot for you. Are you really trying to tell me that you didn't notice? What has become of the Eskel that grabs every chance he can get, huh?"

Eskel said nothing. Of course, when they spent the evenings together, especially when they had a bender, he had told his brothers about his amorous adventures - mainly to keep up with them. But he was not like Geralt, who - in spite of his relationship with Yennefer - shared the bed with every attractive woman he met.

Not that he himself had the opportunity to do so. The disfiguring scar made women stay aloof or even shudder in disgust when they saw him. Even in brothels he often had to pay a higher price than other guests.

But Eskel knew he hesitated to try his luck with Thalia for another reason. She meant something to him.

"I have too much respect for Thalia to embarrass her with intrusiveness."

"Oh, that's what they call it - respect. I always thought that was cowardice. You don't dare, for fear of rejection. Understandable. And stupid. When she's back in Oxenfurt, you've missed your chance and will never see her again. What have you got to loose? She wouldn't laugh at you, she is too polite for that."

"And what for? As you say, she will be back in Oxenfurt soon - and I am here or on the path. She will become a respected professor at the Academy. What's she going to do with a monster slayer travelling from village to village?"

Lambert sighed. "Oh, Eskel. You're thinking too far again. One step after the other. Even if you'll never meet her again after she returns back home - you would at least be getting some!"

Eskel swept Lambert off his feet with a well-dosed Aard bump.
Contrary to expectations, they were fortunate with hunting. It was only early in the afternoon when they returned to the fortress, a deer laid over Scorpion's saddle behind Eskel.

Eskel carried the game on his shoulder to the great hall. Triss, who had apparently read in a book by the fireplace, got up and went to meet them. "Nice that you're back. Are you alright, Eskel?"

She put a hand on his arm and looked at him slightly worried.

"Yes, everything’s fine." He turned around to Lambert. "Even though I would rather have renounced the company ...", he added only half seriously.

"Anyway, I'm glad you're back. You'll have to get used to the fact that i’ll be worried about you for a while," Triss said, smiling at Eskel.

He returned the smile - in his usual way with only one corner of his mouth - a little uncertain. "Uh ... yes. So ... I'll take care of the deer. See you later."

The booty on his shoulder, he headed for the exit to the backyard.

When Triss was about to retreat to her room, Lambert stopped her. "Merigold, let’s talk."

Triss sighed deeply - the witcher had been particularly annoying her in recent days with his constant taunts and insolence. "What is it this time, Lambert?"

Lambert folded his arms across his chest and looked gravely at Triss. "Tell me what you want, Triss."

"You should be a bit more specific."

"Your fuss about Eskel. For years you relished in his admiration for you, and ignored him otherwise. But as soon as a woman appears at Eskel's side, who could compete with you, you suddenly discover your feelings for him. The last few days you have practically spent in his room. Forgive me that I find your change of mind somewhat suspicious. Or do you try once again to make Geralt jealous?"

Anger rose in Triss. She took a deep breath. Her eyes narrowed.

"How dare you? I never understood what Keira saw in you ... but that a sorceress dumped you seems to hit you deeper than I thought. Probably because you know that you will never again have a woman by your side who stands so far above you. Now you're taking every opportunity to piss me off and to wreak your ill humour on me. You're bugging me! Whether and what I feel for Eskel, doesn't concern you. It's only between me and him. I certainly don't have to explain myself to you."

"I don’t give a damn about you, Merigold. But don't play with Eskel again. He doesn't deserve that and you know it."

Triss snorted, turned on her heel and left the hall. She hurried up the stairs to the sleeping tract and shut the door to her chamber with a bang.

What did this creep dare to accuse her? As if she only was seeking self-affirmation while spending time with Eskel ...

It was true that she got carried away last winter and had taken advantage of the fact that Eskel had feelings for her.

She always had enjoyed how much attention he gave her and everytime they met he was a thoroughly pleasant company for her. And nothing more.

But this changed last winter. She had been waiting for Geralt to pay his brothers a visit in Kaer Morhen. And when he finally showed up - without Yennefer - she could not hold her feelings under control anymore. But he had behaved dismissively towards her and showed her that despite Yennefer's absence he was not interested in intimacies. Although Triss had to reckon with that, of course, it had hurt her anyway. No one had a hold on her feelings like Geralt.

When Eskel tried to cheer her up, one thing led to the other. Would Geralt look on it impassively if she turned to another? Or could perhaps his masculine honor be hurt and he would once again vie for her affection?

She had never intended to hurt Eskel, but she had to admit that she had used him only as a means to an end. And her plan didn’t succeed ...

Even though it was difficult, she had to admit that Geralt would never find his way back to her. She didn’t want to be alone all the time and mourn after him. If she gave another man a real chance ... maybe she would eventually get over Geralt.
A relationship with another witcher had always seemed like an inadequate substitute for what she'd had with Geralt for only such a short time. What now her friend Yennefer had with him again. At least she had thought so yet. But in the last few days she had been really worried about Eskel – to her own surprise.

But did she really want him? Or was she just so eager for love that she was ready to get involved with someone else?

It was obvious that Thalia had feelings for Eskel. But if they came close to another on their journey or not ... who knew? As far as it seemed, they weren't a couple. Yet.

Thalia had plunged completely into lab work and worked until late in the night, leaving no opportunity for a quiet conversation among women.

But would it make any difference if the two got closer? Thalia apparently intended to return to Oxenfurt as soon as possible to pursue her academic career. A long-term relationship with a witcher would hardly fit into such a life plan.

And finally, the decision was with Eskel.

If she tried a little harder, it would be easy to rekindle his feelings for her. After all, she was a much more desirable woman than the alchemist.

Triss's mood suddenly lifted, her anger with Lambert was gone. Humming softly to herself, she found a new dress for the evening from her wardrobe chest, put on some Glamarye and looked in the mirror contentedly.

If she intended to, no man could resist her ...

Chapter End Notes

Many thanks as always to my wonderful beta-reader OpheliaTheMoth!
Sunlight fell through the library's large windows onto the wooden tables and benches, making fine filaments shine in the air. The glittering particles were soon joined by new ones as Thalia pulled another dusty book from one of the large shelves on the wall. Some alchemical books of the Wolf School were already piled up on a nearby table, along with bestiaries and medical treatises.

In addition to the writings of the witchers' school, which were held secret to outsiders, the library of Kaer Morhen contained a large selection of tomes of various scientific disciplines. For Thalia they meant an immense treasure.

A larger collection of books she had only seen in Oxenfurt. Perhaps somewhere in those innumerable books, the key to solving her problem was hidden. But finding exactly the right one among the undoubtedly equally interesting, but currently useless books, was a dilemma. There was neither a complete listing of all the books in the library, nor made the sorting of the works on their shelves conclusions on the discipline possible. Thalia had no choice but to subject all the titles in question to a brief inspection. A lengthy endeavor.

If she had more time available, she would have enjoyed every minute in this library. However, any book that she picked up would run the risk of letting her lose the focus for her true goal - some works were too interesting, even if they did not help her with her problem.

Quickly, Thalia revealed that the essay she had just pulled off the shelf was worth a closer look. But after several hours, which she had already spent in the library, she urgently needed a break. The letters of the ornate writing on the yellowed pages began to blur before their eyes. So she put the book next to the pile that had already accumulated and left the library. Some fresh air would quickly do wonders and revive not only her tired eyes, but her mind as well.

Wrapped in her woolen coat, she soon entered the bastion and climbed up a small staircase to a balcony at the east tower. The view of the mountains was breathtaking. The peaks were already crowned by snow. The cool air clearly showed that winter would be coming soon. For Thalia's perception it had already arrived, but this morning Lambert had clarified that it would even get much colder here in the mountains. Of course, the witcher had once again found ribald words for the description.

Soon, the roads to Oxenfurt would not be passable for many weeks. Although Thalia was on the right track, her research would take some time. Triss had offered to send her by portal to Oxenfurt, so she wouldn't have to cope with the arduous trip by horse. That would save her at least three weeks of time - not to mention the possible dangers and the inconveniences of such a long journey.

However, prior to her return, Thalia wanted to continue looking for possible clues to solve the problem in Kaer Morhen's library.

Instead of the mutagens that she had added to the potion for Eskel, a common human organism needed another catalyst to process the enzymes. The chances to find the solution here, with access to countless books with witches' knowledge as well as the common standard works of alchemy, Thalia estimated a higher probability of success than in Oxenfurt.

That's why she thanked Triss for the offer, assuring her that she would love to come back to it as soon as she achieved useful results in her research.

Although she didn't like to admit it, there might be another reason besides the library and the lab,
which made her delay her departure. She had just spotted that reason in the inner courtyard.
Wearing only shirt and pants despite the cold, Eskel trained with the sword. Nothing was noticeable
of the fact that he had only recovered from his severe poisoning a week ago. The blade reflected the
sunlight as Eskel performed some quick, precise turns.

Thalia stepped closer to the railing of the balcony to get a better view of the witcher. She did not
notice the soft footsteps approaching her from the stairs.
"Do you enjoy the view?"
Thalia jumped in alarm and turned to Yennefer, who had stepped to the parapet only a few yards
away from her. Damn the floating steps of the sorceresses ...

Embarrassed Thalia blushed. "Uh ... yes, the scenery here is really impressive," she hurried to say,
looking over at the mountain peaks. "And the view from up here is breathtaking."
"No doubt." Yennefer's eyes were focused on the courtyard. "As I heard from Triss, you plan to stay
longer in Kaer Morhen?"
"Yes, I would like to continue researching the antidote before returning to Oxenfurt. I might as well
be doing it here. I would prefer not to return with empty hands, but with a viable approach to an
antidote for ordinary people."

"The antidote for extraordinary people has, luckily, been effective. Although I do not like to admit it,
in this case, alchemy was superior to sorcery. A rare circumstance that would normally annoy me.
But this time I make an exception. Well done, Thalia."
"Thank you very much. Without Geralt and Lambert, however, it would have taken much longer - if
I had succeeded at all. And without the arts of you and Triss, Eskel would never have survived long
enough. So thank you as well."
"Then we agree that we are all grateful. Has our patient already shown up to you? It seems like you
still have a lot to talk about."
"What do you mean?"
"Don't be daft, Thalia. I have eyes, you know. Whatever is between you and Eskel seems to be in
need of a discussion."
"Oh. That ... that is not necessary. And even if it was - we had hardly any opportunity to talk in
private. Triss was almost always close to him in the last few days. I don't want to be intrusive ..."
She has for a long time. Which does not prevent her from keeping other options open for herself. She
enjoys basking in the admiration of other men - and hopes to arouse Gerard's jealousy. Which, of
course, is pointless, but that does not stop Triss from trying again and again."

Thalia looked at Yennefer in surprise. Triss in love with Geralt? Now the looks the sorceress had
thrown to the white haired witcher, whenever she thougt to be unobserved, made sense. Thalia had
dismissed her observation as nonsensical because Geralt was so obviously connected to Yennefer.

Thalia looked down at Eskel again, who continued to practice lunges and turns and apparently was
unaware of the audience.
"But even if that's true ... Eskel seems to have a soft spot for Triss. As he spoke of her ..."
"Eskel is a man like others, in the end," Yennefer cut her off. "Of course he is attracted to a beautiful
sorceress - that's what all men are. But I have watched him in the last few days. The attention Triss
gives him doesn't just seem to be pleasing to him, especially when you're around.
In your presence, he behaves differently than usual. Almost awkward. Men do that when they are
afraid to say or do something wrong.
Now do not pretend not to have noticed how he looks at you. You aren't that stupid."

Thalia took a deep breath. Actually, she didn't want to talk about her emotional life with this
sorceress, whom she hardly knew, and whom she had previously encountered rather repugnant.
On the other hand, even though she did not like to admit it herself, her thoughts kept turning around the topic now being discussed. Although she should fully concentrate on her work. Ever since Eskel woke up and Triss was with him almost constantly, Thalia had tried to accept the futility of her feelings. Whenever she met Eskel, she had shown herself to be serene, overplaying her insecurity - sometimes more, sometimes less successfully.

Yennefer's words, however, now triggered another flood of chaotic emotions in Thalia. "Even if he should not be indifferent to me ..." Thalia admitted. "I'll be back in Oxenfurt soon. And Triss shows pretty clearly that she has more than sympathy for Eskel – honestly or not. If Eskel has reason to believe that a woman like Triss has a romantic interest in him, why should he be interested in me?"

"If you believe that Eskel is unable to look behind Triss' motives, you underestimate him. So, if I may give you advice, without being asked: Do not clear the field without having fought. Unless, of course, I misread your behavior and you have no interest in Eskel."

Thalia looked thoughtfully at Yennefer, who was leaning against the parapet beside her. "If I know one thing about sorceresses, then it's that you almost always have your own agenda. Why are you telling me all this?"

Yennefer looked Thalia in the eye, challenging - then a corner of her mouth pulled up in an appreciative smile. "I see you should not be underestimated either. You are right. I do not interfere unselfishly with your private affairs. Even though Triss and I are friends, it did not stop her from fucking with Geralt. She has lied to him and used him - all under the guise of love. Do not get me wrong, there is no grudge between us, no more. But even if I forgave her her actions of that time - I'll never forget. And seeing her reach her limits with her charm and her beauty, failing to win the heart of Eskel nor arouse Geralt's jealousy, gives me, I must admit, a pleasant satisfaction."

Thalia took a deep breath, looked down again at the courtyard. "Speaking of Geralt ..." The said, white-haired witcher was approaching, the swords on his back.

"Attack, Return, Parade, Pirouette. Eskel's body seemed to perform the for years internalized processes almost intuitively. The sword was in constant motion, cutting the air in precise turns. But Eskel was well aware that he was still far from his usual form. His muscles reacted a little bit delayed, not as supple as he was used to. In addition, his respiratory rate had already accelerated. At least he was not sweating yet. Only a small ray of hope, but still ..."

His hearing still worked perfectly. He had already noticed Geralt's footsteps when he entered the courtyard. As the friend approached him, Eskel paused in his exercises. He tried to calm his breath, so as not to show any weakness. Too late.

"You sound like a cave troll after a rabbit hunt."

"I do, but I'm way faster than a cave troll."

Geralt stopped in front of him a few yards away and looked at him scrutinizingly. "Seriously, how are you feeling?"

"Better than I expected to a few days ago."

"This time was really close."

"It was. But apparently even I am lucky sometimes. I'm almost back to my usual self again."

"Just don't overdo it. Take your time."

Eskel twisted the corner of his mouth to a wry smile. "You're just scared that I'll outstrip you again soon."
Geralt acknowledged the friendly challenge with a raised eyebrow. "When did you ever outstrip me?"
"If I remember correctly, I've done a lot of damage to you in our last training match. This would be an opportunity for a pay back."
Geralt was well aware of his defeat at their last common training - last winter when he had sparred with Eskel during his visit to Kaer Morhen.
Just like the old days ...

But he did not want to fight against Eskel, as long as he was not back in his old form. "I'm not fighting an asthmatic Bies."
Eskel swirled his sword in a mill, lightly taking a few steps towards Geralt.
"Come on, Geralt. Don't act coyly like a chaste Melitele healer."
Geralt pressed his lips together, then grinned defiantly and drew his steel sword.
If Eskel really wanted to, then he should get his lesson.
"Let's see if not only your mouth has recovered, but the rest of you as well."
"Wanna use signs or not?"

Geralt hesitated for a moment - the opportunity to beat Eskel in his flagship discipline was tempting. So far, he had often lost the combat, when they had trained with signs ...
"Sure. I don't want to hear your complaints afterwards, about how you could have easily swept me away with Aard, if only you were allowed to."
"Then show me if there’s a reason why the white wolf has such a good reputation."
They circled lurking, never taking their eyes off the other.

They knew the other’s combat style like no one else, had been fighting against each other countless times. Even then, during their witcher training, they had measured their strength in exactly the same place.

Geralt had always been the most skilled with the sword, had knocked each of the other young witchers down a peg. The other boys had respected him for that, though he had never been very popular because of his otherness and his biting cynicism. They had accepted his superiority in fencing.

But not Eskel.
When Geralt had defeated him again and again in sword fight, Eskel had trained even harder than usual to improve his technique and his speed. When the other boys had long since enjoyed their more than sparse leisure time, Eskel stood on the training ground and practiced lunges, parades and evasions. He had even asked their former sword master Vesemir to give him extra lessons - which their mentor had done with joy, acknowledging the ambition of his student.

Through much practice, merciless training and an iron will, Eskel had managed to get close to Geralt's level in swordfighting - something none of the other young witchers had achieved before. The discipline, in which Eskel had been a true natural talent even as a child, were the signs. Highly gifted, none of the other boys had anything to oppose him - not even Geralt.

And that's how it has been until this day.
Without warning, Eskel hurled an Aard-wave, which Geralt tried to escape by jumping to the side. He was only partially successful - the pressure wave did not capture him completely, but still threw him several meters through the air. The witcher deftly rolled and landed on his feet, his sword raised. With fast bounds, he jumped in Eskel’s direction, slashing his sword with a powerful punch.
Prepared for that, Eskel parried and went to a Riposte, took advantage of the force of the attack and drew his backhand against Geralt with half a turn.
The blades hit each other hard. Immediately Eskel took the basic position, weight on his left foot to
go straight to the attack.

"Well countered," praised Geralt. "Seems like you've already recovered."
"I told you."
"Then I don't have to be conciderate of you from now on."

Geralt attacked again, casted Igni and threw an imposing stream of fire on Eskel. But the other witcher’s Quen-shield let the flames fizzle ineffectually. Eskel undid the shield and jumped out of the crouch in one turn, leading the sword in his backhand. Geralt effortlessly managed to parry the blow, but the force of the swords clashed put him briefly off balance. Damn, Eskel was really eager.
"Your Igni has become stronger," said Eskel appreciatively. "I hope you did not spent all your energies now."
"Don't worry, I'm persistant."

Eskel, who seemed to have enough energy for a third sign, also casted Igni. A huge wall of fire rolled towards Geralt, who escaped with a jump behind a nearby wall. Damn, the flames had scorched his hair.
Geralt jumped over the wall, invading Eskel with a series of quick attacks. He backed away a few steps under the onslaught, obviously struggling to parry the blows.

"Easy, Geralt!"
The addressed witcher paused. Yen's admonishing voice made him leave Eskel, who was breathing heavily now, sweat on his forehead.
Nonetheless, Eskel remained in combat position and fixed Geralt, a grin on his lips. "Not bad, White Wolf. Do we agree on a standoff?"

Geralt put the sword back in the holder on his back and smiled, reaching out to his friend. "Agreed! Looks like I'll have to be careful the next time we train together, when you have your old strengh."
"I'm looking forward to it." Eskel grabbed his hand and hugged his brother.

Then he looked up at the balcony where he suspected Yennefer. To Eskel's surprise, Thalia stood beside the sorceress at the balustrade and looked down at him. How long had the two women been up there?

Eskel greeted Thalia with a nod. She smiled brightly at him and raised a hand in greeting. Then she went back to the battlements and disappeared from his view.

The sun just set behind the mountain peaks surrounding the witchers' fortress. The last golden rays illuminated the alcove in the outer courtyard, in which Eskel had retreated.

The witcher knelt motionless in front of a small fire, the dancing flames drawing his relaxed features in light and shadow.

Earlier, during his witcher training, he had initially found it difficult to meditate. Too many thoughts wandered through his mind. Outwardly, he might seem calm and relaxed, but inside he often felt the opposite. The more he tried to calm his mind, the less he succeeded.
He thought too much. Turned everything from one side to the other and then back again. Exactly that was Eskel's problem - especially in the last few days ...
And just like back then, he used the blazing fire to focus his mind. The hypnotic-chaotic pattern of the tongues of flame helped him let go of his thoughts, empty his mind, and immerse himself in that all-encompassing calmness.
But even in deep meditation, witchers were always on alert - a vital necessity in an often hostile environment. Here, too, under the protection of the Witchers’ fortress walls, Eskel's senses were
sharpened despite the trance. And so the approaching steps brought him back to reality prematurely. Since there was no danger, he kept his eyes closed and waited for the person to get within a few yards. Apparently she stayed there without addressing him or moving.

Eskel opened his eyes and looked over at Thalia, whom he had already recognized at the trod. She stood at the entrance to the alcove, wrapped in a woolen cloak, holding a book bound in black leather tightly pressed against her body. She looked at Eskel with an uncertain expression, but seemed to make no attempt on leaving.

"Thalia?"
"Um ... I'm sorry I bothered you while ... whatever you're doing right now. Keep going, I can wait."
Eskel knew that Thalia had a number of good qualities, but patience was definitely not one of them. Contrary to her claim, her face expressed a barely concealed excitement. Whatever it was she wanted to tell him, it really seemed important to her.

Of course, meditation was unthinkable now. Eskel got up and went to her. "I just meditated a bit. Would you like to tell me something?"
"Only when you're done."
"I'm done. What is it about?"

Her eyes lit up as she opened the book and showed him a page with drawn images of organs.

"You won't believe what I discovered! Maybe that's the solution! Well, the antidote we gave you would kill a common human because of the mutagens it contains, that much is clear. But without an additive that allows the body to absorb the enzymes, it won't work. I wondered which substance I could use instead of the mutagens and worked through your library. And this one" - she tapped a finger on a drawing that was supposed to represent a brainstem - "could be the alternative! It says here that the spinal fluid of hybrids has the property of overcoming a body's rejection response to alien substances."

She smiled brightly at him, her enthusiasm for her discovery more than obvious. And charming, as Eskel had to admit.

"And now you want to find out if it could work with it, as long as the claims in the book are correct."
Thalia nodded, smiling, her eyebrows raised slightly.

"And you want to ask me if I can get you a hybrid?"
"A harpy, to be exact. They live somewhere here in the mountains, right?"
"They do, not far away. I can ride along the mountain path tomorrow and look out for any of them."
"But only if you feel good enough again. If you need more rest, I can ask Geralt or Lambert ..."

"No!" Eskel's answer came probably a bit too fast ... "No, I ... I feel fine again. Besides, harpies are not too strong opponents."
"Sirens would probably be better suited, according to these records. But they do not exist here, right?"

"Uh, no. No, they are more likely to be found on the Skellige Islands."
"Or a griffin. A griffin would be perfect. Are there any griffins around here?"
"No. No, unfortunately not."
"Then a harpy will do. At least, to check the theory. I'm so excited, Eskel! That could really be the breakthrough!"

Eskel returned her smile, feeling her enthusiasm. "I wish you're right. I'll get you a harpy tomorrow, then you'll know soon if you've made it."
She was still smiling at him, the euphoric look in her eyes turned to ... something else. She took a breath, as if to say something, but then seemed to change her mind and smiled again.

"I'll better go and let you meditate ... Again, sorry for the interruption."
She turned away, then looked at him again. "It was impressive to watch you and Geralt training today. See you tomorrow, Eskel."
She walked away in the direction of the main building, leaving him alone in the courtyard.

Damn ... the moment would have been perfect to explain himself ...
But he was not a man of big words. Everything he had planned in his mind seemed ridiculous to him.

Eskel knelt again in front of the campfire, trying to find his way back to the meditative trance. But no matter how long he stared into the flames, the circling thoughts in his head did not calm down.

Chapter End Notes

Did I already mention, that I love my fabulous beta-reader OpheliaTheMoth...?
The harpies shriek was thrown back by the rockface and faded away as an echo. Initially the group of hybrids had consisted of four specimens, but Eskel had already killed two with the crossbow, after they had attacked him from the air. The remaining two now circled high above the witcher and seemed to wait for a better moment to attack.

Harpies were not smart enough to really work cooperatively - otherwise a fight against a larger group would have been much more difficult and risky. Instead of attacking the enemy from two sides, one of the two harpies now dropped on Eskel alone, while the last one remained in it’s waiting position high above. As the beast was close enough, Eskel sent a well targeted Aard stroke in it´s direction that threw the harpy out of it´s trajectory. With a cracking sound it hit a cliff and fell to the ground. His silver sword brought a quick end to the beast's life.

Instead of learning from the fates of it´s companions, the remaining hybrid now also dived for the witcher.

When Eskel struck it deadly, it´s scream reverberated echoing, delaying the moment of death, and only faded when the harpy had long since uttered it´s last breath.

The witcher inspected the carcasses. For the removal of the spinal fluid Thalia would need specimens whose spine had remained unhurt. The one he had captured with Aard lay broken-necked at the foot of the cliff. Useless, at least for the purpose of the alchemist.

The same applied for one of the harpies hit by crossbow bolts. The backbone of the other downed beast, however, remained intact. Likewise with the one who had died by a sword stroke into the heart. Excellent. Two specimens should probably be sufficient for the experiments.

Eskel tied both cadavers and lifted the prey on Scorpion's back - fortunately, the harpies had a very light physique, so the Kaedweni had no problems bearing the extra load.

A stinging pain ran through Eskel's left shoulder. Carefully, he moved his arm in it’s joint and cursed softly. While training with Geralt yesterday he had overexerted a bit. Even though he was already in good shape, his muscles seemed to need a little more time to regain their old smoothness. He would have to be careful the next few days not to strain his shoulder too much.

Eskel leapt onto Scorpion's saddle. Since he had left before dawn, he would return to Kaer Morhen in the morning. But surely Thalia had already prepared everything for the Harpies’ section in the lab, as enthusiastically as she had been last night. The thought of the alchemist rejoicing at his return quickly made him forget his aching shoulder.

As he rode into the courtyard of the fortress, Eskel dismounted and laid the bundle of harpies on the stone pavement. Only then did he lead Scorpion to the stable where Arenaria stood next to Lambert's nameless stallion. The mare might have been scared if she had scented the carcasses. After feeding his warhorse, Eskel went back and shouldered his prey to take it to the lab. Damn, his shoulder hurt ...

"Well, have you been wounded again? If you cannot handle harpies, being a witcher may not be the right profession for you anymore."

Lambert's rasping voice was dripping with derision. Of course, the younger witcher had just turned up the moment Eskel had painfully pulled his face. "Don’t you have anything to do, Lambert? If you are bored: The roof of the north tower is still waiting to be repaired."

"That will probably have to wait a little longer. Even if it may surprise you, but I'm just about to renew the outer battlement. Or have you forgotten what you have written on my endless list of tasks?"
"I can faintly recall. Need help?"
"Not yet, I´ll cut the planks first. But later, I might need you if the main beam needs to be attached. Unless you are too exhausted after your hunt ..."  
"I'll come to you later. First I bring Thalia her harpies."
"Take your time." Lambert smirked.

Eskel carried the loot to the main hall and then walked down the stairs to the lab. When he entered the room he saw that Thalia had apparently already prepared everything. One of the desks stood vacated in the center of the lab, and next to it was a pedestal table with a large number of surgical instruments. Scalpel of various sizes, pliers, tweezers and other tools lay neatly on a cloth. Thalia was wearing an apron over her dress, her hair loosely put together in a messy bun. When she saw his arrival, she turned to him with a smile. Joyfully, she raised her eyebrows.  
"Eskel! You got two harpies!"
"Four actually. They mostly attack in packs. But two suffered a broken neck so I can only bring you these."  
"Two are plenty! Will you please place one of them right on the table?"
Eskel untied the rope that bound the two cadavers and placed one of the dead harpies on the tabletop. Thalia had already positioned three lanterns next to the table to brighten her field of work. She turned the hybrid aside to gain better access to the spinal canal. Then she felt carefully with her fingers along the spine and examined the intactness. Satisfied she looked up at Eskel.  
"Thank you, Eskel. This one seems to be perfect."
"Do you know the anatomy of harpies?"
"I have not dissected one yet, if that's what you mean, but I've found numerous pictures in your books. I should be able to cope with that. But ... if you´d like ... and if you have time ..."
"I have."
"Well then ... let's start."
She leaned over the carcass and traced vortex after vortex.  
"According to the records in this book, the best place to extract cerebrospinal fluid should be between the third and fourth vertebrae. That should be here, right?"
"Yes, that's the right spot," Eskel confirmed.
Thalia picked up a scalpel and put it between the vertebrae. Highly concentrated, she cut through the gray-brown skin of the harpy into the underlying tissue. She was so concentrated that she unwittingly bit her lip. She would have looked grotesque if she had not been so gorgeous at the same time. Eskel felt a smile steal onto his lips. He turned away briefly so she would not notice. As he regained control of his features, he watched her work again.  
She led the scalpel with absolute precision, then used pliers to spread the tissue. She proceeded with great sensitivity, so as not to unnecessarily affect the surrounding tissue. A bleeding into the created opening could make the gained liquid unusable. Eskel could not help admiring her skill in dealing with the surgical instruments. With her head bent down, Eskel, who was standing behind her, had an excellent view of her bare neck. A few strands of her hair had reluctantly released from the bun. How gladly he would have touched her warm, soft skin, breathed her a kiss on the tender spot on her neck bend. He quickly suppressed the thought.  
"I really hope it works," Thalia said softly. "Not only because I want to get the professorship. When I think about how many lives could be saved in the future by an antidote ... My professor told me that crab spiders even often spatter the children of forest workers with their poison, which means certain death. With an antidote, these families would at least have a chance."  
Eskel looked at Thalia from the side. "You like children?"
"For sure."
"And ... do you want to have some yourself?"
Thalia frowned for a moment. "I don't know ... When I was with Gregor, maybe. He wanted a
family. But I don’t know if I would be a good mother... I would not be able to pursue my profession. It's not easy at the academy to prove yourself as a woman anyway.” At the mention of Gregor, Eskel pressed his lips together for a moment. Thalia placed the metal tube at the notch, pushing it gently and evenly into the opening. An almost clear, transparent liquid slowly dripped into a glass at the other end of the tube.

Thalia looked up for a moment. "What about you? Lambert mentioned that you are over 90 years old? Surely there is one or the other Eskel Junior, right?"

She winked at him mischievously. "Uh... no. Witches are infertile. A side effect of the mutations."

Thalia looked slightly embarrassed. "Oh. Well..."

She looked at the clear liquid that had collected in the jar. "That looks good. If I had injured a blood vessel and the cerebrospinal fluid was contaminated, the fluid should actually be cloudy. Very well."

Thalia put the used instruments on a spread cloth, to clean them later, and with one hand drew a strand of hair behind her ear. As he watched the familiar, unwittingly gesture, Eskel noticed something. "You no longer wear your ring?"

Thalia looked up at him. A sad expression crept into her eyes, then she looked down at her hand. On the now vacant spot on her finger. "I do not have it anymore."

Eskel frowned in confusion. "Did you lose it?"

"Yes. No. Not directly. I traded it."

"For what?"

"I needed something to pay the dealer who brought us to Aedd Gynvael. The ring was the only thing I could offer him."

Eskel swallowed. "But... it still seemed to mean a lot to you?"

"Yes, it did. But if I had kept it, I might have lost something that meant much more to me..."

Thalia raised her head. Eskel looked into her big eyes, which looked at him in uncertainty. These beautiful, brown eyes. His heart beat faster. He felt as if something was contracting in his chest. Even if he might go too far, even if she might withdraw from him - he was ready to take the risk.

"Thalia..." Eskel hesitantly raised his hand, placing it tentatively on Thalia's cheek, hardly daring to touch her skin. But she leaned against his touch, clinged against his palm and closed her eyes for a moment. When she opened them again and there was so much warmth and affection in her expression that Eskel held his breath.

How he had longed to be so close to her. To touch her. Still caressing her cheek, he stepped closer to her. So close that he only needed to bent down to her a little...

"Eskel? Eskel, are you here?"

Triss's voice came from the stairs to the lab. As if caught, Eskel pulled his hand back and took a step away from Thalia. The look in her eyes changed, showing disappointment and regret now. The next moment, the sorceress stepped into the room. When she saw Thalia and Eskel facing each other, she raised her eyebrows. "Oh... am I interrupting anything?"

Thalia turned to Triss, her face expressionless. "No. No, not at all. We're done."

"Very well. I hope you were successful? Eskel, Lambert might need your help with the battlement."

"Uh, yes, right. I had just promised to come to help him."

Eskel turned to Thalia. "That means..." He swallowed, hesitated. Damn, why had he just reacted so hastily? What would have been so bad if Triss had seen them together? It had been the perfect moment...

Thalia smiled eagerly. "Just go. I can handle the rest alone."

When Eskel stepped besides Triss into the courtyard, the midday sun blinded him. After the dim lighting in the lab, his eyes had to get used to the brightness. Triss took a deep breath of pure, cool air.

"The weather is glorious today, don’t you think?"
"Yes. We should make use of this to continue the repairs in the outdoor area. The weather will change at the latest in a few hours."
Eskel looked to the north, where dark clouds were already visible in the distance. Then he turned.
"See you, Triss."
The sorceress grabbed his arm to stop him. "Eskel. So ... actually I had hoped we could spend some time together. For a few days I have hardly seen you anymore." Eskel turned to her, confused.
"Well, we'll see each other at dinner at the latest today. So ... I should not keep Lambert waiting. If he wants to work which is seldom enough ..."
"To be honest, he did not ask for your help. I ... just wanted to free you from this grim lab."
Triss smiled at him ravishingly. The smile, however, missed the intended effect. Eskel felt anger rise in him. "Triss. What does it mean? Since when do we lie to each other?"
"I wasn't lying. I said he could use your help. And that may well be true ... I'm sorry, I overheard your conversation this morning by accident."
She looked up at him with a pardon and put a hand on his shoulder. "Eskel. I missed you in the last days. We spent so much time together before and I really enjoyed that. I hoped you felt the same way ...
Eskel took a deep breath. He did not want this. He wasn't good in something like that. But he knew that this conversation had long since been overdue. And that he could no longer delay admitting what he really wanted.
"Triss ..." Eskel glanced aside, searching for the right words. "We both know that you're not interested in me. I don't know if you are trying again to arouse Geralt's jealousy or if you really believe in feeling something for me this time - but I know that you will never feel for me the same way. So ...
"That's what you think of me? Eskel. I know that I did wrong last year and I hurt you. But please believe me, that was never my intention. Since then, I had the chance to make up my mind. It's true, I loved Geralt. But he belongs to Yennefer. I know that now. And I accept it. I'm over him, Eskel. The truth is that by now I feel more for you than mere friendship. Unfortunately, I have only now recognized this. Please, give me a second chance."
Eskel sighed. "Triss, I ... a few weeks ago I would have been more than happy to hear you say all this. But ... things have changed."
Triss's expression hardened and she pressed her lips together. "It's because of Thalia, isn't it?"
Eskel nodded slowly. "Yes, it's her. Please don't take it personally, Triss. I ... it took me a while to understand. To be sure."
Triss snorted briefly, disappointment and disbelief in her eyes. "For years you wished to be with me - don't deny it. And now that I offer myself to you ... that I almost beg for your affection – you are just pushing me away? Because of her?"
Her voice became quiet. "Does she mean that much to you?"
"She does." Eskel felt almost a relief to finally say it. "I'm sorry, Triss."
Triss nodded, looked down. "Then I have to accept that." She took a deep breath and looked at him. "Could we ... could we just forget this? Pretend that this conversation never happened?"
"Sure we can."
"Well. So we are still friends?"
"Of course."
Triss smiled at him. If he had not known her better, he could almost believe it was an honest smile. "That's good. I could not bear losing you as a friend."
"I care a lot about our friendship, Triss. A big deal, in fact."
"Will you let me do something for you? As an apology?"
"What are you talking about?"
"Your shoulder. You move carefully again and your shoulder seems to cause you pain. May I take a look at this? If it's just the muscles, I could heal that with an amulet very quickly. Then you can help Lambert without him making fun of you ..."
She winked at him, seemingly almost her old self again. Eskel hesitated, then sighed. "You are observant as ever. I dragged my shoulder during training. But you don't have to worry about it, in a few days the problem will resolve on its own."

Triss raised an eyebrow. "Why do men always have to play the hero? I could free you from the pain in a few minutes. Or are you afraid I would have ulterior motives and would try to seduce you? Then let me tell you that this would be below my dignity. And I hope you know that, too."

For a moment, Eskel hesitated. He was not quite ready to accept her offer, so immediately after her discussion. On the other hand, he also wanted to show her that there was nothing standing between them.

"All right, then. Thanks, Triss."

The sorceress kept her amulets in her room, so she and Eskel went to the living quarters of the fortress. Triss was right: Healing the injured muscle took only a few minutes. Eskel was moving his arm tentatively in all directions, but the pain was gone.

"Thanks, Triss."

Eskel took his shirt, which he had placed over the back of the chair.

"No need to thank me. That's what friends are for." Eskel looked at her briefly to investigate her mood. "You're sure we're good?"

"Yes, of course," Triss smiled. "I may need a few days, but I'll get over it. Don't worry."

"All right. Then I'll go to Lambert's construction site before he complains that I did not show up. See you later."

Eskel left the room. As he walked, he pulled his shirt over and began to button it. When he turned on the landing in front of Triss's room, he almost collided with Thalia.

"Oh," he said with little wit. She seemed as startled as he himself, accidentally dropping the book she had held in her hands. Apparently she was just coming out of her room. However, she made no move to pick up the book, but stared at him with wide eyes.

Eskel overcame his rigidity, picked up the book and handed it to her.

"Thalia, it ... what happened in the lab ..."

"Nothing happened," she cut him off. "At least not in the lab."

Eskel realized how misleading the situation had to be. "It's not what it looks like. Triss just healed my injury," he hurried to explain.

Thalia pressed her lips together, then looked sideways as if she wanted to avoid him. She started to go down the stairs. "If you say so. It's none of my business at all. I have to go back to the lab now."

"Thalia, I would like to talk to you ...

She paused, but did not look at him. "I have to take care of the liquour, otherwise it will spoil."

"In the evening then?"

"Sure."

Eskel watched as she walked down the stairs. "See you then, Thalia," he said softly. Damn, that didn't go well at all. He had to talk to her as soon as possible to clarify the situation. But he didn't want to run after her ...

Eskel sighed. Tonight.

He would explain himself tonight. Even if he did not fit into her life in the long run, if there was no future for them - if he just let her go, the possibilities of the 'what if' would eat him up for the rest of his life. Tonight he would finally gain clarity, knowing if she felt the same way he did.

Until then, he would help Lambert with the repairs. The physical work should help to organize his thoughts. He would work out the right words, to be better prepared this time. Unfortunately, there were no potions or oils for this type of confrontation that he could have used ...

Chapter End Notes
Thanks to OfeliatheMoth for beta-reading.
Thalia hurried down the stairs. The sound of her steps on the stone was echoed by the tower walls. Fortunately, Eskel did not seem to follow her. Right now, she didn’t feel prepared for the conversation he had asked her for.

This morning, in the lab, when he had suddenly come so close to her, when he had touched her and his hand had left that wonderful, tingling sensation on her skin, she had been sure that he felt as much for her as she did for him. That she did not have to be ashamed of her feelings, that she no longer had to keep them to herself. Everything felt right.

But then, when Triss had appeared, he’d withdrawn from her, as fast as if he’d burned himself when he touched her skin. As if he felt caught doing something forbidden.

So it was as she had already guessed: Eskel and Triss were more than just friends. And if she’d doubted that before, what happened this morning didn't leave any room for uncertainty.

She had only wanted to fetch a book from her room to look something up when she almost collided with Eskel on the stairs. Just as he left Triss's chamber with his shirt open.

If Thalia had still hoped that he would choose her instead of Triss, this hope was now shattered into a thousand small splinters that now seemed to be drilled in her guts.

He wanted to talk to her. Of course.

He had noticed her reaction to his touch this morning, and now he wanted to make sure that she didn’t misunderstood his gesture. To tell her, that he and Triss were a couple. That he was sorry. That he felt flattered and liked her and appreciated her as a friend. But that she has interpreted too much into his gesture and misunderstood his behavior. That she had mistaken friendliness with ... something else.

Thalia felt incredibly stupid. Her stomach tightened. She knew that she was only delaying the conversation by avoiding it. But she needed some time. Time to catch up. Time to brace herself so that she could face him with composure. She would not undignifiedly burst into tears or accuse him of sending out contradictory signals to her. She wanted to preserve a bit of her pride.

But now she needed to clear her head. If she went back to the lab, she would risk Eskel visiting her before she was ready to talk to him. She wanted to leave the fortress, get away from all this. To get some breathe somewhere in nature and find a bit of inner peace again. Contrary to her claim to Eskel, she had, of course, already taken care of the liquor, so it wouldn't spoil. Her work could - had to - wait. As unfocused as she was, in the worst case she would ruin one of the won essences.

Arriving at the foot of the stairs, she hurried to the main portal, pulling her cloak from the hook on the wall, and threw it over.
"Greetings, Thalia."

Startled, she winced. Geralt was sitting on a bench, obviously polishing old weapons. She had not noticed him before.
"Oh. Greetings, Geralt."
"Want to get some fresh air?"
"I, uh ... yes. I need some more herbs, which I should certainly find near the lake." "What do you need? Maybe we have something left in our supplies."
"No, I ... have already checked. I'll take my horse and will be back soon."
"Please be careful, Thalia. I controlled the day before yesterday the area around the lake and found no trace of drowners or other creatures - but you never know. In addition, the weather will change this afternoon."
"I'll be back by then. See you later, Geralt."

She disappeared into the yard, leaving Geralt alone in the hall. He briefly wondered why she had looked so confused. Then he turned back to his work. Five ancient witcher swords waited to be freed from dust and dirt.

Two hours later, Thalia was sitting on a large stone on a hillside overlooking almost the entire lake, or at least the part up to the bend of the water behind the next line of hills. She took a deep breath, letting the cool air flow into her body. This was exactly what she needed. She already felt much better. Almost good enough to quickly get over the clarifying conversation with Eskel.

Thalia had first ridden along the path that led east of the fortress. When she arrived at the lake, she had tied Arenaria by the side of the hut, that layed slightly skewed on the shore of the lake, and had followed the path on foot that led up the hills.

After a while she stopped and settled on the stone. The view of the rugged beauty of the area helped her to calm down. Her thoughts kept revolving around the chaos in her emotional world.

Back then, with Gregor, everything had been so clear. Immediately after their first meeting, when Shani had introduced them to each other during a nice evening with friends in an inn, her future fiancé had asked her to meet again. Shortly after, Thalia knew that she wanted to spend the rest of her life with this man. But then everything had turned out different.

She had always thought that someday someone at the Academy would run into her, triggering in her feelings similar to those she had felt for Gregor. But that a witcher should be this man, she had refused to believe for a long time. And now that she'd finally admitted she wanted him - him and no scholar from the academy, no wealthy trader or shipowner - it was too late.

What did she expect? That Eskel would prefer her to the sorceress who so obviously had feelings for him? How had she imagined it could work? She soon had to return to Oxenfurt, where she would be completely taken by her research. He would return to his work in spring, fighting from contract to contract against monsters.

When she noticed a tear running down her cheek, she quickly wiped it away with the back of her hand. What would her colleagues and students think of her if they could see her like this now - sitting on a hill in the wilderness, crying.

She had to suppress her feelings until she could leave Kaer Morhen. Since her notes were almost complete and she had made all the necessary substances, she would be back home in a few days when Triss sent her by portal. In Oxenfurt, her work would take all of her time completely, so that the memory of the time with Eskel would soon fade. At least that was what she hoped for.

She tried to make her peace with the situation. To accept things like they were. Of course it was better this way. He had now gained the woman whom he had long admired and desired.
Thalia was glad she hadn't made a fool of herself by confessing her feelings. She could explain her behavior this morning with a moment of weakness, a sentimental mood, as the conversation came to speak of her ring.

A cool gust of wind made her shiver. Slowly it was time to return to the fortress and to get over this conversation. A time ago the sun had been retreated behind the clouds, which moved from the east across the sky. Since then it had noticeably cooled down.

When she had rushed out at noon today, she had not thought about weatherproof clothing, but simply grabbed her cloak and got the horse out of the stable. The desire to leave the fortress had been so overwhelming that it had abandoned rational thinking. The weather change that Geralt had announced would be coming soon. It was time to leave.

In order not to invalidate her pretense of gathering herbs, she climbed down the slope for a while to pick the celandine that was growing lower down. But in the last days it had rained often, so the ground was softened and gave way. Thalia lost her footing and stumbled, slipped a few feet and twisted her left ankle.

"Oh shite!" She clenched her teeth and felt the painful spot. She could move her foot a bit, so apparently it wasn't broken. But the ankle was already swelling. On one leg, half crawling, half hopping, she made it back to the path that led down the hill. Damn, how am I supposed to go back to the fortress now?, she thought. With agony, she approached a group of trees along the way and with a little effort she broke off a thin branch. As a makeshift crutch, it was not good enough, but it was better than nothing.

The path was quite steep at this point, causing her to stumble again and again. Thalia let out a flood of curses that even a dwarfen smith would not have felt ashamed of. She would still have to walk a long way to the hut by the lake, but perhaps she would manage to get there before the storm approached. Then she could wait there until the weather calmed down. Maybe then her ankle was strong enough again so that she could mount her horse. Unfortunately, on the way there, she had not paid attention to the growing herbs - that she would accidentally find a herb that softened the swelling, was probably quite unlikely.

The wind picked up and Thalia felt the first raindrops on her skin. The fast approaching dark clouds did not bode well. The prospect of getting into a cloudburst in this cold weather was enough to make her limp faster down the path towards the cabin.

The sound of the saw used by Lambert to shorten planks for the battlement filled the courtyard of the fortress, as Geralt joined his brothers to make himself useful. Eskel and Lambert had just exchanged the main pillars. The old, dilapidated beams lay on the pavement, ready to be processed into firewood.

"Can you use a third pair of hands?"

"Of course." Eskel was just climbing the stairs and laying a pile of already sawn planks on the battlements. "You can help me change the rotten wood. At least until the cloudburst starts."

Geralt picked pliers and a hammer and joined Eskel. He looked up at the cloud cover, which was slowly closing in the sky.

"Thalia’s still not back yet? She should better hurry."

Eskel frowned. "I thought she was in the lab? When did she leave the fortress?"

"That was about noon today. She wanted to collect some herbs at the lake, which she needed for
something. Seemed a bit confused."
"And you just let her go that way alone?" Eskel felt worry and anger rise in him.

"Calm down. I investigated the area around the lake a few days ago. Neither drowners, nor water
hags or other creatures are going around there. Wolves just as little. Thalia can take care of herself."
Geralt looked slightly amused. "But if it worries you so much that she's not back yet, maybe you
should look for her."

Eskel snorted. "You bet I will do that. In one hour, this storm will reach us. I hope for you that I’ll
find her safe before."

He went down the stairs and walked to the stable.
Lambert, who had not followed the conversation, looked after him in astonishment. "What’s he up to
now?"
Geralt smirked. "He has something to clarify. Something that has long been clear to everyone but
him."

It did not take long for Eskel to reach the lake. At the foot of the sloping path he could make out the
hut on the lakeside.
From afar he saw that Arenaria was tied up next to the hut. The witcher was overcome with relief.
Probably Thalia had sought shelter here from the approaching storm.

When he arrived at the hut, Eskel dismounted Scorpion and hurried to the door. Briefly he knocked
and entered - but inside there was no trace of Thalia.

Damn ... She probably had walked on. But why? There was a path around the lake that she could
have ridden along with Arenaria. If she had left her horse behind, that meant she had to walk up the
small, steep path.

Eskel led Scorpion into the shelter next to Arenaria. "I'll be back soon, big boy. Hopefully with
Thalia."

The witcher walked swiftly along the path, which led steep up the slope. In doing so, he paid
attention to traces that suggested that someone had come here recently. When the path got steeper, he
could find bent branches on a shrubbery - as if someone would have reached out to find a secure
hold. He was apparently on the right track.

By now, light rain had started. Nothing dramatic yet, but the dark clouds announced that this soon
would change.

Eskel stopped when he heard something - at a distance, but understandable for his witcher-hearing
without a doubt. Someone uttered a true rant. And the voice was well-known to him. Eskel smiled in
relief and quickened his pace.

As he walked around the next bend in the path, he saw her: propped up against a branch, she tried to
conquer a particularly steep spot without falling. What she apparently did rather poor.

"Thalia."
She looked up. As she watched him hurry up, her eyes showed both relief and slight displeasure.

"I'm glad to have found you." Eskel grabbed her arm to support her. "What happened? And why are
you even up here?"

Thalia let him help her until they reached a lower area of the trail.
"I wanted to look for herbs," she replied sullenly.
"Here? In such weather? What do you need so urgently?"

Thalia did not answer. In fact, she seemed to hide something from him. She was probably embarrassed by her mishap.
"Let me take a look, please," said Eskel.
"It’s only sprained. I stumbled down an embankment."
Nevertheless, she sat down on a stone by the wayside.

Eskel squatted down in front of her and palpated her swollen ankle, moving the joint gently - no wonder she had not been able to walk with it. Thalia inhaled sharply as the pain drew into her leg.
"Sorry. Why did you come here alone without company? That could have been dangerous. In addition, there's a storm coming up."
"Yes, I know. That was not one of my best ideas. I just wanted ... I wanted to think," Thalia admitted hesitantly.

Eskel sighed. Did she regret what happened in the lab this morning? Or rather, what almost happened?
"Thalia, I ..." Eskel started, but she interrupted him. "It's alright, Eskel. I ... I understand it now."
"Understand what?"
"Triss and you. I won't stand between you anymore." She looked down. "It was embarrassing enough this morning. So ..."

Eskel realized that he had misunderstood so many things. They both had, apparently.
"Thalia, there's nothing between Triss and me," he hurried to clarify the situation. "I mean, she ... she wanted it, but I ..." He swallowed. "She's not the woman I want ..." She looked at him, a vulnerable look in her eyes. He hoped he would make no mistake, not misinterpret her gaze.
He put a hand to her cheek and brought his face closer to hers, felt her breath against his lips. He hesitated, as if asking for permission. Before he summoned his courage, she closed her eyes and kissed him, her lips gentle and tender.

It took a few seconds for Eskel to realize that this was actually happening. The moment he had been longing for, that he had experienced over and over again in his mind ... He returned her kiss, hesitantly at first, then devoted and hungry.

She put her hand on the back of his neck, running her fingers through his hair as she kissed him with a passion that was in no way inferior to him. The rain became stronger, but neither of them seemed to notice.

When she finally pulled away from his lips and laid her forehead against his, he was not sure if it was a raindrop running down her cheek - or one of the tears he saw in her eyes.
"Everything alright?", he whispered.
She smiled happily at him. "Now it is."

She looked up at the gray clouds, as if she were only now aware of the surroundings around her. "It's raining."
"Yeah." Eskel smiled at this obvious statement. More precisely, it was pouring down. His jerkin would keep him dry for a while, but Thalia's thin cloak was almost soaked.
"We should hurry to get to the cabin quickly before it gets really uncomfortable."

Eskel rose, grabbed Thalia's hand and pulled her up. Then he lifted her into his arms. As she rested
her head on his shoulder, he felt her nestle against him. He carried her down the path to the cabin.

When they reached the lake shore, Thalia shivered with cold. "We should wait for the storm here," said Eskel. "It's still a long way to Kaer Morhen, that could be uncomfortable."

He hugged her, maybe a little stronger than necessary, and pushed open the door of the hut. It was cool inside but dry. There were only a few straw mattresses and blankets in the small room where the witchers had often made themselves comfortable, ate and drank together after fishing at the lake.

Carefully, he set Thalia down on one of the straw mattresses. Meanwhile the wind whipped violently against the shelves of the hut. However, it had withstood many a storm in the harsh climate of Kaer Morhen. This one would not change that either.

Thalia looked at Eskel. "Thanks," she said in a low voice. "Thank you for looking for me. Without you, I might not have made it this far."

"You would have. Just would have needed more time and would have been a bit wet on the way," Eskel replied with a smile. Thalia returned it.

"By the way: it's pathetically cold in here." She opened the clasp of her soaked cloak and put the useless garment on the floor next to her.

"I'll see if the wood is dry enough for a fire," said Eskel, walking the few yards to the small fireplace of the cabin, where a stack of wood lay. They were lucky. Eskel piled up a few logs, added some straw that had swollen from one of the sacks, and lit the bundle with Igni.

Shortly thereafter a small fire burned in the hut, while outside the storm gained strength. The chimney was fortunately protected by trees, so that the smoke could escape. The wind, however, moved through the cracks in the wooden shelves so that it only slowly became warmer in the hut.

Eskel put down his drenched jerkin and sat next to Thalia in his shirt. "Looks like we'll be stuck here in the next few hours."

He smiled uncertainly. Thalia reached for his hand. "Honestly, there's no place I'd rather be ..." She looked at him with a look of so much longing that he caught his breath. Eskel leaned over and kissed her slowly and tenderly.

When they parted from each other, she looked him in the eye and he saw his own insecurity. Then the spell seemed to break. He pulled her close and kissed her, this time passionately and with a hunger that had been left unsatisfied for far too long.

Nestled tightly together, their foreheads against each other, they finally tried to catch their breath. Eskel had to laugh. All the doubts during the last weeks gave way to a deep feeling of happiness. Eskel could not remember the last time he had felt that way.

Thalia smiled at him, her eyes showing so much warmth and affection that he could no longer feel the cold in the hut. She caressed his face with her hands and kissed him passionately again. Then her lips moved on, down his neck. She began to unbutton his shirt. He did the same and untied the buckles on her dress, casting it off her shoulders. His desire to touch her was all he could think about. He kissed the side of her neck as she lay down on the straw and pulled him with her. After removing his shirt, he paused to look into her half-closed eyes. "Thalia ... If I go too far, just tell me ..."

"There is no 'too far,' Eskel."
Geralt breathed a sigh of relief when he saw the two horses in the shelter next to the hut. After the storm had weakened, he had set out to find Eskel and Thalia. Although he was sure he had missed nothing in the inspection of the area, he was slightly worried. Eskel would never forgive him if something had happened to Thalia.

Smoke rose from the chimney of the hut - they had probably sought shelter there. He stopped Roach, dismounted, knocked briefly, and at the same time opened the door. Then he grinned and closed it again. He mounted Roach and set off on the way back. "Finally…"

Chapter End Notes

Finally ... ;-)  
I hope you enjoyed this chapter.  
Thanks again to opheliathemoth for beta-reading.

As always comments are greatly welcomed!  
For further conversation you can always contact me on tumblr (LadyStoneheart-76) or on instagram (melissa_martin_autorin).
The tinder in the oven was ignited by a spark. Thalia smiled, satisfied. This time she had already managed to cast Igni on the third attempt. Although she still did not manage more than single sparks, these came now at least pretty reliable.

Lambert, standing just a few yards away from her and cutting a piece of ham for breakfast, frowned and gave Thalia a critical look. "You’re able to cast signs?"

Thalia closed the oven door and put a cast-iron pan on the stove. "Yes, at least a little. Eskel taught me Aard and Igni. Luckily, because otherwise I would not have been able to light this beacon in the forest."

She cracked some eggs on the edge of the pan. "I lost my flint. It took forever for me to create a spark - I almost felt desperate. But then it worked at last. Since then I try to practice regularly."

"Hm ...", muttered Lambert, raising an eyebrow. "When has the old guy decided to give a shit about the rules …?

Thalia turned the eggs in the pan and half turned to Lambert. "What do you mean? Which rules?"

"Oh, it's not important."

"I want to ask Eskel if he can teach me the sign that produces this shield. When he trained with Geralt, he used it once. It could be useful in the lab if I experiment with explosive compounds again."

She put the fried eggs on a large plate and handed it to Lambert, who gave her a slightly puzzled look. Then he snorted, shook his head, and brought the sliced ham and eggs to the big table in the hall, where Eskel and Geralt were already sitting and having breakfast.

Thalia poured hot water into a cup and added a herbal mixture. Six days had passed since her "trip" to the lake. Wet and frozen as she had been, she had caught a cold. Although she had been able to warm up afterwards.

Thalia smiled at the memory of the hours in the old cabin and looked out of the kitchen at Eskel, who was talking to Geralt. The last days had passed quickly. Eskel and she had spent as much time as possible together. Thalia had not felt so happy and well for a long time.

She took her tea and went into the hall, put the cup on the table, and sat down on the bench besides Eskel. He casually put his arm around her and hugged her briefly. Thalia smiled at him and kissed him on his cheek.

"Oh, come on, is it really necessary to start this during breakfast?" Lambert grimaced annoyed. Geralt laughed throatily. "Leave them alone, Lambert. Or is your displeasure perhaps caused by missing Keira?"

"No way! I’m glad I got rid of this cheating, bossy, arrogant woman." He pressed his lips together and pushed the fork a little too hard into the fried eggs on his plate.

Eskel raised an eyebrow but said nothing. Thalia did not have a clue who this Keira was, but since Lambert was obviously uncomfortable with the subject, she did not ask.

But Geralt did not want to leave it. "I thought that's just the type of woman who gets your cynical blood pumping."
Lambert snorted. "For sorceresses who like to command others, you're more likely to get excited. Exactly the same like Eskel has a soft spot for alchemists. What was this story with the lady at the maskball in Aldersberg, with whose help you have brought down the vampire?" Lambert grinned challengingly at Eskel.

To the elder witcher this topic was visibly uncomfortable. "What’s up with you, Lambert? That was years ago and not worth mentioning."

"Sounded very different back then." Lambert turned to Thalia. "Our dear Eskel didn’t try to make a good impression with fighting against monsters for the first time with you. But definitely you were impressed to see him fighting a group of crab spiders." "Oh, there was no need to impress me with that."

Thalia was annoyed, that Lambert tried to embarrass Eskel. Even though she would have liked to know more about the alchemist in Aldersberg ... But she wouldn't do Lambert the favor and ask Eskel about it.

"Eskel has earned my affection with his kindness and good manners. These qualities do not seem to be familiar to all witchers."

Lambert leaned back and crossed his arms over his chest, acknowledging the remark with a sour grin.

"Besides that, I could not watch Eskel's fight against the spiders," added Thalia. Lambert sighed theatrically. "Oh no. Our model witcher heroically and fearlessly surrenders to a whole pack of monsters - and the lady of his heart cannot even admire him."

"Lambert," Geralt warned.

Thalia did not like the direction the conversation had taken. Obviously, Lambert was not over the loss of this Keira - whoever the woman was. Time to change the topic. "Geralt, it occurs to me that I haven't told you yet: we have a mutual friend. Physician in Oxenfurt, short red hair, a winning smile ... do you remember?" She smiled mischievously.

Geralt lowered his eyes, grinning at the memory of Shani. "Oh, yes, no one would forget her that fast."

"Who don’t you forget that fast?" Yennefer had entered the hall together with Triss and slipped gracefully on the bench next to Geralt. Triss sat down to Eskel’s right.

"Only a colleague of mine in Oxenfurt," Thalia hurried to explain. It had not been her intention to get Geralt into trouble by her statement. "She has a very special sense of humor."

"And for sure she isn’t pretty at all. Or is she, Geralt?" Yennefer gave the witcher a knowing smile that did not reach her eyes.

Geralt ignored the question and turned to Thalia. "Speaking of Oxenfurt: The mountain roads are not passable for a few days. Do you intend to spend the winter in Kaer Morhen, or do you still want to accept Triss's offer to bring you home with a portal?"

"Well, I'm almost done with my records. But I can only make specific tests in Oxenfurt. Only then will it become clear whether the antidote works reliably on ordinary people. So it would be better if I came back to university before the end of winter. In addition, the antidote might then be deployed next year before the crab spiders become active again in the summer, claiming more lives. So ... yes, I think I should accept the offer. If it still stands." Thalia gave Triss a questioning look.

The sorceress smiled at the alchemist. "Of course it does. However, I'm planning on returning to Kovir in a few days. A friend has contacted me to ask for my help with a magical problem. That's
Thalia’s previously good mood reversed immediately to the opposite. She swallowed and pressed her lips together. "Maybe ... maybe you could bring me back via portal, Yennefer? You're sure to stay awhile, right?"

"I'm afraid I have to disappoint you. Geralt and I will return to Toussaint tomorrow. As much as we enjoy your company, but I do not intend to spend more time in this draughty ruin as neccessary."

"Oh ..." Thalia felt her stomach clench. "Well, then ... I'll have to pack soon."
Eskel reached for Thalia's hand. He too had not expected to say goodbye so soon. In the last few days they had avoided talking about the future. It was clear to Thalia that she wanted to see him again. But to be honest - they lived in two different worlds.

"Well, wonderful," Lambert interrupted her thoughts. "Then Eskel and I are the only two jerks again who live in this dump."
Thalia took a sip of her tea. Her appetite for breakfast was gone.

The quill scraped lightly over the paper as Thalia copied a treatise from an old folio in the library. She was alone in the big room - alone with so many books she would not find in Oxenfurt. She already knew that she would miss this library. But not nearly as much as she would miss Eskel.

Thalia looked up as someone entered the reading room. "Oh, you are here. I hope I do not bother you."
Triss looked stunning as always.

Today she wore a dark blue, flowing dress, covering her neck, but with a low neckline on her back. Her open, chestnut curls carressed her shoulders. Thalia once again wondered how extensive the sorceress's traveling wardrobe was.

"No, please come in."
Triss approached one of the large shelves and read the titles of the books. She frowned. "Strangely, actually Corvans encyclopedia of epidemiological diseases should be here somewhere ..."
"Oh, I have it here," Thalia hurried to say. "I'm almost done with it. I just copied the treatise on Cordoxia."

"Cordoxia. A more than unpleasant illness." Triss sat down at Thalia's table. The alchemist had chosen the workplace closest to the burning fireplace. No wonder, the fire was barely enough to heat even half of the big room.

"Deadly, so to speak. If I get my professorship, I will continue to explore this disease and try to find a cure."

"A sorceress I know is working to eradicate the Catriona disease. You two would certainly have something to talk about. By the way, she asked me to help her with her work. She is currently living in Kovir and has probably already made great progresses, although many thought that was impossible. If Keira has set her mind on something, then she does not give up."

"Keira? The Keira, who Lambert still seems to mourn after, though he doesn't admit it?" Thalia stifled a sneeze. That damned cold was getting on her nerves.
Triss chuckled. "Exactly this Keira." Then she became serious again. "I'm really sorry I have to leave so soon. And forcing you to leave."
Thalia looked inquiringly at the sorceress. "Triss ... I actually wanted to talk to you in private for a long time. I've never intended to stand between you and Eskel or compete with you ..."
"It's all right, Thalia. After all, Eskel has a free will. He has chosen you and I have to accept that."
Triss sighed. "I wish you all the best, Thalia. I had my chance last year and let it slip. Unfortunately, this has become clear to me too late. Eskel is happy when he is with you and I grant him that wholeheartedly. I just hope you manage to keep this happiness. Witchers are not the easiest partners. Have you considered how to go on?"

"Honestly, we've avoided this issue so far ... Oh, Eskel is coming."
Triss smiled at Eskel, who entered the library. He returned the smile for a moment, then looked at Thalia. His eyes grew warmer as he looked at her. "Here you are. You disappeared so quickly after breakfast."

"Yes, I ... wanted to copy some more texts before leaving." Eskel pressed his lips together, put a hand on Thalia’s shoulder and turned to the sorceress. "When do you plan to return to Kovir?"

"I would like to leave at the latest the day after tomorrow."
"That soon." Eskel sighed. "Couldn’t you stay a few days longer? For the sake of old times?"

Triss smiled knowingly. "Eskel, just say what you really mean. I understand that you would like to spend some more time together. But I really have to go back. Keira desperately needs support after abandoning a friend who assured her of his help. I do not want to keep her waiting any longer."

Eskel nodded. "Alright." He turned to Thalia. "Would you like to come with me for a walk?"
"Of course." Thalia got up and took Eskel’s hand he offered her. "See you later, Triss. Will you please leave the book on the table when you're done here? Then I'll continue later."

"Naturally. Keep her warm, Eskel. Not that her cold gets even worse."

As they stepped out of the great hall, Thalia wrapped in her green cloak, the cold winter air struck them.
"Uh, it's really cold." Thalia pulled the coat tighter around her body. Eskel put an arm around her shoulders and she leaned against him. "Let's go to the North Tower, we'll get the best view over the mountains there."
"Won’t the wind freeze us to ice?"
"Don't worry, I know a trick to prevent that."

He was right. The view on the balcony of the tower was breathtaking. The mountain peaks were covered in snow and the winterly panorama was indescribably beautiful. If only it had not been that cold.

The wind blew single snowflakes around them. Eskel led Thalia to a bench, where he sat down next to her. Then he cast a sign, and immediately a shield of pure energy formed around them, holding back the cold air and radiating a comforting warmth. The snowflakes that came in contact with the barrier vaporized instantly.

Thalia laughed. "Well, you're always good for a surprise."
"Warmer now?" Eskel looked at her with a smile.
"That's perfect. How long can you keep this shield up?"
"It always depends on what it has to withstand. If it just serves as a windbreak like now, then a few minutes."
"Impressive. Actually, I wanted to ask you anyway if you could teach me this sign. It could be useful
in the lab when I work with explosive materials."

Eskel raised an eyebrow. "For that you have to master Quen very well."
"Of course I have to practice a lot, but with Igni it works quite well … at least I always manage to create sparks."
Eskel laughed. "Well, then …" He released the shield and showed her the correct gesture. "Take the index finger a little higher. Yes, exactly. Now concentrate, let the energy flow."

A faint whirring appeared in the air around her. However, the wind still penetrated to them and Thalia suppressed a chill. The flicker disappeared.

"I'll probably have to practice that again."
"It was a good start." Eskel created a new shield and immediately it was pleasantly warm again. "It worked better than Igni and Aard when you learned it."
Thalia gave him a benevolent push against the shoulder. "It was not that bad for a start."
Eskel laughed. "That's what I'm saying. But please do not rely on Quen if you handle any explosives. Not that you lose more than a finger."
"I only thought of you. I would like to build some really good explosive devices for you. No such children's toys that you work with. I also have an idea how to delay the detonation for a few minutes. Would that be helpful?"
"Very helpful. But please be careful."

He reached for her hand with his left and squeezed it lightly. "I would like to embrace you in one piece when we meet again in a few weeks."
Thalia smiled at him. "So you come to visit me in Oxenfurt?"
"That's what I planned. If that's all right with you."
"Of course it is, you doofus." She closed her arms around him and kissed him, slowly and emotionally. He returned her kiss, then hugged her tightly and buried his face in her open hair. "I don't want you to go." His voice was little more than a harsh whisper.
Thalia suppressed the tears that filled her eyes as she thought about the impending breakup. "And I don't want to leave. But it has to be. Otherwise maybe everything I've built up in the last few years was for nothing."

She looked Eskel in the eye. "I know you want to keep this fortress as good as possible, but ... couldn't you come along with me? To Oxenfurt? Whether you spend the winter here or there with me ..."
Eskel shook his head, interrupted her. "Thalia. You know as well as I do that it would be a bad idea. You said that there are enough people at the academy who do not support your professorship - just because you're a woman. What happens if you also show up with a witcher? An unnatural mutant and monster slayer? You would sabotage yourself with my presence. And that's what I want the least."

She swallowed. "Even if I get the professorship - what's next year? Do we only see each other for a few days, pretend that I have an assignment for you, and then separate again when you move on? Eskel, I want to be with you ..."
He looked at her, his eyes full of warmth. "And I want to be with you. We will find a solution."

Thalia nodded. "I know we will. I just hoped we would have some more time together."
"Me too. But I will not be able to change Triss's mind. Maybe it's true that Keira needs her help with her work. But also she doesn't like to lose."

"I can understand that she does not want to stay here much longer. She's still hurt because you rejected her."
Eskel shrugged. "I don't know. Maybe it's just her pride that's hurt. The result is the same. We only have two days left."

"Then let's use these two days as best we can." She kissed him again. The Quen shield dissolved, the cool air was surrounding them, but they barely noticed it.

"To Toussaint. To wine, warmth and Corvo Bianco!" Geralt brought down the mandrake brandy Thalia had burned in the lab. It flowed down his throat like liquid fire. Wonderful. Maybe not quite as good as the one burned by Regis, but close to it.

Lambert coughed after he took a gulp. "Props to you, Ms. Alchemist! If you no longer feel to work in your academy, you can also become self-employed as a distiller."

Thalia smiled but sipped her own glass. Even though they had eaten well, she knew that she should not drink much of her own brew. After all, she did not want to end the last evening together with Geralt and Yennefer drunk.

Eskel poured the next round. Then he hesitated for a moment. "To Vesemir. May he rest in peace." The witchers drank silently. Geralt spoke first afterwards. "Somehow I have the feeling that he is still there – in these old walls. I have a thousand memories of him here."

He took a deep breath. "What are you doing with Kaer Morhen?" He turned to Eskel and Lambert. "Do you want to come back winter after winter? You can not stop the decay here. Even if I helped, we could not do it. So what should happen to this ruin?"

Eskel's gaze wandered over the tabletop, lost in thought. "I honestly do not know. On one hand, I realize that everything here can not be saved. Our school is no longer existent, there are only the three of us left. Two, considering you're retired, Geralt. But on the other hand ... here is our home. What would Vesemir have wanted us to do?"

Lambert snorted. "Vesemir is dead. I miss the old boy as much as you do, but as we rebuild a dilapidated wall here, while another collapses, he does not come alive again."

Thalia put a hand on Eskel's leg. He had told her that Vesemir had been like a father to them all. And what happened three years ago when the Wild Hunt attacked the fortress. Eskel cleared his throat. "Maybe it's time to give up Kaer Morhen." He spoke softly. He found it difficult to befriend the thought.

Geralt put an arm around Yennefer. "You're always welcome to Corvo Bianco! 'Ma maison est ta maison' - or something like that."
"Geralt! Are you planning to turn our little winery into a witches' fortress?"
"We have enough room."
"We will talk about it. When you are sober."

"When he's sober, he doesn't dare contradict you anyway." Lambert glared morosely into his empty glass, then reached for the bottle and poured himself another one.

"Lambert! No quibble on our last evening, please." Of the three witchers, Eskel was the least drunk.

"It's all very well for you, of course. Now that you have someone to warm your bed, I'm the only one who does not belong anywhere. All I have is this damned ruin here. Throughout the year, I risk my life for this scum of people, who spit on me and thanks for what? To sit here alone in this dump
in winter?" He threw down the liquor, grimacing as the alcohol burned his throat.

"I didn´t know that you are so sentimental, Lambert." So far Triss had kept out of the conversation and had seemed atypically thoughtful. "Has your time with Keira possibly changed you?"

"Leave this unfaithful slut out of the game, Merigold."

"By the way, she lives in Kovir. Did you know that? And apparently she is no longer together with Albert van Ehrenfels. Just in case you should care." Triss took a sip of her red wine.

Lambert stared into his empty glass. "I don´t," he mumbled.

Thalia leaned against Eskel. He put an arm around her. "If Lambert is in that mood, he's even worse than usual," he whispered to her. "Would you mind if we say goodbye?"

Thalia smiled. "Not at all ..."

"I can hear you, even if you whisper," Lambert complained.

Eskel rose. "Good night everyone. Geralt, Yennefer - do you know when you want to leave tomorrow?"

"Yen and I will head off after breakfast. Do not worry, we will not leave without saying goodbye."

Eskel nodded to his friend and turned to the stairs to the residential quarters with Thalia in his arms.

"And, for fuck´s sake, be quiet tonight," Lambert called after them. "I can hear you in the room next door."

Chapter End Notes

Praises to ofeliathemoth for beta-reading!
Farewells

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Geralt took Eskel's hand, pulled him a little closer and hugged his brother.
"Good bye, my friend. And remember, my offer is standing: In Corvo Bianco, you're always welcome and for as long as you wanna stay."
"Thanks, Geralt. I'll think about it."
The white-haired witcher walked over to Lambert, who was standing in the yard with them and hugged him, too. "Offer's for you too, you know that."
Lambert nodded. "Winters are warm in Toussaint, you say? Maybe I'll come over. Even if it's only to annoy Yennefer."
Geralt acknowledged this remark with an amused snort.
Yennefer just said goodbye to Thalia, though without a warm hug.
"Farewell, Professor. I wish you all the best - at the Academy and of course with your witcher."
"Good luck to you too. And thank you for your advice. Without it things would have turned out different, I'm sure."
Yennefer smiled knowingly. "I have another wise advice for you: Have patience with him - witchers are wonderful lovers, but no easy partners."
Thalia smiled. The sorceress seemed to know what she was talking about.
Yennefer went over to Triss to say goodbye to her as well. She hugged her friend, who returned the gesture.
"Please keep me up as the situation for our peers in the north changes," Yennefer said as she separated from Triss. "In Toussaint, we do not get much information first-hand."
"I'll let you know. See you soon, Yennefer."
Thalia, standing aloof now, tightened her cloak and stifled a sneeze. The cold was still plaguing her. Yennefer turned half to her. "Oh, Thalia ... I've transferred the tub out of our room in yours. A bath will surely do you good. The water in the tub will remain hot till evening."
"Thank you!" Thalia was surprised by this friendly gesture from Yennefer. She had not expected it. The sorceress was always good for a surprise despite her often repellent and rugged nature.
Yennefer opened a portal and sent the baggage through it by levitation magic. "Are you coming, Geralt?"
The witcher hugged Thalia for a moment before saying goodbye to Triss. Under Yennefer's keen eye he hugged her briefly. Then he turned to the portal - his expression showed how much he hated this way of traveling. Just in front of the shimmering magical passage he turned once more to Thalia.
"Please send my greetings to our mutual friend. I wish her all the best."
"I'll do."
Yennefer raised a disapproving eyebrow but said nothing. Geralt stepped through the portal, followed by the sorceress.
Triss looked for a few more seconds at the spot where the passage closed behind them. Then she sighed and turned to the others. "Then I'll probably pack once in a while. Thalia, I would like to leave tomorrow morning."
Thalia nodded. "Alright. I will be ready."
Triss went to the main building. Lambert wordlessly disappeared in the direction of the stable. Thalia stepped to Eskel and hugged him, resting her head against his chest. As his arms wrapped around her and she felt his cheek against her forehead, she sighed sadly.
"Just one more day ... I'd like to spend as much time with you as possible."
"I promised Lambert to seal the stable wall with him. But it will not take long. After that I am completely at your disposal."
"All right then. I'll clean up the lab and pack everything for tomorrow. And after that I will enjoy my first warm bath for weeks."

**********

The water surrounded Thalia as she sank deeper into the tub. In the last few days an unpleasant chill had been her constant companion, but now it was driven away by a pleasant warmth that slowly spread in her body.

Even after several hours that had passed since this morning, the water was still at a comfortable temperature, obeying the spell Yennefer had used. Thalia was grateful to the unapproachable sorceress for this parting gift. With a comforting sigh, she leaned against the wood and closed her eyes.

A knock on the door made her jump. She had not noticed that she almost fell asleep.

With only three other people in the fortress, Thalia had an idea who her visitor might be. A satisfied smile stole onto her lips.

"Is it you, love? Just enter."

Eskel entered her chamber and closed the door behind him.

"You weren't expecting Lambert, were you?", the witcher asked jokingly.

Thalia turned to face him in the tub, put her folded arms on the edge, and rested her chin on them.

"Who knows ...", She winked at him mischievously. "But you may also join me."

Eskel smiled, raising his eyebrow slightly skeptically. "Don't you think that the tub is a little too small for the two of us?"

"Let's just give it a try ..."

Eskel quickly got rid of his clothes. Thalia liked to watch him. Although she had been enjoying this sight quite a few times for the last week, she still enjoyed admiring the flexing of his muscles under his skin, that was covered with countless scars. He climbed into the tub. A fair amount of water was running over the edge.

"Leave some for us!" Thalia moved closer to him, leaning her back against his chest. He embraced her with his arms, pulling her closer to him. Thalia turned her head over her shoulder and kissed him slowly and sensually.

As he pulled away, his lips moved along the side of her neck. A groan escaped her throat. Even though they had only recently become a couple, Eskel already knew quite well where she was particularly sensitive. She turned to face him in the water, putting her arms around his neck and nestling her body against his.

"Let's try out how much elbow room we have in here, shall we?"

Eskel happily obliged.

**********

Later that evening, they were lying together on Thalia's bed. Her head resting on his shoulder, she snuggled against him. The slight vibration of the magic radiating from him sent a pleasant tingling sensation over her skin.

There hadn't been much water left in the tub. The floorboards in her chamber had been more or less flooded. But by a slight incline of the floor, most of the water had already flowed out through a gap under the door. Presumably the stairs were wet, but Thalia did not waste any thought.

She only wished this moment would last forever.

A fire crackled in the fireplace and spread a pleasant warmth in the room.

Thalia ran her finger over one of the numerous scars on Eskel's broad chest. So many scars ... His entire body was covered by them, testimony to his dangerous craft. Although she knew his job was common to him, she worried as soon as she remembered that he would return to the "path" in spring.

Even if, hopefully, this path would quickly bring him back to Oxenfurt.

She raised her eyes and looked at him as he lay relaxed beside her with his eyes closed. Sometimes she still could not quite believe that he was hers now and this uncommon yet so interesting man
actually felt as attracted to her as she to him. It was different with him than it had been with Gregor back then. Although he was as tender, Eskel was yet more passionate than her fiancé had ever been.

As if he had felt her gaze, he opened his eyes and smiled a little sleepily to her. In the light of fire, his irises with their slitted pupils looked amber. Thalia remembered how she had initially considered this now so familiar sight as predatory and threatening.

"Everything alright?" Eskel asked softly.
"I think I've never been as happy as I am right now."
Eskel placed a kiss on the forehead.
Thalia closed her eyes and enjoyed the tenderness of his gesture. "I'm just sad when I think about tomorrow. We have to say goodbye to each other."
Eskel hugged her. "It's only for a few weeks. I'll leave as soon as the mountain roads are passable and I'll be back with you before spring begins."
"Will you accept contracts on the way to Oxenfurt?"
"I don't know. Depending on what comes up. Nothing that would take a lot of time."
"Please be careful. Do not take any dangerous jobs."
Eskel laughed. "Thalia. I am a witcher. We're not hired to catch rabbits."
"I'm aware. Don't make fun of me, silly. I just worry. I just ... don't go hunting crab spiders or anything like that again."
"I don't think a beautiful woman will hire me back so soon."
"Speaking of 'beautiful women' ... Your brother Geralt does not seem to take loyalty so serious, does he? When he was with my friend Shani ... well, you know ... he was already with Yennefer by that time, as far as I know."
"Hm. Could be."
"But not all witchers are like that, right?"
Eskel moved a bit away from her, looked at her searchingly and amused at the same time. "Are you just asking me if I'm gonna be faithful to you?"
"Uh ... no, of course not! So ... "
Eskel became more serious. "Thalia. For several decades, I have not been with a woman for more than a night. And never before with a woman like you. Please believe me, that I would not risk what we have for anything or anyone."
Thalia smiled. "I'm sorry. I did not want to doubt your loyalty ... It's just ... I still can hardly believe you've chosen me, not a flawless, beautiful sorceress. Who is, by the way, probably sleeping in the room above us."
Eskel smiled. "But I do not want a flawless, beautiful sorceress. I want you. Everything is real about you. You pretend nothing, don't play games. You're honest and undisguised. With sorceresses you never know what is real and what is not. Let alone their appearance, thanks to the magical beauty treatment: All spells, make-up and Glamarye."
"Oh, yes, everything is real about me. Even the lovehandles on my hips," laughed Thalia.
Eskel gently stroked his hand over the mentioned spot. "I love your curves. I'm sure you've noticed that by now."
"I suspected something like that, yes. But aren't you a little bit too sure about my noble plans? Am I acting so predictably on you?"
Eskel raised an eyebrow. "Do you have dark sides that I should know of?"
"Oh, if only you knew. I can be dangerous - at least in my thoughts. More dangerous than many monsters."
"Then I'm lucky. Monsters are my specialty."
"But you only know ordinary monsters. Waterhags, Harpyies and Bruxae. Maybe even Succubi ... "
She winked at him teasingly. "But this monster knows exactly what it has to do to prevent the witcher from defending himself ..."
She leaned over him, kissing his neck, his chest, letting her lips wander gently over his body. Her breath brushed his skin. She kissed the bare skin on his stomach, wandering lower with her lips.
Eskel drew in a sharp breath. "Thalia ..."
"And if the witcher is defenseless ..." She slowly crawled over him. "... the monster can defeat him easily."

**************

Thalia jumped from sleep, awoken by a scream. Immediately, blinded by sunlight, she closed her eyes again. The first rays of sunshine already fell into the room and she had to get used to the brightness first. The scream was followed by a true rant of loud curses. Eskel had already gotten out of bed and hurriedly put on his pants.
"Is that Lambert?" Thalia asked.
"Undoubtedly, yes." Eskel opened the door. Thalia pulled over her chemise and followed the witcher to the landing of the stairs.
She almost lost her grip, clinging to Eskel so as not to fall. A thin layer of ice had formed on the landing. Lambert, who was half a store downwards, had apparently lost hold and had tumbled down the stairs. He straightened up and continued to shout curses.
"Are you hurt?" asked Eskel and interrupted the flow of heartfelt swear words.
"That damned ruin! No, I'm not hurt! But I've bruised my ass! Everything is iced up here!"
Eskel looked up at the roof of the residential tower.
"Must have been raining through the hole in the roof tonight. The hole that we wanted to repair weeks ago, by the way."
"If you had not written a hundred tasks on this damn list, we might have come to it already. Miserable dump! I hardly slept tonight. First, I had to listen to your fucking moans and then the shitty wind whistled through the cracks in the walls of my room. I'll go to the hall and light the fireplace. At least there it gets reasonably warm."
Lambert stalked down the stairs, annoyed.
Thalia tightened her gown and went back into the room. It was terribly cold in the stairwell.
"Eskel, I think the ice is our fault. The water from the tub ..."
"I know."
"But you said to Lambert that it was on the rotten roof."
"It does not hurt to give him an extra incentive to work."
"Nasty..." Thalia looked at him jokingly-reproachfully.
"I'll help him with the repairs, do not worry."
"Don't fall off the roof. If he likes to, he can also move to this room here, at least there is no draught in here. I don't need it anymore ..."
With the last sentence, her voice had become quiet. Eskel came up to her and put his arms around her, hugging her tightly.

************

A few hours later Eskel loaded the saddle bags on Arenaria after Thalia had bridled the mare. When he noticed that Triss stepped into the yard, he went over to her.
"Triss? When Thalia goes through the portal, I want to go with her to make sure she gets there well. Then I will come back to Kaer Morhen."
Triss looked at him in astonishment. "Eskel, what's that? Do you trust me so little?"
"That's not what it is about. I just do not want to ask myself in the next few weeks if something has happened to her. You know that I'm not quite as sceptical as Geralt when it comes to portals, but I'm still not fond of them."
Triss sighed and made her refusal clear. "Thalia already wants to take her horse with her luggage. Do you have any idea how exhausting it is to create such a large portal and then maintain it for a while?"
"Triss, please. I have to be sure that she arrived well."
Triss's expression changed from indignant to thoughtful. Then she sighed. "All right, Eskel. If you care so much ... I can keep the portal open for a few minutes. Do not take your time."
Eskel smiled at her. "Thanks, Triss."
Triss shook her head slightly. "I never knew you're that wary... Thalia got lucky."
Eskel glanced to the ground, smiling sheepishly, and then walked over to the alchemist who was examining if the saddlebags were tightened properly.
"Ready?"
Thalia turned to him, a sad smile on her lips. "I've packed everything, my records are safely stowed, I have already said goodbye to Lambert and Triss. So everything's ready but me..."
He put his hands to her cheeks and kissed her.
"I'll come to Oxenfurt soon," he said softly as he parted from her. "I still have not received my payment. The Academy owes me 300 crowns for the crab spiders."
Thalia smiled. "Not to mention the Harpyies. We'll have to pay you for them too."
"Harpyies cost fifty crowns each."
"Your services are not exactly inexpensive, Master Witcher. Considering that you've already got the heart of an alchemist..."
Eskel put his forehead to hers, eyes closed, both of them caught at this moment. Thalia broke up first.
"Triss is waiting. I have to go."
"Yes. I'll be accompanying you through the portal. To make sure you've arrived well."
Thalia smiled. "That's kind of you."
Eskel nodded to Triss, who created a shimmering portal. "You'll arrive outside the city walls near the shore of the Pontar. I positioned an anchor there once."
Eskel calmed Arenaria by casting Axii. The mare was now without resistance lead by him to the portal.
He reached out to Thalia's hand, which she gratefully laid in his. Together they walked through the magical gate.

***********

Seconds later, they stood on the bank of the Pontar, the city walls of Oxenfurt within sight. The sky was overcast, but it was not nearly as cold as in the Blue Mountains. Arenaria snorted and shook her head, numb. Then the animal, still under the influence of the sign, decided to graze on the shore. Thalia closed her eyes for a moment, evidently struggling again with a hint of nausea.
"Are you alright?" Eskel asked. Thalia nodded and opened her eyes again. "I am. It's not as bad as with Istredd's portal." Taking a deep breath, she turned to Eskel.
"Well then... safely arrived!" She smiled sheepishly.
Eskel sighed and hugged her. Tears shimmered in Thalia's eyes.
"Come back safely to me, you hear me? No chasing dragons on the way here."
"Witchers don't hunt dragons. I'll take care of myself, I promise."
They kissed one last time passionately. As their lips parted, Thalia wiped a tear from her eye.
"Go now. Please."
Eskel took a deep breath. It was obvious that this farewell was difficult for him too.
He touched her cheek again. "See you soon, dear heart."
Then he turned and walked through the portal, which closed behind him only moments later.
Thalia stood alone on the shore, the grazing mare besides her.
"See you soon, Eskel. I love you."

Chapter End Notes

Gwynbleidd. Whitewolf created a picture of Eskel and Thalia - you find it on my Instagram melissa_martin_autorin. Isn't it wonderful? Thank you so much, Gwynbleidd!
And again thanks to my wonderful beta-reader opheliathemoth!
The red, viscous substance flowed lazily down the walls of the glass rod, dissolving in the clear, pale blue liquid that was already in the bulb. The chemicals mingled, reacted with each other. The color changed from an initially pale purple to a dark emerald green. A light, almost peppermint-like odor was spreading.

Thalia dipped a pipette into the liquid, took a few drops and put them in a shallow bowl, which she placed on a table. Then she picked up the lighter, a long metal rod with a flaming piece of linen at the end. With the help of a candle flame, she set the linen on fire, stepped aside and ignited the liquid in the bowl.

A sting flame formed instantaneously, illuminating the entire lecture hall to the last row. A startled gasping passed through the room, followed by excited murmurs. Thalia looked into the surprised faces of her students and smiled contentedly. The freshmen were always enthusiastic about simple pyrochemical experiments. Some things just never changed.

Many others, however, did. For example, Thalia had exchanged her blue Magister robe, which she had previously worn during lectures, for a gown in venerable black - the color reserved for professors at the academy.

She put a lid on the flame, which now burnt only small in the bowl, and turned to her students.

"What we saw here makes clear that even a small amount of Rubedo added to Vitriol is enough to give a highly flammable compound. Both substances are not flammable for themselves but together they form the basis for many accelerators or explosives. We will continue next week with the nitrogen compounds. Please read in preparation the essay by Aberloft and Gabor, whose library signature is written on the blackboard behind me. I wish you all an educational week."

The students tapped their knuckles on the tabletops in front of them, applauding their lecturer for the successful demonstration. The lecture hall emptied quickly, the last listeners packed their writing utensils and hurried to the next lecture.

Thalia put the used glasses and bowls in the cleaning basin. Of course, she could have left this cleanup work to student helpers as well - a privilege that she now had as a professor. But she still preferred to do this work herself.

When the work area was returned to its original state, Thalia also took her bag and stepped into the hallway. As often, there was a busy crowd of students between lectures. In the past, she had had to struggle her way through the crowd to get to her lab - today the young people readily made room for her. At least among the students, Thalia earned great respect ever since she was appointed a professor of alchemy.

For nine weeks she was back in Oxenfurt. Nine weeks in which her journey with Eskel and the time in Kaer Morhen seemed more and more like a dream from another world.

When she returned to campus with the formula for an effective antidote, not a few professors at the Academy had been most surprised. Apparently only a few had believed that she would be able to successfully accomplish this task. Some even seemed puzzled that she ever returned from her expedition.

Of course, Thalia had reported the incidents on the trip - at least those that were relevant in this context. Of the betrayal and the wanton endangerment by the two guardians Jonas and Olbertz, of
the successful procurement of the crab spider organs, the research process and its results. What the professors should not learn - for example, that she had carried out her research in the witcher fortress Kaer Morhen – she didn’t mention.

Her dean, Professor Bloomfeld, was outraged by the behavior of the expedition attendants. However, since neither Jonas nor Olbertz had reappeared, clarifying the background seemed impossible. Thalia's suggestions that someone at the university might have something to do with it and wanted to sabotage her work were indignantly rejected by the professors. Thalia had realized that it could rather be interpreted as negative even if she insisted on her assumption that her rival Alric Efferen was behind it. She had no evidence. Only Jonas and Olbertz could have contributed to the enlightenment - but both remained missing.

Thalia climbed the stairs to the second floor of the faculty, where her own office had recently been. At the door, a visitor was already waiting for her.
"Shani! Nice to see you!" Thalia went to her friend with a smile. "I thought you were still in Novigrad. Wait a minute, I'll unlock, then we can talk inside."
"Gladly. By the way, the black looks good on you."
Thalia grinned as she unlocked the door. There was a neat mess in her office. Countless books piled up in the corners. All sorts of writing-papers were scattered on the desk, an open-topped sheet of paper taking up much of the space on the tabletop.

"Sit down, please." Thalia took a book from the seat of the visitor's chair and offered the place to Shani, who settled gracefully on the upholstery.
Thalia sat down in the chair behind the desk. "Since when are you back?"
"I only returned last night. And honestly, I'm glad to be here again."

"Has the situation in Novigrad deteriorated so much? I've heard that this Order of the Eternal Fire has regained control after Radovid's successor now sits securely on the throne. But I didn't think that it would get that bad so fast."

Shani snorted. "Neither did I. I really hoped that this chapter would end with Radovid's death. But the situation for elves who live there is becoming more dangerous. I'm not sure, but ... something was wrong at the hospital. You know, I was supposed to talk to a doctor about pathogens that used to appear in a neighborhood in Novigrad. But ... it was kind of strange. The questions of my colleague there were solely aimed at pathogens that only attack elves. He could or did not want to give me much information about the outbreak there. And when I asked if I could look at one of the bodies, he seemed to be getting a bit nervous. Allegedly, all victims have already been burned to avoid a major outbreak. But my feeling tells me that something is wrong with the whole matter. I just can not say what exactly it is ... This Order is regained, witch hunters are patrolling Novigrad's streets - and right now a deadly plague is breaking out among nonhumans."

Thalia frowned. "That really sounds a bit strange. I just hope that these fanatics won't gain influence again here in Oxenfurt. It is enough for me that the Redan army has commissioned some developments. For example, this fire crossbow, which I am still working on. I'm not comfortable with it, as I already told you. Maybe that's why I'm reluctant to finish it. I also noticed that the curricula have changed: Pyrochemistry has received a significantly higher status than in the last year. Almost as if they wanted to train scientists specializing in explosives and weapons research."
"These are not good developments." Shani sighed. Then she smiled. "But let's talk about something positive too. How's life as a newly appointed professor? We have hardly seen each other since your return."

"Well ... for most professors, I have to prove myself yet. Some were not thrilled that they had to award me the professorship. But since I successfully completed my assignment, there was no
objective reason not to grant me the appointment. They have still found a way to raise the good Alric Efferen also in the professorship. Probably they had to - otherwise his family would have withdrawn a small fortune from the Academy." Thalia shook her head. "Now this pompous cockalorum struts around, gathering a horde of sycophants around him, pretending that the essay he's written has revolutionized knowledge about ionic compounds."

"Do not grieve, Thalia. We will always be dealing with such 'scientists'. The main thing is that you have reached your goal." A mischievous smile crept on Shani's lips. "But tell me more about your expedition. When we met shortly after your return, you indicated that this witcher was very pleasant company ..."

Thalia smiled. "Yes, that's one way you can put it ...

A knock on the door interrupted her. The visitor did not wait to be invited. Professor Basilius pushed open the door and entered the office. His massive body was covered by his black robe. A pair of gold-framed glasses sat a bit crookedly on his nose, the curved glasses made his eyes appear smaller. When his eyes fell on Shani, he smirked.

"Ah, the ladies all by themselves. Surely there are important issues to discuss that no man should hear ..." He winked at Shani knowingly and then turned to Thalia. "When you've finished your chat, Miss Colleague, please come to my office in twenty minutes. Another research order of the government has just reached the faculty. I do not have to point out that this is the highest priority. You and some of your colleagues will accept this assignment. I'll tell you the details later. So be punctual." He nodded to the two scientists and left the office.

Shani shook her head. "What was that?"

Thalia snorted. "Well, I have to get used to that. Some faculty senior professors still struggle to have a woman in their ranks now. Some express their concerns openly, some a little more subtly - but almost all have concerns about whether a woman really can meet the demands of this venerable state."

"I am glad that we are already a bit more advanced in the medical faculty."

"Yes, you can call yourself lucky. I'll have to make an extra effort to silence the doubters. Please do not be angry with me, but I would rather go to this meeting right now. I definitely do not want to be the last to arrive."

When Thalia entered the spacious office, three of her colleagues were already present. One of them was Alric Efferen, who seemed engrossed in an animated conversation with the other two professors. Thalia greeted those present, but nobody seemed to notice her arrival. She went to one of the shelves on the back wall and studied the titles of the books in it. Alric Efferen shared an anecdote from one of his lectures, that lacked any punchline. Which did not prevent the two listeners from bursting out laughing at the end of the story. The influence of the Efferen family and their generous allocation of research funds apparently transformed any tedious story into a witty narrative, as Thalia thought.

Professor Basilius entered the room, followed by two other young professors, Yonka and Laikos. The elder greeted Efferen and his two listeners with a handshake, nodded to Thalia and then began to speak.

"Distinguished colleagues, as I have already indicated, our faculty has received an important commission from the Redan Government. Needless to say, you will leave all your current research to rest until this work is successfully completed. As you probably know, raids of this damned Scoia’tael happen again and again, especially on the border to Temeria. So far, it has not been possible to stop these murdering gangs. But maybe the tide will turn now. A plague has broken out in a slum of
nonhumans in Novigrad – with symptoms similar to Catriona's disease. Humans are apparently immune to the pathogen. The outbreak could be put under control by the radical intervention of the local medicals."

The professor pursed his lips, then continued after a moment's reflection. "I imagine that what I'm about to tell you will cause one or two of you to worry." He glanced at Thalia. Her confusion kept increasing. Her mind already made logical deductions from what she had heard, but she refused to even consider that possibility. All speculation, however, was unnecessary, as the professor continued.

"But please consider how many people have already fallen victim to these so-called "squirrels". How brutal and cruel these enemies are against villagers and soldiers. This pathogen gives us the opportunity to eliminate this threat once and for all. Our King Radovid, the sixth, personally signed the commission to our alchemical faculty. It states that we should research this pathogen and develop a method of targeted dissemination."

Thalia felt as if she had been punched in the gut. It took several seconds to regain her composure. Two of the other scientists seemed to be alike. Marik Yonka, a young Kaedweni, was visibly pale and blinked nervously. Similarly, Vincent Laikos, who had been one of her mentors during her studies, fared the same way. However, Alric Efferen and his two flatterers seemed more interested than repelled at the thought of being involved in the development of a biological weapon.

"You will begin your research tomorrow, dear colleagues," continued Professor Basilius. "We will first examine together a few of the infected, so you can make yourself a picture of the disease process. After that, three of you will be working to isolate the pathogen, while the others will deal with the question of disseminatability. For information on the current state of knowledge, please refer to this copy of the treatment and autopsy report of a colleague from Novigrad. Everything else will be discussed tomorrow. I wish you a pleasant day, dear colleagues."

Each of them was given a multi-page document. Thalia scanned the first page and frowned. She swallowed, took a deep breath. The other professors left the room, Yonka and Laikos spoke softly.

"Professor Basilius?" The person addressed turned to Thalia, apparently amazed that she made no move to do the same to her colleagues and leave the office. "May we talk, please?"

He raised his eyebrows but made a gesture for her to sit in one of the chairs. "Any questions, Professor van de Wintervoord?"

Thalia hesitated for a moment. "Professor ... I ... I would like to ask you to release me from this ... this 'research group'. I feel unable to participate in this."

Professor Basilius looked at Thalia for several seconds, his expression unreadable. When he finally spoke, his voice was sharp. "My dear. Your inclusion in this research group is not a request. This order comes directly from our King - I do not have to explain to you what that means for our Academy." Thalia wanted to object, but he stopped her with a sharp gesture. "This order has the highest priority. And our most skilled scientists will do their utmost to fulfill it as soon as possible. I may like it or not, but you are one of our most capable scientists. And you will do your best to satisfy our government."

"With all due respect: I did not become an alchemist to develop weapons. My goal is to help people through my research ..."

"You said it! We want to help people! Let us end this constant threat to humans through this ineffable Scoia'tael. This pathogen gives us the opportunity to put an end to it once and for ever!" The professor had raised his voice, but Thalia refused to be impressed.

"By genocide? You seriously consider bringing a deadly plague on the elves to win the fight against
the rebels? Hundreds or thousands of innocent people can perish. How do you justify that before your conscience?"

"I do not need to justify anything, my dear colleague. I fulfill orders. And you should do that too. You are now a professor at this academy. Did you think you could choose your research projects yourself? That you only have to fulfill the orders that correspond to your personal morals? Welcome to reality! The conversation is over."

"Professor Basilius ... I have never made a secret of the fact that I have made it my goal to research the Cordoxia and put an end to this disease. I can not and will not contribute to spreading another pathogen!"

"Miss van de Wintervoord. I still have not expressed myself clearly enough." The voice of Professor Basilius had become dangerously quiet. "I do not give you the choice to put your expertise to the service of this task. Should you refuse your cooperation, it will not only be easy to withdraw your professorship, but also to damage your reputation in science so far that you will not be able to work any more at any university in Redania, Kaedwen or Temeria. Everything you've built up in the last few years - all the goals you've been following - that all we can quickly undo, Miss Professor. Just think about how much you can do in your career. Do you just want to throw it all away because of moral concerns?"

Thalia swallowed. Her counterpart noticed the effect of his words on the young professor. He put on a winning smile. "Professor van de Wintervoord. I understand that you have concerns. Yes, I can understand your arguments. However, I can assure you that there is no question that we will research, reproduce and distribute this pathogen. If you refuse to cooperate, the only consequence will be that you will lose everything. Not a single elven life will be spared through that." Professor Basilius leaned back in his chair. "Use the rest of the day to rethink your attitude. I'll be awaiting you tomorrow at noon at the gate of the prison, where we'll take a look at the infected elves along with the others. Good day, Professor."

Thalia rose from her chair. The professor would not let his mind be changed, she knew that now. Thalia left the room without a word.

One hour later, she was sitting on the bank of the Pontar, where she had said goodbye to Eskel nine weeks ago. Since then, she had often come here to reflect and also to escape the hustle and bustle in Oxenfurt for a short time. She would never have thought it possible before, but after her time in the wilderness and in Kaer Morhen, she often found the city overwhelming.

Arenaria grazed a few meters beside her. After all they had been through together, she felt a sense of attachment to the horse and had not wanted it to be ridden on further expeditions. Thalia had bought the not very young mare of the university and since then the animal lived in a stable on the outskirts of the city. Thalia regularly rode out in the nearby area, which was not only good for the animal. Oh, how much she missed Eskel. Especially now in this moment.

Her whole world had just been torn apart. What immoral inventions and developments had already left the walls of the Academy? Were these things hidden from the young scientists, or had they just closed their eyes? Would not it have been clear to her that her idea of using alchemy for medical advancement and for the benefit of all would not have been shared by all professors?

A shiver ran down her spine as she thought about how the effectiveness of her antidote might have been tested. She had been told that an assistant had brought a sample to Toussaint via portal, where crab spider attacks were not uncommon at this time of the year. Particularly vulnerable were the
workers in the vineyards. But was the antitoxin actually tested on an accidentally poisoned person? From what she had heard today, Thalia would have thought it possible, that someone had been purposely exposed to the poison, to confirm its effectiveness.

A tear ran down her cheek. How could she have been so naive? Everything she had worked for, everything she had achieved ... it all seemed worthless to her. Her noble goal of wanting to defeat the Cordoxia - what price would she have to pay at this academy?

Never in her life would she help develop this pathogen as a weapon against the elves. But could she do more than refuse her cooperation? Could she keep her colleagues from doing their research? Possibly find allies who, like themselves, were repulsed by the idea of becoming mass murderers indirectly? Maybe Yonka and Laikos? Could she trust them? Who in Oxenfurt could she trust at all? Shani, for sure. But otherwise? She realized once again that she had few real friends. She had always focused too much on her work.

In any case, she would have to be careful not to arouse suspicion. Withdrawal of the profession and exclusion from the academy were the official means of pressure used to force her to cooperate. But would people who intended to commit genocide be reluctant to remove a scientist who could endanger their plans?

She would go to jail tomorrow, get aware of the situation and then plan further steps. Maybe she would succeed in sabotaging the research without being suspected? Thalia pulled her legs closer to her body. She had never felt as lonely in all of her life.

If only Eskel was already here ...

The witcher knelt before Vesemir's grave. At that time, he, Geralt and Lambert had handed over the bones of their mentor to Earth. It was late afternoon, the sun was already low and would soon disappear behind the mountains surrounding Kaer Morhen. Then temperatures would drop well below freezing.

In recent weeks Eskel had often come here. To meditate. And also to think. About the past and about the future - both his own and that of the witcher's fortress. Thalia had been gone for nine weeks. Nine weeks in which he felt for the first time in his life what it meant to really miss someone.

Certainly, he had been looking forward to seeing his brothers again at the end of the season. Or Triss. But he had never known this feeling of missing someone so much that it almost hurt. His thoughts often went to Thalia, to moments during the short time they had together. Did she miss him too? Or was she getting so absorbed in her work that she was hardly wasting any thought on him? No, he was doing her wrong. Eskel called himself a fool that he still found it hard to believe she felt the same for him as he did for her.

He was sure that Vesemir would have liked Thalia. The older witcher always had a soft spot for independent women who could go their own way and assert themselves. That's why Ciri had always been able to wrap him around her finger so easily. Eskel smiled at the memory of old times, when the little whirlwind brought back life to the witcher's keep.

Before the attack on Kaer Morhen, where almost all the witches in the school lost their lives, the fortress had been pulsing with life. Still today, Eskel often had the laughter, the crying, the clinking of the practice swords in the ear. And also the screams. He still saw individual faces of his protégés - those who came through, as well as those who had not survived the trials.
Eskel thought back to a conversation he had had with Vesemir after a particularly bad day. Three of the novices had succumbed to their mutations on this day in agony. Eskel remembered the storm of anger and grief that had rolled over him that day. When most of the witchers had already gone to bed, Eskel sat by the fire in the great hall, staring into the flames, lost in thought. He had registered that Vesemir had joined him when the older man spoke to him.

"A bad day for all of us, Eskel. But especially for you."

"Why is that, Vesemir? Why can you all joke and eat and laugh as if nothing had happened? As if they had never been here? At this place ..." Eskel pointed to one of the benches. "... there Arec always sat. And there was Maron over there two days ago boasting to his comrades that he was fighting a wolf. They will never sit there again and eat and laugh with us. And yet you can all just go on as you always do. Why is it so difficult for me, Vesemir? What is wrong with me?"

"You put the question wrong, Eskel. Nothing is wrong with you, but with us. Even when you came to us as a child, you were a sensitive boy who took everything very much to heart. And the mutations have not dampened your emotions as much as they do with most of us. But that's no blemish - even if it may seem that way to you right now."

"Forgive me, Vesemir, if I can not share your opinion right now."

Vesemir had smiled. "Eskel, you have given these boys support. Most of them have never been cared for in their lives, and the few who have had a family miss their parents. You have become the most important caregiver for these boys. Your compassion and care have made these boys see the witcher’s school as their home. And us as their family."

Eskel had snorted. "They're dead anyway. This morning I held Arec's hand as he screamed from his internal bleeding."

"Without you, he might have died alone."

The younger witcher had shaken his head in resignation. "I don't want that anymore, Vesemir. I do not want to let it get so close to me. How do I manage to teach and support the children without building a bond with them?"

"You can't do that, Eskel. There are always those who are closer to you than others. About them you worry more, for them you grieve more. It gets easier with the years. The children feel that they are not indifferent to you. They are oriented to you. They trust you. As hard as it may be for you - stick to it."

Vesemir had been right. Over time, Eskel had learned to handle the losses. Many of the boys who had survived the trial of the grasses died in their first years on the path. But during their time in Kaer Morhen, Eskel could at least try not only to teach them as much as possible, but also to give them a sense of belonging.

In the raid on the Wolf School, almost all of them had fallen victim to the angry mob. Their bones still lay in the ditch of the fortress, crumbling to dust, only a memory - just as Kaer Morhen would soon be. Two witchers alone could hardly counteract the decline ...

Nine weeks ago, immediately after Thalia, Triss had said goodbye and had traveled to Kovir via portal. Since then, he and Lambert were the only inhabitants of the fortress. And it would stay that way for a few more weeks. Until the ice on the passes in the Blue Mountains and the Kestrel Mountains had thawed.
Approaching footsteps brought Eskel out of his thoughts. "Here you are. You probably did not find a more comfortable place to meditate, did you?" Lambert had thrown a thick cloak over his leather jacket, which he tightened around him. "Do you want to stay out here until you're frozen to ice?"

Eskel stood up and stretched slightly to loosen his muscles. "I come here often. I always feel very close to Vesemir at this place ... "

Lambert looked at the simple grave, nodded slightly. "Sometimes it feels like the old man could stand out in the yard at any time behind a wall." He pressed his lips together. "Do you know if you will return next winter?"

Eskel shook his head slightly, looked down. "I thought about it a lot. And honestly, I still do not know. Kaer Morhen has no future. We have no future."

Lambert snorted. "I think your future doesn't even look so bad. Or was that thing with Thalia not that serious for you after all? Don´t you want to see her again?"

"You know I want that more than anything else. And as soon as the passes are clear, I will ride to Oxenfurt on the quickest way. But I still do not know how we could have a common future. She is almost certainly already a professor and is respected at the academy. Even being seen with a witcher could damage her reputation. And I want that the least. Her begrudger and opponents at the academy would be pleased to have an excuse to ruin her reputation. She would be much better advised to look for a befitting companion."

"But she will not. And you should be happy about that. Not much good happens to men like us. And if it happens, then we have to hold on it."

Eskel raised an eyebrow and looked at Lambert, half amused, half astonished. "Look at you, getting all philosophically. Are you going to get smarter with the years?"

Lambert crossed his arms over his chest and sneered. "If I were you, I'd be smart enough not to let a woman like Thalia go."

"What about you and Keira? You never lost much words about why you parted."

Lambert's expression darkened. "There is not much to tell. She is just a typical sorceress - selfish, bossy and unfaithful. It took a while for me to realize that."

"I thought that the path might soon lead you to Kovir ..."

"To see this bitch again? No way! I do not crawl back to her like a pet dog, just because she's separated from that snob. I do not give a shit what this bitch is doing."

"Do you know where you're going next season?"

"Let's see. First way west." Lambert's gaze wandered to Vesemir's grave. "Eskel ... if you do not come back next winter ... let me know, okay? I do not want to sit alone in the cold here. If you will not come, I will not be back either. Maybe it'll be time to conclude with all this."

Eskel looked at him thoughtfully. After a while he nodded. "Yes, maybe it's time ..."
If you´d like to read what happens to Lambert after this chapter you may read my little spin-off „Eternal Flame“. The first chapter (of three) is now online.
The events in „Eternal Flame“ take place between chapters 20 and 23 of the „Heart of Alchemy“ and are continued in the main story from chapter 23 and following.
I hope this isn´t too confusing …

And thanks to ofeliathemoth for beta-reading. :-)
Eskel crouched in the high bushes on the edge of the clearing, hidden by the dense foliage from everyone's eyes. Even from those of the young Griffin, who circled about ten meters above and aimed at the goat that the witcher had tethered as bait in the middle of the clearing.

After traveling for a week, he had almost reached the Kestrel Mountains. The nights had been chilly, but he had expected that. He usually would have spent at least three more weeks in Kaer Morhen until winter had finally given way to spring. This year, however, he was drawn to the path much earlier than usual ...

Actually, Eskel had intended to travel by the quickest route to Oxenfurt and, on the way, only accept small contracts, that would not take much time.

But when he entered the village of Dagren six days ago, the residents greeted him in unexpectedly friendly ways. Even though Eskel was also critically eyed and children were hurriedly sent into the houses and huts by their mothers, the villagers did not spit out or shouted filthy insults when he rode past them, as in most other villages. The eldest himself had come to him when he had settled in the local tavern. The man was still stately despite his advanced age. He sat down opposite Eskel at the table where he was having a meal. Apparently the chief didn’t want to lose time and immediately came to the reason of his appearance in the tavern.

The area surrounding the village had been terrorized by the Griffin for some time. At first the animal had confined itself to stealing sheep from the pastures. Four weeks ago, however, a human had fallen prey to the winged beast - the shepherd, who had recklessly tried to chase away the Griffin from his herd when it was hunting again. Apparently, the man had tasted excellent, because since then, the Griffin had attacked people in addition to the usual sheep again and again.

Most had succeeded in escaping to a nearby building or in the protection of the forest - but not the half-grown son of the miller. His gnawed bones had been found days later on the banks of a stream where the Griffin had evidently consumed his meal.

Therefore, the villagers understandably welcomed the appearance of a witcher in their settlement. Eskel was aware that hunting a Griffin would take several days, or even weeks, at worst. But if he declined, there would probably be more victims in the village.

In addition, Eskel did not intend to damage his reputation as a reliable representative of his guild by abandoning the villagers in their distress. And the offered 300 Ducats were not to be despised either. So Eskel had spent the last few days following the track of the Griffin. When he came across bones that layed scattered at the foot of a mountain, he knew where to find the nest. The search had required a short climb, as the eyrie was on a ledge out of reach of the mountain trail. There were no eggs in the nest - so the threat to the villagers should be eliminated once the beast was killed.

Eskel had identified a clearing not far from the eyrie as a suitable place for an ambush, leashed a goat with a stake in the ground on the grass, and retreated into the bushes. The crossbow lay on his forearm, a bolt inserted and the tendon taut. For several hours he had already remained motionless in his hiding place.
A few minutes ago, the winged hybrid had finally appeared.

The Griffin began diving on the complaining goat, who could not escape the approaching death. He jerked his wings up and thrust his legs first toward his victim. However, before the beast could slap its claws into the frightened animal, the crossbow pin hit it sideways into the chest and penetrated deep into the body below the right wing. The Griffin screamed bloodcurdling and hit hard on the ground. The screams of the goat ceased in the shriek of the beast.

Eskel jumped out of his hideout, the silver sword pulled. He threw the sign Axii on the Griffin to confuse the senses of the wounded creature. The Griffin, who had previously tried to reach the wound in his chest with the tip of its beak, now shook his head dazed. The hybrid apparently hadn’t noticed the witcher approaching from the side yet. Eskel reached his prey with a few long strides and jumped up, sword raised. The powerful blow hit the Griffin on the side of the neck. The main artery ruptured and a torrent of hot blood spilled over the flank of the beast. Eskel swerved sideways and, with a few strides, moved out of reach of the powerful wings of the raptor-like monster.

The Griffin, who now had his attacker firmly in view, had dropped to its front claws. With every heartbeat, a small torrent of blood was pumped out of its wound. It seemed to mobilize the last remaining powers and jumped at the witcher, then crawled on long claws in his direction. Eskel remained where he stood, ready to stop the dying Griffin with the help of another sign. But the beast collapsed a few feet before it reached the witcher. There was nothing to hear except for the wheezing of the Griffin. It seemed as if all the animals in the woods had stopped making sounds, so as not to attract the attention of the opponents. Even the goat kept silent, still prevented from escaping by the taut rope.

After a short while the wheezing sound died down, the Griffin had taken its last breath. As the pulse came to a halt, the steady stream of blood from the neck wound also dried up.

Eskel pulled a cloth out of his pocket and cleaned his sword. This had been easier than expected. The Griffin must have been really young and inexperienced. Bad luck for the beast. Good for the witcher.

From the saddlebag, which was still in the bushes, Eskel fetched an empty bottle. When he had accepted the Griffin contract, he had come up with the idea to draw a private benefit from it as well. During the fight he had taken care not to hurt the backbone of the griffin. That's why he had not been able to raise his sword to behead the beast.

Eskel pulled his stiletto out of his bootleg and made the first cut to access the spinal fluid of the Griffin. He would not miss this opportunity to please Thalia. When the bottle was filled and stowed, Eskel went to the still-bound goat. The animal had apparently overcome its fear and now made its displeasure of being abused as a bait known loudly.

Eskel squatted next to the goat and stroked his hand over the fur. "Easy, my little friend. You did well. Incidentally, you remind me of one of your conspecifics."

The goat acknowledged the petting only with a new mowing.

Eskel smiled. "Well, come on then. I'll take you home, you little bleater."

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With the reward in his pocket, Eskel had made his way back to the pass in the Kestrel Mountains the very next day.

Two days later he arrived in Ghelibol, a small town on the banks of the Nimnar. If armed soldiers were seldom seen in Kaedwen, it was obvious that this changed in Redania. As a border town to the eastern neighbor, Ghelibol housed a large garrison of the Redan army. If necessary, the soldiers
stationed there could hold the crossing at the pass in the Kestrel Mountains and defend the Redanian border.

Since King Radovid VI had taken over the government of Redania, diplomatic relations with the neighboring empires were sometimes strained. Although Eskel did not follow the political developments in detail, he was worried about the rapid deterioration of the situation. And not only the situation at the borders was partly explosive. Even within Redania there were riots and attacks - especially against non-humans, as far as he had heard in Kaedwen.

After spending the night in Ghelibol and exchanging his Kaedweni Ducats in Crowns, he took the road to Tretogor. He would rather have avoided the capital - witchers had never been welcome visitors there - but a detour would cost him several days. And Eskel was not ready to lose any more time.

He was so eager to finally be with Thalia again. To touch her, to see her smile and to hear her voice. In the long weeks in Kaer Morhen, after Thalia had left, he had more often given in to the bottle than was good for him. Lambert had followed him suit, so the two witches had spent the evenings wistfully mumbling their respective memories. Lambert still did not seem to be over the separation from Keira - even though he denied it vehemently. Eskel would not be surprised if his brother was on his way to Kovir, where the blond sorceress had her current residence according to Triss. Often Eskel had become the target of Lambert's ridicule when the younger man made fun of his brother's separation pain. However, Eskel had the impression that Lambert would have gladly traded places with him.

But as much as he looked forward to see Thalia again - worries crept into his thoughts. Would everything be the same between them as it was when they parted? Maybe she had changed her mind by now? Had the time at the academy allowed her rational side to gain the upper hand? He could not blame her.

He hoped very much for her that she had received her professorship. Professor van de Wintervoord. Eskel still saw no way how it could work in the long run between them. A relationship with a witcher was more than a problem for a respectable woman even in liberal areas. For a professor in Redania in times when all strangers were met with increasing mistrust, however, this was already a social suicide. She had done so much to get that position - under no circumstances did Eskel want to be responsible for her losing everything she had fought for.

As hard as it would have been, but he had even thought about ending their relationship – for her own sake. But he knew he would not be strong enough for that.

After housing Scorpion in a rental barn and securing a good treatment with a few extra coins, Eskel set out to find accommodation for the night. It was already dawning and the witcher was moving swiftly through the streets and alleys.

Armed guards met him in small groups, eyeing him critically. Eskel strove for a decidedly harmless expression and a defensive posture. But he was a conspicuously apparition, with the witches’ swords on his back and disfigured by his scar.

His saddlebags shouldered, Eskel walked through one of the many narrow alleys that branched off the market square. His sensitive hearing became aware from afar that a dispute was afoot at the intersection to which he was addressing.

The light of a lantern fell on three members of the city guard, who pushed a slender figure against a
wall. "You lousy elf will think twice in the future in whose pockets you put your long fingers," whispered the tallest of the three uniformed men to the oppressed. He grabbed the slender man by the shoulders and pushed him firmly against the wall.

The elf mumbled an apology and tried to dodge to escape the encirclement of the three strong men. However, the one closest to him roughly pushed him back. "You will not get away so quickly, you scum." He struck the elf hard in the pit of his stomach. The slender elf suppressed a scream, but cringed in pain. "Perhaps we should inform the order of Eternal Fire what you are doing." The tallest of the guards leaned down to the elf, who was still crouching against the wall. "They make short work of the likes of you. How many stolen goods would they find in your hut, eh? Soon the pyres burn again and then you and your kind are among the first to be roasted."

Eskel knew he should stay out of it. Witchers did not interfere in the affairs of others. But there were always exceptions ... Damn, he did not want to get any more problems. Why did he always have to get into such situations?

Eskel stayed in the shadows, walking almost silently towards the group. The guards had turned their backs on him, but the elf - on closer inspection Eskel could see that it was still a youngster - had noticed him and looked at him seeking for help.

Before the three guards could turn to him, Eskel casted Axii. The men froze in their movements, their expression suddenly oddly distant. The elf opened his eyes in surprise, stared at Eskel partly anxious, partly relieved.

"Get out of here," Eskel whispered to him. The boy didn’t have to be told twice. He rushed smoothly past the men, who seemed to be in a trance, and disappeared behind the next corner of a house.

Eskel paused behind the guards. "Stay here and count the stones of this wall," he ordered the three men.

Then he set off again to look for an inn. Behind him he heard the guards, muttering to each other, counting stone by stone. They would be busy for a while, at least as long as his sign was active. Time enough for the young elf to escape. He did not know if the city guards would really have made their threat true or if the boy had been rightly charged. But the mere mention of that damnable Order of the Eternal Fire had been enough to make him take sides.

Throughout Redania, these fanatics regained influence. He had heard that in Novigrad even these wretched witch hunters were at work again. Radovid's successor apparently intended to follow in the footsteps of his predecessor and "cleanse" his kingdom of sorcerers, non-humans and others. It was only a matter of time before Redania would hunt down witchers, so Eskel had no illusions.

Tomorrow he would leave early in the morning. Only about 100 miles, then he would finally reach Oxenfurt ...

Chapter End Notes

Thanks to Ofeliathemoth for beta-reading. <3
The prison of Oxenfurt was located just outside the city, on an island surrounded by the currents of the Pontar. Thalia had already left early to meet with the other professors at noon. She had not been able to focus on anything else anyway, too many thoughts were nagging at her. On her way she had passed the houses, shops, and restaurants that she knew so well, identifying familiar faces among the people who met her on the way. Students she knew, traders she used to visit regularly. They all practiced their daily routine as usual. Their world was the same as it was the day before.

But for Thalia everything had changed. Her understanding of her profession, of the University, of her integrity - everything had been questioned yesterday with the announcement of Professor Basilius. The more she approached the jail, the heavier her footsteps became. Everything in her was reluctant to be involved in these machinations. And yet, for the time being, she had no choice but to at least appear to pursue the same goal as her colleagues.

A cart overtook her on the cobbled street that led to the bridge over the Pontar. A transport of prisoners that sent more poor souls to their possibly last abode. The stone bridge was the only access to the prison, which was enthroned on the island in the middle of the river. An intimidating, cheerless structure of gray stone.

Thalia crossed the bridge. Two other professors had already arrived in front of the entrance gate. Yesterday, Marik Yonka and Vincent Laikos seemed not happy with the announcement of the new research order. But whether the two were also willing to add to the wishes of the Academy - and those of the King – was on a completely different page. Surely they would not risk open protest. But maybe they were ready to resist in secret?

Thalia wondered how she could find out, without giving away too much of her own attitude to the order. "Greetings, dear colleagues." She walked over to the two professors, who had talked quietly together. "Not a pleasant place for a gathering, it seems to me ..."

"Certainly not." Marik Yonka, a lean middle-aged man, pressed his thin lips together and took a deep breath. "Professor van de Wintervoord, yesterday we did not fail to notice that you have similar reservations to this mission as we have ...

"Thalia's eyes widened. Apparently the two had noticed her reaction to the remarks made by Professor Basilius. Similar to how she had registered their mispleasure. Before Thalia could begin to voice her concerns, however, Professor Laikos began. "Professor ... Thalia. We've known each other for quite some time." The younger of the two men looked at her impressively. "During your studies, I met you as an ambitious scientist. With high principles. That's why I'm warning you: do not do anything that could attract the attention of the Academy or our clients. In the negative sense. Do you understand what I mean?"

Thalia swallowed. Apparently she couldn't expect any help from both of them, even though they shared similar views as she did.
"Yes, Professor Laikos. I understand…"

"I hope you are aware of what is at stake for you. It's not just about your academic career. So put your concerns aside and do your best. For your own good."

"The others are coming," warned Professor Yonka.

Professor Basilius, Alric Efferen and the other members of the research group came across the bridge.

"I am pleased to meet you here," Professor Basilius began. "Well then, let's not waste time and talk to the guards. As far as I've heard, one of the infected people is in critical condition. Not that we're already too late ..."

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The chief of the prison guards himself escorted the group through the narrow corridors. At regular intervals, torches cast a scant light on the visitors, some of whom were fascinated, some risked a look into the cells. First, they had crossed the tract in which the citizens of Oxenfurt "resided", should they let something come to debt. On this floor the prisoners were relatively well accommodated. But the deeper they entered the building, the darker and colder it became. The smell of mold, excrement and unwashed bodies took away Thalia's breath. This was were the outcasts of the society vegetated.

If Thalia dared to look behind the bars that lined the side of the aisle, all too often her gaze fell on non-humans. The condition of the prisoners was sometimes more than worrying.

The guard led them to a separated area behind a heavy iron gate.

"Here we have housed the infected. Take one of the masks and put it on. The plague affects only non-humans, but you never know. The doctors from Novigrad have ordered us to go to the sick only with protective clothing."

The scientists put on the smocks and gloves that laid on a table and put on the protective masks. Not for the first time, Thalia wore one of the beak-forming face masks to protect against infection. The glass-sealed eye openings severely restricted the field of vision.

The guard unlocked the door and led the group into a slightly brighter section.

"Over here ..., he pointed to one of the cells on the left side. "... is the worst one." He opened the gate to let the scientists in. Professor Basilius first entered the small, dirty cell and crouched down beside the elf, who was lying on a hard bunk. The skin of the man was covered with inflamed pustules - some so large that only a few intact areas were visible. With gloved fingers, Basilius pulled up an eyelid of the supposedly unconscious and glanced at the iris and the pupil. Then he felt the pulse of the patient.

"Well, gentlemen ... it looks like we're late. This one is already on his way to his pointed-eared ancestors."

He turned to the jailer. "Make sure the body is kept cool. One of my colleagues will deal with the section. And now bring us to the other infected."

The guard led the group to other cells. Thalia counted nine infected elves, six men and three women who appeared to be in different stages of the disease. Two of the infected men had a slight rash, but another seemed to be closer to death than to life.

Thalia stayed in the background as much as possible during the examinations. The way her
colleagues (with the exception of Yonka and Laikos) treated the patients disgusted her. The scientists
shared their findings as if the infected were objects. And she realized that they saw it as just that: the
non-humans were just interesting research objects for them to study. They took blood and saliva
samples and talked about their observations as if these people were not concerned about their
inevitable death.

Thalia was glad that the mask covered her features. Her horror and disgust at her colleagues would
have been hard to hide. The mask also helped to maintain some distance from her surroundings, at
least enough to prevent her from panicking at the sight of the suffering prisoners and the thought of
the effects of the plague. She forced herself to rest. If she lost her composure, she would only put
herself in a bad light and perhaps have no opportunity to put the plan she had forged last night into
action.

After the investigation, the scientists gathered in the courtyard of the prison and Thalia filled her
lungs deeply with the cool, fresh air.
Alric Efferen came towards her, showing a smile that could have been considered charming if you
did not know him.

"You were holding on well for a woman, Thalia. But you always seem to be good for a surprise ..."

"Yes, I'm tougher than I look, Alric. Who would have thought that I would ever return from my
expedition ..."

"Oh, my love. That again? I already told you that I had nothing to do with what happened to you.
Your baseless allegations were amusing at first, but it's starting to get on my nerves by now.
But that's just how the fairer sex are, I think. If you have nothing to complain about, you are not
happy. Maybe you're missing a husband who you could make the target of your nagging?"
Thalia felt anger rise, but she struggled to look relaxed. In no case did she want to show this bastard
how much she was upset by his remark. Therefore she did not give him any comment and turned
away.

Not for the first time, she was annoyed not to be good at repartee. Hours later, she would come up
with many witty replies that she could have flung at him. At least, her rage had made sure that the
knot in her stomach, that she had been carrying since she'd entered the prison, had come loose.

She joined Yonka and Laikos, who were talking quietly about the infection and its symptoms.
Behind her she heard Efferen's sycophants smirking at him over his affront against her.

"Well, colleagues..." Professor Basilius had stepped into the middle of the alchemists. "As we have
seen, this disease goes through several stages, at the end of which lies, without exception, the death
of the infected person. I suggest that you first analyze the samples and isolate the pathogen.
Afterwards we deal with the multiplication and the possibilities of the targeted infection of subjects.
In order for the research to progress quickly, I have instructed the prison guards to let each of you in
at any time of day or night. So I'm counting on your fullest commitment. The king expects first
results already in three weeks. Therefore, we should all work quickly. So ..." He pointed to the
entrance gate, which was already opening for them. "Get to work."

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Hours later, a gentle knock on Thalia's door let her startle. She had sat thoughtfully at the dining table
in her home, but had not been able to eat anything. The impressions of the day weighed heavily on her mind.

Since she was a professor, she had cleared her chamber on campus and now lived in a small house in Oxenfurt that had been provided by the Academy. She went to the door and glanced through the window next to it to catch a glimpse of the evening visitor. A sigh of relief escaped her and she quickly opened the door to let her guest in. "Shani! I'm so glad you came." Shani hugged Thalia tightly as she began to tremble slightly.

"Thalia, I received your message and came immediately. What's going on?"

"Shani, you were right when you suspected that something was wrong in Novigrad ..."

When Thalia had told her friend everything that had happened since yesterday, Shani took a big sip of the wine she and Thalia had poured themselves. At first she found it hard to believe it, but there was no question that Thalia was speaking the truth.

"I wonder if we at the medical faculty will get involved into this matter too sooner or later. Or if my senior colleagues may already be informed ...

"We'll probably have to expect it, Shani. I do not know who else I can trust here anymore. Theoretically, almost every scientist in alchemy and medicine can be involved or at least know about this order. Were we too naive?"

"I do not know, Thalia. But it honors me that you trust me. The question now is what we should do now."

"Oh, you should not do anything. I do not want to involve you, Shani. Maybe I should not have burdened you with that ... But I just could not take it anymore. This feeling of being completely alone ...
I lay awake last night and wondered how I could sabotage the research without drawing suspicion on me."

Shani looked at her worriedly, head tilted slightly. "Please be careful, Thalia! What do you want to do alone? If your colleagues find out that you are working against them, it could end badly for you. I don't think they would back away from getting you out of the way ..."

"I am well aware of that, Shani. And I'm not intending to end up as a corpse in the Pontar. But I just can't contribute on developing a weapon of mass destruction. I intend on sabotaging the research. Making the pathogen unusable. To distort the results. I can't do anything for those who're already infected, but I want to prevent others from dying from this epidemic. If the artificially induced infections fail, they will eventually give up on their plans."

Shani thought about it, frowning. "I don't know, Thalia. The outbreak in Novigrad is already over. All infected people have either already died or are waiting for their end in quarantine. At least that's what people say. But if you make even a small mistake, they'll track you down. You're taking an incredibly big risk ..."

Thalia looked at the tabletop, painting small circles of wine on the linen cloth with the foot of her glass. "I do not intend to stay here much longer, Shani."

The friend looked at her curiously. "You have just received your professorship, Thalia. Everything
you've been working for in the last few years. Where do you want to go?"

"It's all worthless!" Thalia was close to tears when she pronounced what she had realized yesterday. "I always wanted to heal diseases, Shani. That was the reason why I wanted to become a professor! And now? Now I'm supposed to help spread a plague. Supposedly for the benefit of the people. No, Shani. I do not want to be a professor at this academy anymore. I also do not want to live in a kingdom where the government considers the mass murder of non-humans to be a good idea. In which soon the pyres will burn again."

She sniffed, swallowed, took a deep breath. "I'll wait until Eskel comes and then I'll get out of here. I do not know exactly where to go, but somewhere I'll start over. Somewhere where they appreciate my skills and I can use them for what I care about - healing."

"So you're really serious about your witcher, right?" A soft expression had entered Shani's eyes.

Thalia smiled sheepishly. "Yes, I am. But ... I don't know if he would be willing to live with me somewhere. I mean ... witches are always on the move, on their 'path'. They usually don't settle down. We ... we have not talked about how future might look like for us. But what ever he may choose, my resolve is clear. I won't stay here. I just have no way to contact Eskel, so I have to wait for him to come here as we have planned. I just do not know when that will be."

"Hopefully soon. I'm worried about you, Thalia. Your efforts won't be unnoticed for long."

"He'll come as soon as he can." Thalia looked thoughtfully at the table again. "I'm sure of it."

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A few days passed, during which the scientists analyzed the samples taken and prepared them for further research. So far, Thalia had not had a chance to work alone with the samples. At least one of her colleagues had always been present.

The laboratory on the second floor of the faculty building had been converted into their research base. Other alchemists and students had no access, only the members of the research group were allowed to enter the room.

Thalia had just examined the pathogen under a microscope. It was definitely a bacterium, deceptively similar to the cause of Catriona's disease. However, the rate of cell division was far below that of the pathogen, which was dangerous to humans.

At a table next to Thalia, Vincent Laikos was preparing calculations for bacterial growth. His slightly too long blond hair fell in his eyes, as he bent over the paper on which he wrote his notes. He smoothed it back absent minded with the other hand.

Eric Sardo, one of the colleagues who liked to associate with Alric Efferen, had just put the samples in several small bowls of glass.

"Well, the mitotic rate is well below a level that allows the disease to spread quickly," Laikos explained. "We should test if moderate heat increases the rate. Eric, could you please prepare the oven?"

"Sure." Sardo started the oven, which was mainly used for decontamination of laboratory equipment - but occasionally also as an incubator for bacterial cultures.
Laikos turned to Thalia. "Could you please add more nutrient solution to the sample containers? Time is running out and I would be happier if we had something positive to report tomorrow."

"I'm on it." Thalia pipetted five drops of clear liquid into the sample containers, which she then placed in a rack.

Sardo put the rack at the very bottom of the oven where, thanks to several intermediate barriers, the samples were exposed to only a small amount of heat. There were optimal conditions to stimulate the growth of bacteria.

Sardo once again checked the temperature and then took off his gloves. "It's getting late. I'll finish up for today. What about you?"

Thalia also took off her gloves. "Here we can not do much at the moment. Let’s call it a day."

Laikos also joined them. Together they left the room and said their goodbyes. Thalia walked down the hallway for a short distance and turned into a branching corridor that led to her office. There she waited. Laikos and Sardo had gone the other way, probably to the staircase.

A few minutes later, she went back to the lab. Nobody met her on the way. By that time, the faculty's corridors were usually deserted - a circumstance Thalia was appreciating. She unlocked the door to the lab and slipped into the room, refraining from lighting the lanterns, contenting herself with the dim light of a candle.

With gloved fingers, she opened the oven door and placed the rack with the sample containers above the first heat barrier. There was the highest temperature - no bacteria could survive this for more than a few minutes.

Then she would put the containers back in the lower part of the oven. If everything went as planned, she and her colleagues would discover tomorrow that the bacteria did not seem to have survived the treatment - or that Eric Sardo had set the temperature too high. Nobody had noticed how much fuel he actually filled in the oven. Maybe he had miscalculated the dosage. A stupid mistake, but mistakes happened ...

Thalia felt a guilty conscience at the thought that Sardo could be blamed for this incident. But only for a few seconds. Then she remembered how this lickspittle had made fun of her in prison, when Alric Efferen had mocked her and her misgivings dissipated.

Now it was time to wait.

Thalia looked pensively at the door of the lab. It was through this door that Eskel had entered her life. She remembered how she had been startled when she saw him for the first time. How her initial concerns had first turned into sympathy and then gradually into ... something else.

She missed him so much ... If only she knew when he would arrive in Oxenfurt. If he would come at all ... He had had so much misgivings about damaging her reputation. If he had come to the conclusion that it would be better for her if he did not come to Oxenfurt? But he would at least contact her? Or was this his way of quietly disappearing from her life without saying anything? Thalia scared away these thoughts. No, he would certainly come. By then, hopefully, she could have done enough to sabotage the research. And then she would disappear from here before any suspicion came up that could lead to her. And maybe Eskel would even accompany her. Surely he would ...

As a key turned in the door lock, Thalia jumped in shock. Quickly she blew out the candle flame and hid behind one of the lab tables. Who was sneaking around here at this time?

Out of her hiding place she saw Vincent Laikos walking to the oven with a small, covered lantern in his hand. He glanced briefly through the lens - for all the gods sake, now he would notice that the
bacteria were burning in the wrong section of the oven. But instead of tearing open the oven door and trying to save the containers, Laikos slowly turned around and let his eyes wander around the lab.

"Thalia? Are you here?"

For a moment she thought that she should stay in her hiding place, but then she realized that he would only have to take a few steps in her direction until the light of his lantern would betray her. She stood up behind the table.

"Vincent. I'm ... surprised to meet you here."

"I could say the same about you. And ... no, actually it does not surprise me. I knew you would come up with the same idea as me. Did anyone notice you while entering the lab?"

The same idea ... Thalia felt a surge of relief as she realized what that meant.

"No, there was nobody left in the corridors."

"Very good." Laikos pressed his lips together for a moment. "How long have the containers been exposed to the heat?"

"Four minutes, approximately."

"All right. Let's wait another three minutes for safety's sake, then put the containers back and get out of here."

Chapter End Notes

A big hug for OpheliaTheMoth for beta-reading.
Scorpion's hooves caused a rhythmic sound on the stones of the paved path that led across the bridge to the faculty island of the Academy of Oxenfurt.

A flock of wild geese flew over the city, the calls of the birds overlapped by the sounds of the people who populated the nearby marketplace. Like the migratory birds, the Witcher had left his winter quarter, but his path led him from the north to the city at the Pontar.

Ever since he had left before dawn to reach Oxenfurt as early as possible, the prospect of seeing Thalia in just a few hours had filled him with euphoria and excitement.

Again and again he had imagined the moment of their reunion, had tried to arrange words. But now that he had finally reached his goal, he felt the uncertainty again that had clouded his mood for several weeks.

He dismounted and led Scorpion on the rein to the gate. As expected, the guards scrutinized him critically, barely concealed disgust.

"Where is the Witcher going?", the left of the two men asked, without prefixing a greeting.
"My name is Eskel and I wish to speak to Professor van de Wintervoord." He hoped that he was correct in his assumption and Thalia had meanwhile received her professorship.

"So, that's what he wishes. Does He have a reason for his visit?"
"It's about an assignment for the alchemical faculty," lied Eskel. If Thalia found it unpleasant to be associated with a questionable person like him, he wanted to keep her a plausible solution.
"Ah. Well then. Wait here. I send a messenger. If the professor wants to see you, she will send for you."

The guard stepped through the gate and evidently summoned a boy to deliver the message to Thalia. The remaining security guard did not let Eskel out of his sight.

When the guard returned to the gate, he easily made a dismissive gesture. He did not seem to quite believe that the witcher's visit was actually welcome, and apparently was looking forward to sending him off in plain words.

Eskel took a few steps back and leaned against the parapet of the bridge that spanned the Pontar and connected the Academy to the main island of the city. The water glittered in the midday sun and flowed calmly towards the northern sea. At the moment, Eskel would have been glad if he felt this kind of peace for himself - but contrary to his normal serenity, his inner feelings were in turmoil.

On the one hand, the anticipation of seeing Thalia again dominated. In the past few months, no day - if he was honest with himself, not an hour - had passed, in which he had not thought of her and missed her.

But along with the joyous expectation, doubt had settled in his mind. Was it naïve to believe they could simply pick up on their time together in Kaer Morhen?

The same thoughts that had been occupying his thoughts in recent weeks circled his mind again.

Had the months that had passed since their departure changed something between them? Her
farewell had been very emotional, but Thalia was basically a pragmatic, rational person.

What if the spatial and temporal gap had led her to see their relationship in a different light? If her reputation was too important for her to want to be seen with a mutant? If she had come to the conclusion that there could be no future for both of them together - he was a traveling witcher who lived from one contract to another, she was a respected scholar who frequented the upper class ...

Would she be happy about his early arrival? Or rather surprised that she had to explain to him earlier than expected that their time together had passed and was only a pleasant memory now?

A sound behind the walls of the campus aroused his attention - quietly and inaudibly for the guards, yet unmistakably approaching. It sounded like the staccato of heels, the wearer hurrying down a flight of stairs, not caring how loud his footsteps echoed on the pavement.

Suddenly the noise stopped. Eskel could hear soft breaths - someone tried to calm his breathing after a quick run ...

A few seconds later, the footsteps behind the wall began again, slower this time.

And then he finally saw her as she approached from the campus forecourt. Under the black gown that lay over her shoulders, she wore an emerald-green dress that caressed her figure. Her hair was loosely pinned, a few strands had dissolved as so often and now played around her face in soft curls.

He wanted nothing more than run up to her and hugging her, but he kept calm.

She walked slowly, almost gracefully toward the gate. As it probably was suitable for a professor. She smiled as she looked at him - friendly but reserved. Eskel felt something tense in his stomach.

He stepped toward her, careful not to let his face show the emotions that were fighting within him. The two guards watched him carefully, ready to put him into place when there was a sign of trouble.

Eskel took a deep breath before greeting Thalia. "Hello, Professor ..."

"Master Eskel. I'm glad to see you. Please come in." She turned to the guards. "It's all right, his visit was announced."

"Should someone accompany you, Professor?"

"No need. The witcher is known to me from another contract and enjoys the faculty's confidence."

With that she turned away and strode into the forecourt beside Eskel, who led Scorpion by the rein. Only when they had brought several meters between them and the guards, she spoke to him softly. "Please forgive this spectacle, but it has to be. I'll explain it to you soon. Not everything is as it seems ..."

Worried, Eskel looked at her out of the corner of his eyes. What did she mean by that? Was she in danger? Or he himself?

After arriving at the stables, Eskel put his saddlebags over his shoulder. On Thalia's instructions, Scorpion was well looked after and Eskel left him. Thalia led him to the main building of the alchemical faculty.

"We'd better go to my office, there we can talk. Did you notice anyone watching us?", she asked softly.
Eskel had been more than alert all along, but had not noticed anything suspicious. "No. What's going on here, Thalia?"

"In a minute."

Thalia strode ahead of him up the stairs, to her study on the second floor. She unlocked the door and stepped through, motioning him to follow her. The room was rather small and pragmatic, replete with books, notes and drawings. The desk, on which also notes and papers piled up, occupied most of the room.

If Eskel had tried to imagine her working environment in recent weeks, her office had always been a little more imposing in his imagination. He put down his saddlebags on the floor, between stacks of books and bundles of pieces of paper that took up almost any space on the wooden floorboards.

Eskel turned to Thalia. After she had locked the door from the inside, she leaned against it with her back and looked at him. The expression in her big brown eyes was difficult to interpret for him ...

"So," he began. "What's ..." He did not get any further, because Thalia had come to him in two steps, clasped his face in both hands and kissed him passionately.

It took Eskel a second to overcome his surprise, then relief seized him. He wrapped his arms around her and returned her kiss, just as hungry. Breathless, they held each other in embrace. Thalia pressed herself close to him and covered his face with kisses, before she pressed her forehead against his and enjoyed the sincerity of the moment.

Eskel let out a shaky breath. The tension that had gripped him in the last few hours and the fear that everything might be different between them had constricted his heart. Now the knot broke in his chest and he enjoyed the feeling of holding her back in his arms.

"I missed you so much, Eskel. So much ..."

How he had longed for these almost whispered words. How could he have doubted her?

"I missed you too, love. More than you can imagine."

She broke away from him and looked at him with a smile.

"This charade must have been very confusing for you. I'm sorry."

"It's all right. I already told you it wouldn't be an advantage for you to be seen with me. And as far as I got aware on the way here, the reputation of witchers in Redania has not improved."

Thalia sighed. "If it were only that ... my reputation has become pretty much the least important thing to me. Eskel ... things are just awful."

Tears gathered in her eyes. Eskel took her hands, holding them while she told him everything that had happened in Oxenfurt in the last few weeks.

"Do you think you're under surveillance?" Eskel asked when she finished.

"I'm not sure. Sometimes I have the feeling that someone is following me when I go home or when I leave the prison. Eskel, it's horrible there. By now, all but two of the infected prisoners have died. I have just received a message telling me to go back this afternoon. Supposedly, I get a new task - I have no idea what that should be, but certainly it's no good.
And my senior professor and the University’s management expect results quickly. The Redanian government is putting pressure on them to quickly provide an effective way to infect other people in the border regions. Laikos and also Yonka take a lot of risks to sabotage the research, but it's only a matter of time until they discover us."

"Us? Are you in danger, Thalia?"

"I do not know if they have a concrete suspicion against me. But I certainly do not enjoy the confidence of my superiors. They are aware that I do not agree with their plan. So ... if the last infected ones have died and we have completely destroyed the pathogen samples, I want to get away from here, Eskel. I no longer want to be a professor at a university that can be harnessed for such purposes. And I do not feel safe anymore."

Eskel pulled her into his arms and hugged her tight. "I'll take you away from here, my heart. The sooner, the better."

"I cannot leave Laikos and Yonka, Eskel. So far we have only delayed research, but if we stop now, then the Redanian government will soon trigger a pandemic among the non-humans. I can not answer for that."

"They'll do it without you too." He cupped her face with his hands. "Thalia, I'm worried about you. Please do not put yourself in danger."

She smiled sadly at him. "I'll try, Eskel. Now that you're here, I feel like everything's going to be all right." Her smile suddenly blazed as she remembered something. "By the way, I have a gift for you."

She turned and pulled out a surprisingly large box from the bottom shelf. When she opened the lid and reached in, Eskel became aware of the slightly stinging smell of saltpetre. With a proud smile she presented him a roughly apple-sized ball on her palm.

"A bomb?"

"Not just a common bomb. Do you remember that I once asked you if you could use explosives that detonate with a time delay? Ta-daa ... I present: The first witcher grenade with acid activator - that's what I call my construction. Maybe I should apply for a patent ... if all this is over."

"I'm impressed, Thalia. How much time will remain after sharpening until the explosion?"

"That's exactly what's special about it: You have several periods to choose from! I'll show you how it works."

Thalia unscrewed the primer from the ball and pulled out a vial attached to a metal disc.

"Actually it is quite easy. I thought about how it would be possible to delay the contact of the detonator with the flammable explosive substance. That's why at the end of the detonator, I filled fuel into a small gap. But the fire has no effect on the chemicals inside, it only burns down there - up to ten minutes. If you ignite the bomb, you'll turn the firing head vigorously in that direction. This breaks the vial in which there is an acid that gradually eats away this copper plate. Only when the plate becomes permeable, the fire gets in contact with the explosive substance and then ... woosh! ..." Thalia accompanied the sound with a gesture and a big smile. She was visibly pleased with her invention.

And Eskel was really impressed. "That's awesome, Thalia!"
"I know." She smiled mischievously.

Eskel critically examined her hands. "And still all nine fingers attached!"

Thalia knocked him playfully against the shoulder. "You are a bit too cheeky, Master Witcher," she replied, smiling. "Professor van de Wintervoord doesn't make such grave mistakes. Here, with this plate you can decide for yourself how long the delay should last. For this you have five different strengths of the copper plate to choose from. I spent a lot of time trying out how long the acid takes to etch a hole in the plates. Here, I have marked the number of minutes on each plate.

Theoretically, one could achieve an even longer delay time by increasing the cavity for the fuel so that the fire can stay longer in 'waiting position'.

Before I left, I had noted the composition of your bombs and I made a small supply for you. Samum, grape-shot, north wind and a few others. As you can see, the box is full."

Eskel gave her a tender kiss on her smiling lips. "You know how to make a witcher happy, Thalia."

"I hope so ..." She kissed him long and passionately. When they parted, he remembered that he had not come empty-handed.

"I also brought you something. Not as spectacular as your present, but ..." He pulled a cloth-wrapped bundle from his saddlebag. When he had removed the cloth, a glass container appeared, filled to the brim with a clear liquid. Together with the glass he gave Thalia a long, multicolored feather.

Thalia took both in surprise, inspecting the liquid by holding the bottle against the light coming in through the window. "Eskel! Is that ..."

"Spinal fluid of a Griffin. I thought you´d still have use for it."

Thalia carefully placed the glass on the shelf. Then she hugged him stormily and kissed him again.
"Thanks, Eskel! You also know how to make women happy ..."

"Well ..." Eskel was a bit embarrassed.

She ran her hand under his jacket and stroked slowly over his chest. "You know ... I have some time left before I have to visit the jail. I'm afraid I can not take you to my house, that would be too suspicious ...

"I've already rented a room in an inn I've stayed in before. The Alchemy."

"Shall I come to visit you tonight? I could go with a friend, that would be inconspicuous. And then, by chance, I'll go up the stairs to the guest rooms."

"Room number 7."

Thalia smiled mischievously. "Room number 7, then."

Her hand continued its way over his chest, pausing on his abdominal muscles, tightening under his shirt. Eskel felt his pulse speed up.

"Like I said, I still have some time ... I really missed you a lot, Eskel. Everything about you ..." Her hand moved to his back. She kissed him passionately. A moan escaped Eskel's throat as she pressed herself close to him. Apparently she'd noticed his excitement.

Thalia's accelerated breath showed him that she felt the same. But the office didn't offer much space
Apparently Thalia had gone through similar considerations. But unlike Eskel, she had no inhibitions to ensure for space. She moved away from him and with a sweeping movement pushed all the books and notes to the floor that had barely covered her desktop. A challenging look in her eyes, she grabbed Eskel's hands, pulled him with her and sat down on the table. "The bed in your room is certainly more comfortable ... but for now this is enough for me."

Since witchers were known to be satisfied with little comfort, Eskel raised no objections.---

Two hours later Thalia crossed the bridge that connected the prison island in the middle of the Pontar with the main island of the city. Although the goal of her journey left her shivering as usual, her mood was much more positive this time than on her previous visits.

Eskel had returned to her. Finally. Knowing him in her vicinity and the certainty of seeing him again tonight made her much more comfortable with the prospect of her imminent hours in jail. She still thought she could feel the light tingling on her skin wherever he had touched her. Even the short time with him today had allowed her to regain her courage. To hear his voice, his calm, unshakable manner ...

How much had she missed him.

Tonight they would plan the further steps of their early departure. The anticipation of having him alone for several hours drove away most of Thalia's worries.

But when she came to the gate of the prison, her heart became heavier again. The guards, whom she now knew from her previous visits, greeted her and willingly opened the door. The guards were instructed to let in the scientists of the research group day and night without asking.

Thalia strode through the long, cell-lined corridor, penetrating deeper into the building. The further she came, the more shabby and bleak her way became. When she arrived at the section for non-humans, the watchman met her.

"Professor van de Wintervoord. Greetings. Unfortunately, Professor Basilius can not personally instruct you, but he has left me specific instructions. Please, enter ..."

The strong, bearded man unlocked the door to the isolation wing and let her go first. Initially, the scientists had still worn protective clothing when they visited the infected non-humans, but they renounced in the meantime on wearing the masks because there was not a single human suffering from the disease. However, Thalia continued to put on protective gloves and a smock - she did not want to risk that the disease could spread among the other people living in Oxenfurt because of her carelessness.

"Well, the professor told me to bring you directly to this witch. The slut calls herself Keira Metz."

Thalia paused in the middle of the step. Keira Metz? Wasn't this the name of the sorceress Lambert had been with until a year ago? The one he was still attached to - even if he had vehemently denied it? Hadn't Triss mentioned Keira Metz working on a cure for Catriona's disease? Was the sorceress here to assist her in exploring the local plague?

"It was a lucky coincidence that this witch fell into the hands of the Order of the Eternal Fire in Novigrad," the guard continued. "As far as the professor told me, she probably knows more about Catriona's disease, and that's probably similar to the plague that infected the other non-humans. But..."
"You should talk to her, the professor said. Ensure her cooperation. A sorceress who was picked up by the witch hunters in Novigrad a few weeks ago has probably reported that this woman Metz has found out quite a bit about the Catriona plague, which was previously unknown. And that should help you to research the disease here.

She arrived here today. Still had a witcher with her, probably defended her like a wild fiend. Did not benefit her anyway. Even less. Let's hope for the guy that he can take just as much as he spreads with his mouth. This mutant spits insults like a fountain. Not for the ears of a lady, Professor. But we will teach this bastard manners. Maybe that'll make this whore talk."

Behind the bars of the cell to which the guard had led her, Thalia saw a woman tied to the wall. Long, blond hair fell around her shoulders, disheveled. Her skin was pale. She was probably bound with dimeritium chains - the metal provoked a strong nausea and prevented any magic from the magically gifted. Keira Metz threw Thalia and the guard a hateful look, her lips pressed tightly together.

But even more than the woman, the man in the cell drew Thalia's gaze. Half unconscious, he hung in the chains that tied his wrists to the wall. Judging from the fresh abrasions and bruises, he had already had to endure some maltreatment.

Thalia tried not to show her shock. The witcher in the cell - only a shadow of his former self - was Lambert.

Chapter End Notes

If you haven't read my Lambert spin-off "Eternal Flame" yet, I'd be happy if you'd take a peek. There you can find out how Lambert and Keira got into the bad situation in which they are now.

And again hugs and kisses for OfeliaTheMoth for beta-reading.
In the evening, mist had risen from Pontar river, muffling the sounds of the footsteps of the two women, wrapped in cloaks and hiding their faces behind hoods from the streets of Oxenfurt. After dark it was still uncomfortably cold and the dampness of the fog reinforced this impression even more.

Thalia and Shani were glad to escape the cold as they entered the warm, inviting dining room of the Alchemy. First the two looked around - at this hour the inn was well frequented, travelers sat at the numerous tables, beside students and other university members. Thalia recognized many faces. She gestured Shani to choose one of the free tables at the side of the room. They hung their damp cloaks over the backs of the chairs and placed their orders.

"Quite a lot of familiar faces here today," whispered Shani to Thalia.
"That was to be expected. Unfortunately, Eskel has chosen a room in one of the city's most popular inns. There won't be any trouble, though. You know how women always go to the privy in pairs ..." She winked at Shani.

However, when the two of them made their way to the back of the restaurant a little later and entered the corridor, they did not turn off to said location, but climbed the stairs to the guest rooms. Thalia knocked softly on the door to room 7.

Eskel opened almost immediately - apparently he had already recognized her by her steps. Thalia hugged him when she entered the room. Eskel sighed contentedly as he wrapped his arms around her. Then his eyes fell on Shani, who closed the door behind her and gave him a friendly smile.

"Uh ... you brought a friend?"

Thalia parted from his embrace, but her left arm continued to loop around him.
"That's Shani, I've told you about her before. She is a medical doctor at the university. If anyone was really watching me, it was less suspicious not to go to a restaurant all by myself. Besides, maybe she could help us. Eskel ..." She looked at him searching for words. "Lambert is in jail. Together with this sorceress Keira Metz."

The smile immediately disappeared from Eskel's face. "Lambert? He is here? Why was he arrested?"
"He tried to protect Keira from the witch hunters when he was with her in Novigrad."
"Witch hunters? I thought their time was over ..."

"The government reinstated them. Together with the Order of the Eternal Fire. As if they were just waiting for the right moment ... They have already taken over parts of the prison. When I got there this afternoon, I saw dimeritium being placed everywhere to prevent anyone from using magic. They are apparently planning to arrest more sorcerers. But Keira was not picked up by accident – they set a trap for her. Because she has made great strides in researching Catriona disease, she is expected to support our research group. The pathogens are related and her findings could help spread the plague among the other non-humans."

"Why would she help you develop this weapon?" Eskel frowned in confusion. "While all the negative qualities of a sorceress may apply to Keira, even she has principles. I'm sure she would never support mass murder, no matter what they threatened her with."
Thalia grabbed his hand, squeezing it lightly. "They use Lambert as leverage against her. They tortured him, in front of her eyes. Eskel, we have to do something! Lambert was smart enough not to show the guards that he knows me, and I pretended to play the game and questioned Keira about her research. When the guards didn't pay attention, I let them know that I had no intention of spreading this pathogen and we'll help them as soon as we can." Tears had gathered in Thalia's eyes, a single one had managed to escape their well and rolled down her cheek. Eskel gently wiped it away with his thumb.

"We will help them. But we cannot do it alone." He seemed to gather his thoughts for a moment. "I'll ride to Novigrad. An old friend of Geralt lives there, about whom I can contact him. Geralt had once mentioned he had given this friend a Xenogloss, with the help of which he can communicate with him in an emergency in Corvo Bianco. Geralt will support us, with some luck Yennefer too. I should be able to arrive in Novigrad in two days, if I hurry. Together we should be back in three days when Geralt travels by portal. Let's just hope Lambert and Keira can hold on a little while longer..."

Shani stepped closer. "In the meantime, I'm going to help Thalia with the preparations. If she is really under surveillance, it is better if she does not take all precautions by herself. We've already thought about how we could succeed ..."

* * *

Even if Eskel had always disliked the Free City of Novigrad with its noises and smells he just couldn't ignore - after two days in the saddle, he was almost happy, as he rode through the city gate. He didn’t want to lose any more time.

Dusk was already breaking. After Eskel had accommodated Scorpion in the nearest collective barn, he made his way to the South City, in which the entertainment district of Novigrad was located. Geralt had told him a few years ago that his friend, the bard Dandelion, had a cabaret in Novigrad. Eskel desperately hoped that was still the case. If only he could remember the name of the establishment ...

When Eskel arrived at the Hierarch Square, his witcher senses had already become accustomed to the noise of the city, and more and more often he made out a few speeches of conversation as he passed people on his way. He had not missed, that he was critically eyed by some of them. He was used to that. However, the mood he had felt had become much more hostile since his last visit to the Free City. "Disgusting witcher" ... "loathsome mutant" ... "soon this scum will burn too" ...

Eskel tried to ignore the snapped statements. But as he spotted witch-hunters across the square looking out over the crowd, he found it difficult to maintain his serenity.

So it really was like Thalia had described. Not that he had doubted her statements, but to see these fanatics patrolling the streets of the city with his own eyes as a matter of course was something else.

Quick stepped he went on in southern direction. His eyes fell on a colorful poster, which was attached to a wall of a house and advertised for an entertaining stage play: "The Horned Baron" - a comedy in three acts, musically accompanied by the fabulous Priscilla. The performance took place every evening in the "Chameleon" in Glory Lane - judging by the information on the poster the most famous cabaret in whole Redania, led by the world-famous poet Dandelion personally.

Briefly, Eskel was confused that the search for the bard should turn out to be so easy - but even a witcher was lucky from time to time. He finally knew where to find Dandelion and the rest. Arrived in the street, the multi-storey establishment could not be missed. Colorful banners adorned the facade, a loud babble of voices and laughter came from the open entrance portal.
Eskel entered the cabaret where the performance was already in progress. On the stage, which occupied the entire right side of the dining room, four actors flaunted their skills. A well-dressed, elderly man - apparently the baron in the play of the same name - was trying to win over a young, lightly clad lady. His clumsy attempts to obtain the benevolence of the beauty were acknowledged by the audience with loud laughter.

Eskel let his eyes wander around the room. All the tables were occupied, even on the sides of the room guests stood to attend the performance. He himself had never met Dandelion, knew the bard only from the descriptions of Geralt. As far as he could remember, the poet used a rather eye-catching wardrobe and Eskel hoped to be able to recognize him despite the crowded hall.

The act was apparently over, the audience gave euphoric applause. A young, very pretty woman entered the stage. Her long, blond hair was crowned by a red cap, adorned with a long feather. Gracious she took her place on the stool, tuned her lute to a cheerful melody and began to sing in an angelic voice.

Eskel usually did not care much for music, but the song of the young woman also captivated him. But only until the moment when his eyes fell on the man who stood at the edge of the stage and listened to the lady with delight.

Dressed in blue and violet, a feathered beret on his well-groomed hair, the man stood out clearly from the mass of those present. Eskel made his way through the audience. When he was separated only a few yards from the man, the dandy looked at him. The bard was visibly startled and took a step back. Then his eyes fell on Eskel's wolven medaillon and he relaxed.

Eskel stopped a few feet in front of the man. "Are you Dandelion?"

"In the flesh. And you are ... Master Eskel, if I'm not mistaken?"

Eskel lowered his head in agreement. Before he could speak, the bard spoke further. "What a pleasure to meet one of Geralt's friends in person. He told me a lot about you ... well, you know him. Not really a lot. But he always spoke of you as of a brother. What brings you here, do tell? Are you looking for contracts? Then I have to tell you unfortunately that Novigrad is not a good place for you. You may have already seen them: the witch hunters are roaming our streets again. They make mood against everything that is alien to them - non-humans, sorcerers ... and even witchers. It's better for you to avoid them. In your position I'd leave Novigrad as soon as possible. I hope your brother Lombard also stays well clear of this city."

"Lambert." Eskel took advantage of the bard's respite to correct him. The fluency of Dandelion's speech had briefly irritated him. But what else could one expect from a poet, a man of words...?

"And because of him I am here. I urgently need to contact Geralt. He told me he gave you a Xenogloss to reach out?"

"Oh, yes, he has. It's urgent, you say? Well, let's not waste time. Follow me, please." The bard gave the singer on stage, whose gaze had repeatedly wandered to Eskel during her performance, a curt hand signal to assure her that everything was alright. Then he went ahead to the stairs that led to the upper floors.

As soon as they left the dining room behind, Dandelion spoke again. "Geralt will be happy to hear from you. As pleased as he seems to be in Toussaint, sometimes I think he misses his old witcher's life. He once told me that he occasionally takes up work, but most of it's apparently confined to some contaminated wine cellars. Nothing exciting - rather "exterminator work", as he said. This way, the Xenogloss is in my private room. I've only used it a few times so far."
"I thought it was meant primarily for emergencies."

"Well, of course. But sometimes you just want to talk for a moment."

Eskel could hardly imagine that the bard was capable of a short conversation ... Without interruption, he continued: "Or one would like to inquire about old acquaintances. Geralt now and then has contact with the Regent of Toussaint, Duchess Anna Henrietta. Did you know that? And coincidentally, the lady is also a good friend of mine. Toussaint still appreciates the fine arts. Poetry, theater, music ... there, artists are met with due respect. Not like in this area ..." The bard grimaced in disgust. "Sometimes I wonder if I hadn't better settled there. But now it is how it is. And I don't want to complain; the 'Chameleo' is thriving, Priscilla - the lovely lady you've just admired on stage - and I are a perfect match, and our art attracts visitors from all over Redania."

Dandelion led Eskel along the main corridor and opened a door at the end. The room obviously served as a bedroom as well as a storage room for costumes. Eskel's eyes fell on magnificent robes, colorful fabrics, baubles, glitter, feathers and headgear of all kinds, which were placed on numerous stands and on the dressers. However, the room was dominated by a strikingly large bed that, with the finest linens and a rose draped on one of the pillows, was more than just a place to sleep.

"A lady like Priscilla wants to be courted," said the Bard, who had noticed Eskel's puzzled look. "Some women may succumb to the more rustic charm of a witcher - but most ladies prefer courting in a cultured way."

Eskel spared a comment.

Dandelion walked purposefully to one of the cupboards, revealing from one of the drawers a rather inconspicuous wooden box, which he held out to Eskel.

"That's it. Do you know how to operate a Xenogloss?"

"Not yet."

"It's easy, wait, I'll show you. You open the lid ..." Which the Bard did at once. "And then you turn on this gem, which then activates the counterpart. Normally, the Xenogloss in Corvo Bianco should now reflect everything spoken here. Hopefully Geralt is home. Should we wake Yennefer by our call, we can prepare ourselves for a wordy reproof ..."

The jewel, fixed in the center of the box, now radiated a pulsating glow. Dandelion held the Xenogloss closer to his mouth and spoke in a loud voice. "Geralt? Geralt, are you there? It's really important this time. Your brother Eskel is here with me and wants to talk to you. Geralt? Can you hear me?"

From the Xenogloss they heard - slightly metallic distorted, but unmistakable - Geralt's voice. "Yes, Dandelion, I can hear you. As loud as you scream, I could probably hear you without Xenogloss, all the way in Corvo Bianco." He sounded slightly breathless. "Eskel is with you, you say? Pass the box to him please, I would like to speak directly with him."

"Good evening to you too, Geralt!" Dandelion seemed a little snuffled because of the slightly rude greeting. Nevertheless, he immediately put the Xenogloss into Eskel's outstretched hand.

"Geralt? Glad I could reach you so fast. Lambert is in trouble."

"Lambert? Are you both back on the path? It's not even spring ..."

"We were in a hurry this year to leave Kaer Morhen. He is in prison in Oxenfurt. Together with Keira Metz. And it looks like the Order of the Eternal Fire and the witch hunters are out for the two
Eskel briefly explained to Geralt what he had learned from Thalia about the events in Novigrad and Oxenfurt. 
"Thalia is not sure how long they'll hold up," he concluded. "We should act quickly, Geralt."

At the other end it remained silent.
“Geralt? Do you still hear me?”

"I have just spoken to Yen. She overheard our conversation. We will immediately come to Novigrad by portal and take you to Oxenfurt, saves your travel. Situation seems to be serious and we shouldn't waste time."

* * *

The pervasive smell of alcohol and formalin was only partially able to mask the smell of death emanating from the bodies lying exposed on the tables in the morgue. Marik Yonka placed the lung he had just taken from one of the bodies in the prepared container. The organ would be examined by his colleagues in the university. Carefully, he closed the body bag around the corpse.

He marked the container and signaled to one of the assistants to dispose the body. The man pushed a cart over to the table, rolled the corpse in the bag on top of it, and pushed the cart out of the door.

Yonka let out a sigh of relief. Everything went well again this time.
At the moment only one of the infected people still lived. The other bodies had been autopsied, the organs removed were examined for changes and any pathogen samples taken. It was with the help of the lung samples that the scientists hoped to find a way to spread the pathogen by air. At least some of the scientists ...

Yonka had been doing his part in the past few days, when he was entrusted with removing the organs, that this would be nearly impossible.
He put the used instruments in the sink, stripped off his gloves, and loosened the cloth he used as a respirator. As he was getting rid of the smock, Alric Efferen opened the door and stepped into the room.

"Marik, glad I could meet you. I was afraid to be late. Professor Basilius had the idea that we should also examine the spleen of the infected to look for pathogens in it. I'll get to work right away. Luckily, the body was not yet on its way to the stove."

The assistant, who had recently taken away the body, pushed the cart back into the chamber. "You can leave that to me. I'm just putting on the protective clothing again," Yonka hurried to say. But Efferen already pulled the gloves over his fingers.

"Let it be, a little practice will do me good. You did almost all the autopsies on your own and left us little else. Where's the fun for us, huh ...?" Alric Efferen winked at Yonka jokingly.

His heart beat up to the neck. He had to dissuade Efferen from his plan – somehow.
Yonka returned the smile, then grimaced painfully and touched his chest. He started to cough. "I ... Alric ... I can barely breathe ..." He dropped to his knees and leaned against one of the tables.

Alric Efferen immediately rushed to support him. "Marik, what is it? Could it ... did you inhale something?" Efferen immediately pulled the towel he had prepared as a mask on his face. Slight panic spread in his eyes. "Come, we should leave quickly ..."
With Yonka on his arm, which he supported while walking, he went to the exit. Yonka's body was repeatedly shaken by coughing fits. They had almost reached the door.

Then Efferen's eyes fell on the corpse, now uncovered again, which the assistant had already freed from the body bag. The body showed no signs of the disease - no rash, no pustules.

Efferen frowned, let go of Yonka - who was in despair - and stepped to the table. Without a doubt - the dead elf had never suffered from the disease. The body showed signs of ill-treatment - which probably were the cause of the death of the non-human - but no trace of the disease. Efferen turned to Yonka, first an incredulous, then a furious look on his face.

"Marik? Care to do some explanation?"

Chapter End Notes

Thanks to OfeliaTheMoth for beta-reading.
A bold plan

It was the third morning after Eskel's departure. Days in which Thalia had prepared everything for her upcoming escape and their rescue mission. Her duffle bags lay on her bed, already well packed - with books, scientific records, and a few personal belongings. She only wanted to take some clothes that were suitable for a longer journey.

In Toussaint she'd probably have to buy new ones. Yesterday she had issued a bank draft from Vivaldi Bank on her entire balance, which she would be able to exchange in Beauclair. Even if the academy tried to block her accounts before she arrived in Toussaint, she would still get her money. Enough to start a new life in the duchy.

A messenger had brought her the answer from the Ducal Academy – the director was a friend of Gregor, who had been working as a doctor and scientist in the southern Duchy for some years now, and had been commissioned by Duchess Anna Henrietta to set up the new Academy in Beauclair. He had cured a person close to the Duchess of a chronic condition and therefore had risen in the favor of the aristocracy. Even after Gregor's death, he and Thalia had maintained occasional contact and so he was looking forward to helping the former fiancé of his deceased friend. His intentions were not purely altruistic, as he had emphasized in his letter. After all, an alchemist with Thalia's expertise was a big win for the new university.

She carefully tucked the bottle of Griffon's spinal fluid into one of her pockets, then reached for the feather Eskel gave her. Immediately she was filled with longing and worry. If all went well, he would soon leave for Toussaint with her.

Thalia was looking forward to the new beginning, to leaving Oxenfurt and all this, the terrible events of the last few weeks, and starting a new life.

But she hadn't dared asking Eskel if he wanted to participate and accompany her on her way ... It all happened so fast - Lambert and Keira in prison, Eskel's departure ...

Hopefully he'd be back soon with Geralt and maybe also Yennefer. When she thought of the planned rescue, her stomach cramped again with worry and fear. Shani entered the room and handed Thalia a carefully wrapped bundle. "Here, the samples of the infected, that Laikos has ensured. You really want to research a cure in Toussaint?"

Thalia carefully took the package and stowed it in a bag between her clothes. "I want to try. Even with Laikos' intentions to destroy all remaining samples, who knows if he will succeed? And at any time there could be another outbreak. If all goes well and we can free the sorceress and Lambert, she may even help me with the research. The similarities to Catriona disease are really striking. Her knowledge would certainly be helpful."

"I only want Laikos to be careful. Yonka has disappeared without a trace two days ago - and I don't believe it happened by accident."

Thalia sighed deeply. "I'm worried about him too. About all of us, to be honest. The faster we get out of here, the better. Once the last victim dies and all the samples have been destroyed, there is no reason to stay longer than necessary. We can't do anything more."

"If it weren't for the sorceress and her witcher ... Did you really think this through properly, Thalia? I still don't like your idea."
Thalia pressed her lips together and turned the griffin feather between her fingers. "I'm not too enthusiastic about it myself, Shani. And Eskel won't agree, I'm sure. But there is no other way, they won't make it alone. Not after the entire prison is teeming with knights and witch-hunters and ... "

A knock on the front door interrupted Thalia. She exchanged a quick look with Shani. If it was Eskel, he would have traveled back by portal - which would mean he succeeded. If it wasn't... Thalia swallowed, then put the feather back on her bed.

As she headed down the stairs to the door, she tried to suppress the upcoming fear of a Knight of the Eternal Fire standing at her doorstep.

But a glance through the side window made her worries disappear in an instant, and Thalia hurried to open the door.

A woman, barely taller than Thalia herself, but much daintier, was standing in front of the threshold. The hood of her rather simple black cloak covered most of her black curls. Eyes and lips wore - in contrast to their previous encounters - only discreet make-up, but the smell of lilac and gooseberry, which surrounded the woman, was intense and beguiling as always. Although Yennefer seemed striving to attract less attention than usual, her willingness to compromise seemed to have clear limits.

"Yennefer! I'm glad to see you. So Eskel has been able to reach you." The relief in Thalia's voice was unmistakable.

The sorceress entered the house and looked around briefly as Thalia closed the door behind her. Lifting a slightly disapproving eyebrow, Yennefer threw a derogatory look at Thalia's rather purposeful decor.

"I see you live properly for a scientist, Thalia. Any adornment and comfort would probably only distract you from your work ..."

"Yennefer ... are Eskel and Geralt also in Oxenfurt? I hope everything went well on the way?"

The sorceress turned to Thalia, a slightly amused look on her face.

"You worry about him again, how touching. Yes, Eskel is very near and eager to see you as well. I understand that Lambert and Keira Metz are in a less edifying situation. So we shall not waste any more time, I suggest we set off to discuss the plan with Geralt and Eskel ..."

The sorceress's gaze fell on Shani, who was descending the stairs. Her left eyebrow slightly wandered up.

"This is Shani, a colleague from the Academy," Thalia hurried to introduce her friend.

Shani stepped closer and nodded in greeting to the black-haired woman. "Miss Vengerberg."

"You happen to be the colleague of Thalia, who helped Geralt of Riva with two of his assignments ...?"

Shani's cheeks immediately took on a reddish tone. Thalia searched in vain for words to appease the sorceress. She had not thought about their meeting being filled with this much tension. Shani, however, held Yennefer's gaze and started to explain.

"I ... I did not realize at first that he …"

"Oh, don't worry," Yennefer interrupted. "No need to be uncomfortable. Don't fear, I'm not one for retribution. If that was the case, I would probably have to wipe out a significant portion of the female
population of Novigrad, Oxenfurt, the Northern Kingdoms and Skellige – including a sorceress or two. I know about Geralt's charm." A slightly threatening smile stole from Yennefer's lips. "But it won't happen again."

Shani shook her head. "Of course not."

"Well. Since we have clarified this now, I suggest that we leave. Geralt and Eskel are at a friend of mine, a sorcerer who lives undetected in Oxenfurt. I'll wrap myself up with a slight stealth spell on the way, which should distract any observers."

+++

When they reached the unassuming house on the outskirts of Oxenfurt, Thalia immediately felt a great relief when she saw Scorpion in the open stable next to the main building. The stallion ate a portion of oats with relish - he had certainly deserved it after Eskel had made his way to Novigrad in such a short time.

On the walk here, Thalia had noticed that passers-by hadn't looked at her or the other two women. They didn't even seem to notice them. The spellcasting seemed to be working. Once again, Thalia wished that her own magical abilities would be enough to accomplish such a miracle as well. Especially in the last few weeks, when she had repeatedly suspected she was being watched, a cloaking spell would have been very convenient.

Yennefer knocked on the door in a certain rhythm. A slender middle-aged man opened the door, slightly at first, then completely, as his eyes fell on the sorceress. Yennefer got in first, followed by Shani and Thalia.

As the door closed behind them, Thalia had already run to Eskel, who had sat at a table with Geralt but now got up and hugged her. Geralt also rose and nodded in greeting to Shani. It was obvious that the welcome would have been more cordial if Yennefer had not been present. The sorceress watched Geralt, one corner of her mouth pulled up in amusement, then stepped over and put an arm around him. Apparently, the ownership had been clarified.

Geralt, who was obviously embarrassed, put his arm around Yennefer's shoulders, his gaze resting on the young physician. "Shani. Nice to see you. You haven't changed at all the past few years."

"Neither have you, Geralt. I am happy to see you again. I heard you have settled in Toussaint?"

"I did. I've decided to settle down and enjoy life. Together with Yennefer."

Shani smiled. "That's good. You deserve it. You both do."

"Now that we've all got what we deserve ..." Yennefer interrupted. "... maybe we should go over to discuss the plan. Eskel has already told us about it. By the way, this is my old friend, Aegidius Gleissenstein", the sorceress introduced the house owner to Thalia and Shani. He then nodded to the two women with a short smile. "Ladies. I'll excuse myself, so you can discuss everything else." He turned away and climbed the stairs to the top floor.

"He wants to get involved as little as possible," Yennefer said. "He owes me a favor, so he temporarily lets us stay in here. But we cannot expect more help from him. His solidarity with other members of our guild is quickly exhausted as soon as it becomes dangerous for him."

"Understandable," Thalia interjected. "The situation for magicians will rapidly get worse in Oxenfurt. A large number of witch hunters and representatives of the Order of the Eternal Fire are already in the city. And with that we are already at the decisive point: we have to change the plan."
"What do you mean?" Eskel looked at Thalia, frowning questioningly. "I thought we had already discussed that. At night, with only a few guards on duty, Yennefer provides a magical distraction in the back of the jail. Her, Geralt and I go in and fight our way to Lambert and Keira Metz. We can certainly take on some extra witch hunters and knights, Thalia."

"I don't doubt your abilities, but things have changed a lot in the last few days. I visited the prison every day - officially, to receive information from Keira to link the plague to Catriona disease. Incidentally, she is doing well, according to circumstances - except for the side effects of dimeritium of course. Lambert, on the other hand ... The witch-hunters and Knights of the Order, who have been quartered in prison since the day before yesterday, seem to have found a new scapegoat next to non-humans and sorcerers in witchers. I don't have a complete overview, but there must be at least sixty of these fanatics in there. And they have set up dimeritium throughout the prison, including in the courtyard, on the bridge to the entrance gate and the forecourt to the bridge. Yennefer can't get inside, no matter what. And you both against this superiority ... that wouldn't work, Eskel."

"So what are you proposing?" Geralt seemed to be already mentally exploring possible alternatives to the original plan. "Since I have full access to the prison, I will place bombs with delays on different spots in the prison. Under the pretext of an urgent question to Keira the guards will not get suspicious. They know me by now, I am allowed to move even without supervision in the prison. I have already prepared the containers, some filled with stun gas. That should eliminate some of your opponents. If I place a few bombs in the back of the building, the detonation will lure most of the Order's Knights there, and your entry through the main gate will not immediately grab all the attention. At the gate, I will also position an explosive device that goes up after the others. At least you have no problems getting in. You cannot use signs because of the dimeritium."

"Forget it, Thalia," said Eskel vehemently. "I won't let you get yourself into danger."

Thalia grabbed Eskel's hand. "I'll leave the prison long before the first explosive device detonates. You know I'm not as crazy as playing the heroine. But I cannot let you face this superiority alone. Yennefer won't be able to help you."

The sorceress obviously saw the situation differently. "I could bombard the prison with magic bullets from the Pontar's shore. Just tell me what part I have to spare so that Lambert and Keira will not be in danger and I will reduce the rest of the building to rubble."

"That would kill hundreds of inmates. And not all of them are rightly detained. Many elves, dwarfs and gnomes have recently been arrested for trivialities. Not to speak of the poor ones who live there because of minor offenses. We can not put all these people in danger."

Geralt nodded slowly, seeming to befriend the changed plan. "Yen can probably cover us from a distance when we come out again. And she can help us to escape and flee out of the city. Are there any other exits than the main portal?"

"No, unfortunately not - there is only the one. I made a sketch of the floor plan - at least as far as I could. I don't know all parts of the building, but I have drawn the way to Lambert and Keira and also the positions of the sentries. I suspect the quarters of the witch hunters and knights in the southern tract. I could hide an explosive device on one of the cross corridors. Maybe this will prevent some of the knights from getting through to you quickly."

Geralt nodded slowly. "That could work ..." Eskel snorted in disbelief. "Am I the only one who thinks this is a terrible idea? The risk for Thalia is way too big. What if the timers do not work properly and one of the explosives detonates too early?"
Or if you are discovered while hiding the containers?"

"The timers work!", Thalia interjected.

Eskel turned to her. "Thalia. I understand you want to help us. But ... even if everything goes well: your visit to the prison shortly before the explosions will immediately lead to suspicion. Oxenfurt will be no longer safe for you, you should submerge immediately."

"She has to do that anyway. Marik Yonka, who helped Thalia and Laikos manipulate the samples, has disappeared without a trace two days ago," Shani intervened.

"What? Thalia ... Had I known you were in danger, I would have taken you to a safe place before I left."

"I know, Eskel. But whatever happened to Yonka - whether he was captured or worse - he didn't betray Laikos and me, otherwise we would have been taken into custody. I have already prepared everything, my bags are packed. Shani has already informed Laikos - he too will be leaving the city tonight. I ... I intend to go to Toussaint. I could work at the newly founded university. I have a friend there who has already got everything underway." At the last words, Thalia's eyes had wandered to Eskel. "Would you ... would you go with me?"

"Are you seriously asking that? Whether Kovir, Temeria or Toussaint - I can work anywhere as a witcher. I am much more worried about this whole thing tonight. Thalia, I don't want you to put yourself in danger."
"And I cannot stand by and watch you and Geralt commit suicide."

Eskel looked at her for a long time, then he sighed. "Alright, apparently I can't convince you to stay out of trouble. But promise me not to take any risks. If anything isn't going as planned, you'll leave the prison immediately - without placing the explosives."

"Of course I will, promise. But I got the easiest job here." Thalia sighed. "Geralt and you ... If something should happen to you ..."

"We've often been in dangerous situations. Doesn't seem like it, but I know how to defend myself ..."

Thalia had to grin against her will. "You oaf … please take care of yourself."
"You're not going in there alone again. I will accompany you," said Vincent Laikos firmly and in a tone of voice that would not tolerate any protest.

Thalia knew this tone. She had often heard him speak that way in the lecture hall with all too reluctant students. But Thalia was no longer a student. And Laikos was no longer her mentor.

"Vincent. I already told you. Eskel and a witcher-friend of his will be there, as well as a sorceress. I won't be alone. And my job is simply to place the explosive devices inconspicuously inside the building. I'm leaving the prison before one of them detonates. I'll leave the rest to the witchers."

Thalia noticed his worried look and her tone softened slightly. "I can do this, Vincent. There is no reason why you should be in danger. Leave the city in the next few hours – as we planned."

In order not to cause unnecessary suspicion, Thalia had asked Shani to inform Laikos about their planned escape. Until now she had assumed he also prepared to leave Oxenfurt today.

When she and Shani had returned to her house an hour after meeting with Eskel, Geralt and Yennefer, Laikos had been waiting for them in a back alley. Now the three of them were sitting at the dinner table, discussing the mission that was planned for the coming night.

"Oh, don't worry, I've packed my bags, cleaned up all the remaining samples, and I think I'll be on my way north in the morning." Laikos stroked his long, blonde hair out of his forehead with a nervous gesture. "But I won't just vanish without lending you my help. This morning somebody pushed a note under my front door. Marik is alive! He is apparently being held in prison and interrogated - just like your witcher friend and the sorceress. I'm not going to leave him to his fate. And I cannot let you go into even greater danger of freeing him - while I'm on my way to Kovir. I'll escort you to jail tonight and get Marik out of there."

Shani frowned. "We don't know who this message came from. It might as well be a trap ..."

Laikos snorted. "Yes, of course. But if these knights, witch hunters, or our colleagues should suspect me, it would be easy for them to take me out of business as well as Marik. Why use a trick if they could just arrest me and put me in jail for interrogation? I assume that one of the guards wrote the message. Someone whose feeling of injustice or conscience has not yet completely blunted. Anyway, tonight is the perfect opportunity to liberate Marik."

Thalia looked thoughtfully at the table. "It would also be the perfect opportunity to get hold of us all at the same time. The one who sent the message to you expects you to go to the prison to find Marik. As soon as you show up there, it will be clear to him - or them - that we are trying to free our friend. This could thwart the whole action."

"Thalia. If Marik had betrayed both of us, we would have been taken into custody long ago. These people do not need an official charge, they'd just pick us up at the university or at home and take us away. The plan is risky. But it wouldn't get any safer if I left. Thalia - let me help you!"

Laiko's insistent gaze made it clear to Thalia that it would not be easy to change his mind. And if she was honest with herself, the prospect of not having to go to the jail alone tonight was even reassuring.

Thalia returned his gaze, sighed slightly and finally nodded. "Alright, Vincent. Join me, if you want."
After spending the rest of the day with putting her selfmade time fuses to the explosives that had already been prepared and marking them with the respective delay time, Thalia and Vincent Laikos made their way to the agreed meeting place. Shani had in the meantime brought Arenaria out of the rental stable and loaded the horse with Thalia's travel bags. Since Arenaria’s white fur made the animal visible from afar, Shani had tied her in the shelter of a distant tree group and arrived by foot at the meeting point on the shore of the Pontar.

Eskel, Geralt and Yennefer were already waiting in the shade of some trees, watching the prison from a safe distance.

"The moonlight is far from ideal," Shani said.

Geralt nodded and pressed his lips together. "Unfortunately we have no choice. We can not wait anymore."

"I know. Thalia brings the explosives – and more. Vincent Laikos visited her at noon today and wants to accompany her."

Eskel frowned. "How come? Another change of the plan? We ... " He stopped when his sensitive hearing told him the arrival of the two.

Eskel approached Thalia and hugged her. His gaze wandered to Vincent Laikos, who eyed the witcher with a slightly startled look in his eyes. However, Laikos quickly overcame his own spontaneous reaction to Eskel's sight and nodded in greeting to the witcher.

Thalia hurried to introduce her companion. "That's Vincent Laikos. He helped me, together with Marik Yonka, to thwart research on the pathogen. He has received a message that Marik is still alive and is also being held in prison."

"I'll go in with Thalia and look for Marik. When the chaos starts, I'll try to escape with him."

Geralt frowned. "How so? Just going through the front door?"

"I have another lab coat for him, as well as two respiratory masks that are also used in autopsies. With a bit of luck, he will look like only another scientist trying to find safety. In the general confusion, the guards will certainly be busy elsewhere."

"I hope you realize that this is very risky. We can't guarantee for your safety."

"I am aware of that. I am ready to take the risk. Marik is a friend I cannot easily abandon."

Eskel parted from Thalia’s embrace and sought her gaze. "Is there no way to change your mind? We can do it without you going in there ..."

Thalia shook her head slightly. "Are you sure? Anyway, the risk would be far too big. I'll manage, Eskel. Don't you think I'm capable of such a feat?" She winked at him mischievously - to calm him, but also to distract herself from her fear.

"I think you're capable of almost everything by now. I'd be happier if I knew you were safe, though."

"Me too, Eskel. It'll take a load off my mind when we're in Toussaint. But until then ..." She kissed him passionately, trying to reassure herself that it would not be the last time. At Eskel's hug, she felt...
that he, too, was fighting similar thoughts. Fearing that her courage would leave her, she broke away from him and turned to Laikos. "Shall we?"

Vincent nodded. Thalia turned to Eskel. "Did you prepare this potion for Lambert?"

Eskel handed her a small, opaque flask. "A mixture that will strengthen him for a short time and prevent the narcotic gas from affecting him."

"Thanks." Thalia took the bottle and stowed it in her bag. "For Keira Metz, I've prepared a breathing filter that she can hide in her mouth. Not as good as a respiratory mask, but I can hardly put it on inconspicuously. The filter will have to suffice. I place one of the gas containers near the dungeon so that the gas should shut off the guards in front of their cell. Each of them carries a key for the gate on his belt, as well as keys for the shackles. So you will lose no time in breaking the locks."

Thalia looked at Eskel, then Geralt. "As soon as I come out, it'll probably be a few more minutes left before the first explosives and gas bombs detonate in the back of the building. Three minutes later, the two charges at the gate should explode. Then it's your turn."

A short time later, when she walked across the bridge to the front gate of the prison next to Laikos, Thalia felt her courage grow less and less. The strap of the explosive-filled bag weighed heavily on her shoulder. Some of the bombs were carried by Laikos in his pocket. Together they had gone through the plan again. Based on the floor plan they had determined who should place which explosive at which position. The premise for the success of their plan was that they both could move unobserved by the guards in the corridors. That had always been the case during their last visit to the prison, but who knew ...

Thalia swallowed, feeling her mouth and throat getting drier. A shiver ran through her.

"Easy, Thalia. We'll be fine." Vincent's voice was little more than a whisper. His confidence - whether real or for her sake - calmed Thalia a little. In contrast to the fight that Eskel and Geralt were still facing, their task was comparatively easy. However, the fear of the risk Eskel was taking caused her to choke up for a moment.

"Pull yourself together, Thalia. You can do it. And Eskel can do it too. Any opponent I can eliminate with the explosive devices is one less to threaten him or Geralt. Let's go ..."

"Greetings," Vincent just addressed one of the two guards at the gate. "Please excuse the nocturnal visit. But we have just made a discovery that could make the breakthrough in our research. We can not lose any more time and therefore have to go to the sorceress and ask her again."

The guard on the left pursed his lips. "Again? No idea what you scientist are doing, but that swanky one of yours, this Efferen, is also with this bitch." The man spat, then scratched his neck and turned to Thalia. "Maybe she was even more talkative with him than she was with you - I've heard from one of the turnkeys that he isn't the squeamish kind. Serves her right, this fuckin witch. Abnormal bunch." He opened one side of the large entrance gate. He had not noticed that Thalia had gone pale at his words. The guard on the right stifled a yawn and waved Vincent and Thalia through the gate.

"You know the way ..."

Together they stepped into the corridor. When she felt unobserved, Thalia gave Vincent a horrified look. "What are we going to do now?", she whispered to him.

"First of all, stay calm. We continue to go according to plan. We part, I search in the prisoners' wing
for Marik and place my explosive devices at the cross corridor to the guards’ quarters. Once the gas is released there, a larger proportion of the men who are there should be off for the time being. You go to the sorceress as planned. Involve Alric in a conversation, distract him, whatever. Make sure the sorceress and the witcher are still in place. Then go and disperse your explosives and disappear from prison. With luck, I'll find Marik before the first bombs detonate. Alric should be our least concern."

"I hope he doesn't come up with the idea of escorting me outside ..."

"Then fob him off. No matter how you do it, you have to place the explosives. Have more confidence in yourself, Thalia. Haven’t I been telling you that for years?"

"Yes, you have. I'm working on it, Vincent."

A torch illuminated the intersection, from which they now had to go separate ways. Thalia would take the right turn to get to the dungeon of Keira Metz and Lambert. Vincent's way would lead him straight on to the cells.

Thalia took a deep breath, looked around once more and then turned to her companion. The tall blond man whom she had come to appreciate over the years as her mentor smiled encouragingly. Thalia sighed. "Good luck. I hope you find Marik and get out of here safely ..."

"A wish I share." Vincent Laikos smiled mischievously. Had she known him less well, she might not have noticed the uncertain twitching of his mouth. "Good luck, Thalia. I'll see you then ... and in case it should be different ... all the best." He hesitated for a moment, then hugged Thalia and turned away, stepping in the direction of the cells.

Thalia looked after him, trying to suppress her fear and concern, and turned into the corridor on the right side.

The way to the dungeon, in which the sorceress and Lambert were held prisoner, she knew only too well. She reached the stairs two floors down to the dark, damp rooms that served as "interviewing rooms." A euphemism that could not obscure the true nature of the torture chambers. At the moment, only two prisoners were in the dungeon: the sorceress Metz and Lambert, usually watched by two guards – same as tonight. The two of them were already well known to Thalia, evil fellows who appeared completely dulled by the suffering of their captives. Sullenly, the men stood to the left and right of the barred door, which secured access to the interview room. As Thalia approached the heavy iron grille, she heard Alric Efferen's unpleasant voice speaking threateningly to the sorceress.

Thalia nodded to the two guards. "Greetings. I see I'm not the only one visiting the sorceress late at night."

One of the men snorted and muttered, "The whore is definitely used to nocturnal visitors ..." and smirked.

"Karel! Curb your bragging when talking to a lady!" The second guard gave his companion a disapproving look and turned to Thalia. "Excuse his language. I'll let you in, then you can join your colleague in the interrogation." The heavy key turned noisily in the lock and the guard opened the grille for Thalia. The large, L-shaped room behind it was barely lit. Thalia knew that the two prisoners had to stay chained behind the bend of the room.

When the gate opened, Alric's voice had fallen silent. Apparently he had not expected a disturbance. As his eyes fell on Thalia, who stepped into the faintly torch-lit area of the interrogation room, his face darkened.
"You!"

"Yes, me!" Thalia had decided to take an offensive move to upset Efferen and distract him from her real purpose. "The interrogation of the prisoners is my assignment, Efferen! Care to tell me what you are doing here?"

"Unlike you, I make sure the bitch finally gives us useful information! Professor Basilius needs urgent results and since your success in this survey so far was very slim, he has decided to transfer this task to me. Don’t look so surprised! Has he not informed you yet? Well, since my methods are obviously more effective than yours, he will certainly be pleased with his decision ..." Efferen held up a vial with a greenish, clear liquid, a smug grin on his face.

Thalia’s gaze fell on Keira, who was barely suppressing a sob. The skin on her right arm had strange burns. A sickening smell hit Thalia's nose. Enraged, she turned to Efferen. "This is your idea of an effective interview? You are torturing the prisoners?"

"Really, Thalia! Torture is such an aggressive word ... let’s say I have emphasized my arguments."

Thalia squatted next to Keira, apparently to investigate her injuries. She leaned over to the sorceress tightly. "We'll get you out of here right now," she whispered to Keira. Keira's eyes widened in surprise. As Thalia examined a cut on Keira's cheek, she slid the breathing filter into her mouth, careful to cover Efferen's view of Keira with her body. "Put this under your tongue. As soon as the gas escapes, let the fleece fill your mouth and breathe through the filter."

With an indignant expression she did not have to play, Thalia turned back to Efferen. "Alric, you have caused her terrible injuries. Why? She was already cooperative! The informations that I was able to deliver to Professor Basilius ..."

"... were nothing but useless theories! You’ve had four days to question this whore and nothing came out that would have even contributed to solving our problem!"

Thalia turned to Lambert, who stared at Efferen hatefully. His condition had worsened once more. Apparently, Alric had applied his "effective methods" to him as well: Lambert's shirt was torn open, and the skin below the clavicle had burns similar to those of Keira's. A cut below the costal arch, which had presumably been inflicted several days earlier, had become inflamed, as Thalia could see from afar. Lambert's glazed eyes were probably due to a high fever. She squatted next to the witcher, who watched her strangely impassive, feeling the temperature of his forehead. He was burning.

"Alric! This witcher has a high fever and is very dehydrated! What good will he do us if he dies?" She opened her bag, but only wide enough that Efferen could not catch a glimpse of its contents, and took out the potion flask. "Luckily, I have some water with me." She quickly opened the bottle and poured Lambert the liquid. After the first sip, his eyes widened a little as he registered the taste, that was probably familiar to him. Thalia hoped Alric, standing a few feet away, would not smell the strong alcohol. Nor did he see how the potion made the witcher's skin appear translucent at a time when the veins were clearly visible beneath the surface. Lambert drank quickly, swallowing the entire content of the bottle within seconds. While Thalia closed the flask and stowed it away, he whispered a hoarse "Thank you". Their eyes met briefly, Thalia nodded slightly. If she could tell the two more exactly what would happen soon. But she did not have a chance - thanks to Efferen.

After a few seconds, the visible effect of the potion faded and Thalia rose again. If Efferen now looked at the witcher, he would notice nothing unusual.

It was time to spread the contents of her bag in the hallways. After that, there would be no way back ...
"What are you going to do, Alric? Will you torture them until you like the sorceress' answers better? Do you really think you are moving her to help us by letting her lover die?" Thalia turned to Efferen, openly showing him her hostility. "I will not put up with you just kicking me out and rake in the accomplishments I've already achieved. Tomorrow morning I will speak with Professor Basilius. And then we will see who of us continues with the interviews."

She reached for her bag. "Please do me a favor and keep the two prisoners alive until then. They're no use to us dead. I hope even you can understand that."

Efferen snorted derisively as Thalia left the room. "Speak with Basilius. And please do me a favor and pull yourself together when he cuts your wings."

Thalia nodded briefly to the guards and quickly made her way to the next turn of the corridor. When she was out of sight, she opened her bag and pulled out the first gas container. Luckily, she had numbered all the explosives in advance so that the sequence of detonations was as planned. In the faint light of the torch, the incised number was barely recognizable. Thalia sharpened the explosive device and placed it in the dark corner next to the wall, right at the turnoff. The gas that emanated here would quickly shut off the guards in front of the dungeon.

From now on, time was running.

Quickly Thalia went back the planned way, placed five explosives, most of them with stunning gas. At a diversion to the guards' quarters, she dumped a bomb with greater explosive power. With a bit of luck, the detonation would ensure that access to the prisoners' wing would be blocked. Hopefully, Vincent was also successful in placing the explosive devices. His bombs were the first to detonate to lure the knights, witch hunters and wardens into the back of the prison before Eskel and Geralt entered the main gate.

Thalia was left with only the last explosives - the ones destined for this gate. She approached it, fixing the two small explosive devices with the help of leather straps on the hinges of the right-hand side of the gate, then knocked on the left side from the inside to signal the waiting guard to open it.

Seconds later, he opened the lock. The side of the door swung open. "Already done?" The guard gave her a frown.

Thalia looked annoyed. "My colleague is already taking on the sorceress, as I just have learned."

The guard laughed, snorting. "Maybe it's more of a job for a man. With all due respect, but women are just too soft for that." Thalia shot the man a devastating glance and started to enter the bridge that connected the jail to the Pontar shore. Only a few dozen meters and she would have made it. Then it was Eskel’s and Geralt's turn. Relief seized her, the pressure of the last few hours dropped off her shoulders. At the same time, concern for Eskel stole deeper into her heart. She hoped everything would turn out well. But she couldn't do anything more ...

As she was halfway across the bridge, a threatening yell snatched her from her thoughts.

"Thalia! Explain this! Immediately!"

Efferen had followed her outside! Thalia turned slowly to him, trying to calm her pounding heart.

He stood in front of the gate and with a triumphant expression he held the fleece in his hand, which she had just put into Keira's mouth. The fleece that the sorceress should have served as a respiratory filter.

She could still run away. A quick sprint across the bridge and she would be safe. Efferen might not
But what if he became suspicious? What if he alerted the guards and told them that Thalia might be a traitor? If any of them accidentally discovered one of the explosives ahead of time …

Thalia took a deep breath. And made a decision. She walked towards Efferen. In a few minutes, the first explosives in the back of the building would explode - until then she had to distract Alric and prevent him from putting the guards on alert.

"Alright, Alric. You´ve caught me. This cloth actually serves to sedate animals before a section. I soaked it with an extract of mandrake and henbane."

Efferen frowned. "Why should that be? Are you planning to sabotage our work?" His eyes widened as the sudden realization permeated him. "You! You're in league with Yonka! I figured he did not have the guts to go through his manipulations alone. I suspected Laikos of helping him. But you …"

"Alric! Let's talk about it, please. I can assure you that I have nothing to do with it. I just wanted to make sure that the sorceress can not provide you with any information tonight that will allow you to triumphantly walk to Professor Basilius tomorrow morning," She sighed. "I didn´t want you to be successful with your interrogation - and let me look ridiculous in Basilius´ eyes." She tried to look guilty.

"You can not get away so easily, Thalia!" Efferen could barely control his anger. He grabbed Thalia by the arm and dragged her with him through the gate, back into the prison.

The guard looked at his comrade, frowning questioningly. The other just shrugged. The guard briefly shook his head. These fine academics did not behave any better than ordinary people. He locked the gate again and went back to his post.

Three minutes later, chaos erupted within the prison walls.
Victory and Defeat

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The alcohol was burning in his throat and yet could not cover the aroma of Celandine and Ranogrin, which spread in Eskel's pharynx. Seconds later he felt the active ingredients pouring through his body. Minutes earlier, he had already taken the potion Swallow to prepare for the upcoming fight. Now that his body had to process two potions, the side effects of alchemical ingredients were all the stronger.

His veins came clearly visible under the skin as his blood accumulated with the drugs. He felt his senses sharpen, his muscles tense for a moment.

He glanced over at Geralt, who was crouching in the bushes a few yards away and was about to pick out the appropriate flasks from his pocket. Eskel held out the bottle of Oriole to him. "Sure you don't want to take a few sips of mine? Alchemy has never been your strong suit, Geralt …"

The white-haired witcher gave his brother a mocking look. "The fact that you were Master Yaris' prized student in brewing does not mean I didn't learn in the course of decades, my friend. Thanks, but I trust my own potions."

"If you say so." Eskel corked the bottle again. His gaze wandered to the prison island, which was hard to spot in the fog that came from the Pontar. Geralt watched as Eskel twisted the cork in the bottleneck between his fingers - first in one direction, then the other. A sign that he didn't feel the peace he was trying to show. At all.

Geralt pulled the bottles out of his pocket, took several gulps of Swallow, then the Oriole and, like Eskel, waited for the onset reaction of his body. When his metabolism had processed the substances, he got up and went to Yennefer, who stood together with Shani in the middle of the tree group on the shore.

"Eskel and I are on our way now. The fog you created should cover us long enough. Will you please keep that for me?" He handed Yennefer his silver sword. For a moment, she looked confused, then realized that a strange blade was attached to Geralt's back next to his steel sword. "I got a sword for Lambert," he explained. "Certainly not as good as his old one, but better than nothing."

"How noble of you. It's hopefully more stable than this ornate quillons would suggest." Yennefer gave the sword's ornament a raised brow.

"Was the best the blacksmith had to offer here. Lambert will buff it out, no matter what blade I give him." Geralt looked at Yennefer, almost as if he wanted to memorize their sight once more. Then he leaned over to her, put a hand on her neck and kissed her. Yennefer snuggled up to him, returning his kiss. Geralt inhaled her scent of lilac and gooseberry, then opened his eyes again.

"Come back safely." Her voice was little more than a whisper.

"Haven't got any other plans." He broke away from her, nodding briefly to Shani. "Shani. We thank you for your help. For everything. You should better go now before it gets uncomfortable here."

"Do you really think I would leave without knowing if you all got out of prison safely? I'll stay, Geralt. If something goes wrong, you might need my help."
Geralt nodded slowly. "Alright, Shani. Let's hope it won't be necessary." He turned to Eskel. "Ready?"

Eskel took his eyes off the prison and looked at Geralt, calm as usual. "Let's go. I'll be glad when all this waiting will be over." Eskel went back to Scorpion, who grazed among the trees next to Arenaria, and said goodbye to his warhorse. The animal began to prance restlessly, apparently noticing the tension of his master. Eskel patted his flank and murmured a few reassuring words.

They left the two women behind in the protection of the riparian vegetation. Yennefer would be careful enough to stay out of the Dimeritium sphere of influence, which was not just in the prison itself. As they approached the forecourt of the bridge, that now also lay in the fog, Eskel felt the radiance of the metal that made any magic impossible. He and Geralt would not be able to use signs from here on. Each of them had only a well-stocked set of grenades with them to gain an advantage.

Eskel didn't feel comfortable about having to forego his own speciality discipline during the upcoming fight. But even without signs, him and Geralt would be successful. Thalia's explosives should keep some of their opponents away. They could handle the rest. There was no other option.

In the bushes on the edge of the forecourt, they took cover. The bridge was partially hidden in the fog, lit by the moonlight. Geralt noticed that his brother didn't bother to hide his tension anymore. Eskel squatted beside him, the muscles of his jaw tensing under his skin. He stared fixedly at the bridge, his fingers drumming restlessly on his leg. There was no sign of his usually calm posture.

"Relax, Eskel. So far, everything is going according to plan."

"As soon as Thalia is outside again, I'll be the relaxed as always, Geralt. Until then …"

As if on command, they heard the creaking of the entrance gate, which seemed to open, followed by the sound of light footsteps on the bridge. Thalia. Eskel took a deep breath.

Suddenly the loud voice of a man on the bridge sounded. "Thalia! Explain this! Immediately!"

Eskel's muscles tensed, he tried to see what was happening on the bridge.

Seconds passed, then they heard Thalia's footsteps move away from them and back to the prison.

Eskel jumped up from his crouched position and started to walk to the bridge. Geralt held him back by the arm.

"Eskel," he hissed. "It's still too early."

"She's going back in, Geralt!" Eskel spoke softly, but the mixture of worry, anger, and tension in his voice was unmistakable. "Something went wrong."

They heard Thalia talking softly to the man, but could not understand the words because of the distance. Then they heard the creaking of the gate again. And then - silence. Apparently, Thalia and the man were once again behind the walls of the fortress.

"Soon the first explosives go off and she is still in there! You should not have stopped me, Geralt!"

"Calm down!" Geralt pulled Eskel back into the cover of the bush. "The guards are still standing at the gate and could see you. That won't exactly improve Thalia's situation."

Eskel snorted. "Let's hope Thalia had a chance to put the explosive device on the gate as well." He turned briefly to Geralt. "Who was that guy? He seemed to know her. If he lays a finger on her ... As
soon as we get in, I'll look after her. You make your way to the dungeon and free Lambert, but for me Thalia has priority." Eskel's gaze was again fixed in the fog. "I'll get her out of this, Geralt. And if anything should happen to her, even their Eternal Fire can not help these bastards anymore ..."

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Alric Efferen gripped her arm tightly and Thalia nearly stumbled as she had to keep up with his fast pace. He dragged her along with him, through the corridor she had walked a few minutes ago in the opposite direction.

"Alric, let's talk about it reasonably. I said it was just a matter of thwarting your success in the interrogation." She got a little out of breath - partly because she had to do almost two for each of his steps because of her shorter legs, partly because fear suffocated her. It would not take long and the first explosives would detonate. Everything was about to go awry.

"Does it surprise you that I begrudge your success, Alric? You are constantly trying to make me look bad to others. I do not even know why. But if you succeed and I didn't manage ..."

Alric stopped abruptly, the grip on her upper arm tightening again. His narrowed eyes looked hatefully into hers. "How stupid do you think I am, Thalia? You're in league with Yonka. Do you think I didn't see you talking to each other again and again? You are just like him: blinded by your noble disposition. You think alchemy is a form of art, a tool to heal. I see the power in it. I see the weapon that allows us to make the decisive blow against this breed. The blow that can save the lives of hundreds, perhaps thousands, of people who otherwise fall prey to those pointed-eared freaks. But you on your noble, high horse are of course too squeamish to admit that. I would not be surprised if Laikos also participated in this conspiracy. But I'll find out, now that I put a stop to your game."

When he continued his way, his strong grip almost tore her from her feet. Thalia tried to estimate the time that had passed since the first explosives were armed. It could not be long now ... Maybe she could use the confusion then to break free and escape. Eskel and Geralt would take this route in a few minutes to get to Lambert and Keira. If she could hide somewhere until then ...

He pulled her along, down the stairs that led to the dungeon. The two guards outside the barred gate frowned at their return. But Alric's angry expression prevented them from asking. "Open the gate! This woman is a traitor and I intend to tell Professor Basilius in detail about her crimes in the morning." As one of the guards opened the lock, Alric turned to Thalia. "And I hope for her that she will be talkative. Just like the sorceress." He had lowered his voice threateningly. As he pulled her through the gate into the dungeon, he whispered to one of the guards, "Whatever you hear ... just stay on your post."

When he dragged her to the part of the room where Lambert and Keira were still tied, he pushed her roughly to the ground.

"What else did you manipulate? Was it you all the time? Didn't we get any useful results because of you? Speak, Thalia!"

The anger that he had just mastered to control now broke out of him. "All the time we wasted. The loss of our reputation with the king. You have all this to answer for!"

Thalia straightened up again, trying to get to her feet. Alric lunged out with his leg and kicked her in the stomach. Pain, hot as fire, exploded in her body. Panting, she collapsed, gasping for air. Thalia felt dizzy with pain. She felt the cold, damp stone of the ground on her cheek.

"You lousy bastard!" Lambert, who was still handcuffed to the wall, braced himself against the
shackles. Despite her anguish, Thalia realized that the potion seemed to be working on him. Lambert seemed much livelier and more alert than he had minutes ago. But he still did not come up against the shackles.

Keira appraised Efferen with glances that would have frozen his blood in his veins - if the sorceress had not been deprived of her power.

Thalia had hoped to appease Alric with words. But now he seemed blind with anger. He leaned down to her, grabbed her tunic and dragged her to her feet. Roughly he pushed her against the wall. "You mendacious, sneaky wench! I'll get the truth out of you."

At that moment, the first bomb detonated in the back of the building - one of those Laikos had previously placed. The explosion shook the walls around them, dust trickled out of the wooden ceiling.

Efferen was momentarily frozen. He looked up at the ceiling, then at the gate. Then he turned to Thalia. His face twisted with anger into a grimace. "You! You are behind this whole charade! What are you going to do? Do you want to free your accomplice?" He reached back to her, pressing her against the wall and putting his hands around her neck. Thalia tried to push him away, but he was just too strong. Her fingernails clawed into his cheeks, she managed to tear a long scratch from the left ear to the corner of his mouth. Alric cried out in pain for a moment, letting go of her neck - but only to give her a resounding slap in the face. Her head hurled painfully against the wall. Already his hands wrapped around her neck again, he began to choke her. "You're going to rot here, you whore - just like Yonka! The guards will definitely have their fun with you. Who knows, maybe you will even enjoy it? How long has your fiancé been dead? Five years? You must be completely dry. But do not worry, the guards won't bother."

Thalia could not breathe. Panic seized her. Her vision darkened, fainting threatening to overwhelm her.

As if in the distance, she heard Lambert shout something, but the words did not reach her.

More and more powerless, she tried to free Efferen's hands from her neck, pushing him away. Her fingers clawed at his shoulder, wandering down his waistcoat, trying desperately to fend him off. She felt something hard and cool as her hand slid down his waistcoat. Her fingers closed around a vial he'd stashed in his pocket.

With all her remaining strength, she slashed the glass jar against his right cheekbone. The glass splintered. But the splinters that pierced Efferen's skin were not the reason for the sharp scream he uttered. He streaked away from Thalia, his hands trying to protect his face, but it was too late. The acid with which he had just dealt with Keira and Lambert burned the right half of his face. Thalia heard a faint hiss as the substance ate into his skin. The sound, however, was drowned out by Alric's screams echoing off the walls.

A splash of acid had also hit Thalia's palm. It burned like fire, only with difficulty Thalia could suppress an outcry. She rushed to the bucket that stood in the corner of the dungeon and plunged her left hand into the water. The pain subsided instantly, stunned by the chill.

One of the two guards now entered - contrary to Efferen's previous order - the dungeon, tried to conceive the situation and then went down next to Alric on the floor who was still screaming.

It could not be long before the gas can would explode in the corridor. To her, the time with Efferen's attack had seemed like an eternity - in fact, only seconds had passed. Lambert would be protected from the stupefying effect of the gas by the potion, but she and Keira would lose consciousness.
within seconds. Of course she didn't take the time to get herself a breathing mask. So she had to improvise. She pulled her hand out of the water, ignoring the pain that was instantly resurfacing, and pulled off the vest she wore over her tunic. The second attempt to tear it in two pieces along the back seam was successful. She dipped the two panels in the water and soaked them completely.

Alric's screams had turned into a whimper now. As big as her fear of him had been, she felt pity now. The guard still leaned over him, trying to release Alric's hands from his face to assess the injury. He took no notice of Thalia.

She hurried to Keira and tied the strip of wet fabric to her face. It wouldn't stop the gas for long, but it might be enough to gain time.

Right as she tied her own cloth behind her head, the gas can detonated in the hallway. The guard jumped up and hurried to his comrade, who was still standing on his post. But before he reached the grid, gas was already pouring into the dungeon. Thalia tried to breathe flat and ducked to the floor. The guard coughed, grabbed his throat and began to stumble.

From a distance, Thalia heard loud shouts. The next detonation followed, this time the shock was even more noticeable.

"Get the keys, Thalia!" Lambert did not seem to have any breathing problems - whereas she herself clearly felt the scratching of the gas in her throat, despite the improvised filter.

The guard had now gone groaning to his knees and collapsed a few yards from Thalia. She crawled over to him and groped for the key. The gas burned in her eyes, which started to water. There was the keychain, fastened to the guard's belt! Thalia tore it off and crawled to Lambert. With trembling fingers, she tried one key after the other until finally the match was found and the right of the two handcuffs jumped up. Lambert immediately took the key from her hand and unlocked the remaining shackles.

Alric, lying crumpled on the ground, had lost consciousness by now - whether due to pain or by the gas. It was probably a blessing for him. The acid had already etched so far into his skin that Thalia could see the white glimmer of his cheekbone. And the substance still caused further damage. Thalia was grateful that the gas was now covering the stench of the decomposing tissue. But the sight made her feel a wave of nausea. She crawled over to the bucket of water and slowly poured its contents over Alric's head to rinse off the rest of the acid.

Lambert was already unfettering Keira. The sorceress glanced at her battered wrists, where the dimeritium shackles had scoured her skin.

Thalia felt the gas clouding her senses more and more. She barely registered that Lambert wrapped his arm around her torso and supported her and Keira at the same time. The sorceress, too, gave in to her knees - in addition to the gas, of course, the day-long influence of the dimeritium also had its effect on her.

In the corridor Thalia noticed the motionless body of the second guard, leaning against the wall. Lambert dropped Thalia and Keira on the ground and searched the man for weapons. But a small dagger was all that the watchman carried with him. Apparently nobody had expected bigger problems down here in the dungeon. Lambert swore, but put the dagger in his belt and pulled the two women back to their feet.

"Hey, don't fall asleep now, Professor! Where do we have to go?"
Thalia tried to think clearly. A new wave of nausea rose in her. "Straight ... straight ahead, up the stairs. Then left. Eskel and Geralt ... they are coming."

They heard another detonation. This time from the direction in which they slowly dragged themselves. The main gate had just been blown out of its hinges.

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When the heavy gate hit the stone floor, Eskel and Geralt had already jumped out of the fog's cover with drawn swords and were running across the bridge toward the now open entrance portal. The gatekeepers, who had been alerted by the explosions, had turned away from the bridge and stood in the archway, arms raised. Apparently, they expected to be facing fleeing prisoners from the inside. Too late they realized that their opponents were approaching them from the bridge. Screams and shouts from inside the prison had caught their attention. When they noticed the approaching witchers, it was already too late for them.

Since the first explosives detonated in prison, Eskel's inner agitation had increased even further. Knowing that Thalia was in immediate danger and unable to do anything but wait ... Now, as he finally intervened, the knot broke into Eskel's chest.

Already in the corridor that led them from the entrance to the prisoners´ quarters, they met other guards.

With every opponent standing in the way of his sword, Eskel felt his tension drop more and more. His senses were sharpened to the utmost, his muscles performing the pranks powerfully and accurately.

So far they had not encountered any knights or witch hunters. But both witchers realized that this would not last for much longer. Although the explosives should have made some of the access corridors impassable, their opponents would certainly leave their quarters by other means, which were probably in the back of the fortress.

Unable to guess where to look for Thalia, Eskel, along with Geralt, headed for the dungeon Thalia had previously described and recorded.

The corridor in front of them was flooded with smoke and gas. The witchers were not affected by neither one or the other, Eskel felt only a raspy feeling in his throat. Here they came across the first Knights of the Order - but they lay unconscious on the ground. Eskel and Geralt climbed over the motionless bodies.

From a passage to their right, two persons suddenly appeared, their faces hidden behind beak-shaped breathing masks. The two witchers were already ready to strike them down when one of the two men raised his arms. "Wait, wait! It's us!"

The man briefly pulled up the mask so the witchers could glimpse his face before putting the respirator back in place.

"Laikos!" Geralt had lowered his sword like Eskel when he recognized the scientist. He turned to the second man. "Then you must be ..."

"Marik Yonka," the addressee introduced himself, his voice muffled by the mask. He stood in a slightly bent position, leaning against the wall with one hand. Apparently he was not in good health.

"Good that you live," Eskel greeted the two. "Laikos, Thalia is still here. She was already on the way out when she was detained by someone ..."
"Efferen!" Despite the mask, Laikos' anger could be heard from his voice. "Damn it! He was already here when we entered the prison and asked questions about the sorceress. Thalia wanted to go to her and soothe him before placing the explosives."

"So it's likely he could have gone back to the dungeon with her?"

"That would be my guess."

Eskel nodded to Geralt. "Then on to the dungeon. With a bit of luck, you should be able to do it alone, Laikos. We cleaned up on the way to the entrance."

The person in question looked at Yonka for a moment, then turned to the witchers, who already turned off at the next junction into the left corridor. "We'll come with you!"

"Not a good idea!" Geralt called to the two professors over his shoulder. "Things will get...uncomfortable."

"We're either in this together...", replied Laikos, who had already caught up with the witchers together with Yonka. "... or not at all."

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The first encounter with knights who had not succumbed to the narcotic gas was already taking place behind the next bend in the corridor. Four men in full armor stepped in their path. As the corridor was too narrow for swarming, Geralt and Eskel were able to hit the opponents one by one. None of the men could measure in skill, strength, and responsiveness with the witchers. Laikos and Yonka reasonably stayed in the background, keeping their distance from the fighting, occasionally glancing into the corridor behind them. But so far, no knights from the Order of the Eternal Fire had been lured by the battle sounds.

The witchers climbed over the bodies of the fallen and continued on their way, the two professors stumbled behind them.

Eskel's sharp hearing registered a noise behind the next turn. But before he could warn the others about it, the sound was gone. Eskel quietly approached the crossway, keeping close to the wall. Then he ventured to peer into the adjoining corridor - and at the last moment managed to dodge a dagger, which was guided with a precise swing against his throat.

"Eskel, you idiot!" Lambert instantly dropped the dagger. "I almost killed you!"

Eskel let out a relieved sigh. "Wouldn't have been much to it. Still nice to see you, Lambert."

Then his eyes fell on the two women, who were behind Lambert in the corridor. One of them gave a relieved cry at the sight of him, trying to reach him more stumbling than walking. With three long strides he was with her and embraced Thalia in his arms. "I'm so glad you're alright," he mumbled into her hair. Then he paused, pulling away from her for a moment. "You are alright, aren't you?" His worried look wandered over her body in search of injury.

"I am. I've just gotten some of the gas, that's all." She glanced over at the two professors. "Are you...?" Yonka took down the mask, smiled at Thalia. The already slender man looked haggard now, dark shadows under his eyes and a bruise on his cheek testified to the martyrdom he had been exposed to in recent days. Thalia nevertheless seemed more than relieved to see him alive again. "Vincent found you. I cannot tell you how happy I am that you are alive. We were afraid of the worst."
"I'm glad I'm not in this cell anymore. I did not think I would see Vincent and you again, to be honest."

Laikos had also removed his breathing mask, as the gas had already evaporated from the corridors. He put a hand on Yonka's shoulder. "We'll get you out of here, Marik."

Geralt nodded briefly to the sorceress, who got to them with measured step and a supporting hand on the wall.

"Keira. Good to see you again. Then let's get out of here." He pulled the second sword out of the holder on his back and handed it to Lambert. "Here. Certainly not as good as your own, but I couldn't find anything better in a hurry."

Lambert frowned at the sword. "For whom was this made? A dude with harem pants and a feather hat?" The ornated handle and crossguard did not seem to suit the witcher's taste. He weighed the sword in his hand, carrying out a trial stroke. "Will have to do. Better than this toothpick here." He threw the dagger he had stolen from the guard carelessly to the ground.

They ran back the way the witchers had taken earlier - Eskel supported Thalia, Lambert had his arm wrapped around Keira. Geralt formed the vanguard, the two professors the rearguard.

"Right up front we're dealing with some guards ..." warned Geralt. Already six, then seven knights poured into the corridor. The women and scientists stayed in the background as the three witchers side by side knocked the first opponents down. But more and more men crowded into the corridor, the witchers drove back gradually. Further back, they also saw some witch hunters who wanted to help their comrades in spirit.

It was clear to Eskel that their location was no longer a secret anymore - apparently all the knights and prison guards who had been around nearby had become aware of them through the battle noise. He pulled one of the grenades from his pocket, activated it and threw it over the heads of the knights. The explosive device landed between the men, who did not have enough time to react. The witchers ducked and fractions of a second later, the detonation tore a large part of their opponents into the realm of eternal fire.

The remaining ones, who were still on their feet, were quickly turned off.

But already they heard more reinforcement, which was loud calling on the way to the scene. To go further in that direction, with the two weakend women and the professors in tow, would have been suicide.

"Shit, it's too many of them!" Lambert scowled in the direction from which they heard the sounds.

"There was a side corridor I didn't know of ... Damn." Thalia obviously blamed herself for the current situation.

"We have to find another escape route," Geralt sought, pragmatically as ever, for an alternative. "Even if we could make it over the next intersection, the risk is too big for them to go after us from both directions." He turned to Thalia and the two professors. "There is really only one exit?"

"Yes, unfortunately," Thalia replied defiantly.


"You were never in the morgue, right? I spent a lot of time there with the autopsies. There is a kind
of slide over which the corpses are disposed of. The bodies fall from the chute onto a barge that carries them down the Pontar. Of course the boat will not be there now, but we could swim ..."

"Where is the morgue?" Geralt already took a liking to the idea.

"Not far from here. We just have to go back one corridor and then turn left."

Eskel had already stepped back to Thalia to support her. "Let's go."

On the way, they heard the knights behind them - the distance between them was getting smaller and smaller. Although the women were recovering slowly and they ran faster now, they were not fast enough. Soon their pursuers would catch up with them.

Yonka had been right: they reached the morgue after a few minutes.

The room was small and filled with the sweet smell of decay. There were hidden bodies, covered with cloths, apparently waiting for their disposal.

Eskel and Geralt put away their swords and barricaded the door from inside with the help of the autopsy table. With luck, their pursuers wouldn't realize that they had taken refuge here and would pay no attention to this room.

Yonka went to the back wall and pushed aside a wooden paneling. A slope that led into the darkness like a tunnel appeared. Eskel stuck his head in the opening, trying to gauge how long the slide was. But no light fell from below into the shaft - they would have to jump into the unknown. He could hear a splash softly.

He turned to Yonka. "Are you sure this shaft leads directly into the river? Don't want us to land on rocks ..."

"I was there once when they were carrying corpses down there. They fell directly from the slide onto the boat - at least that's what I was told. Of course I could not see it ..."

Eskel sighed and turned to Thalia. "Looks like that's our best chance. Are you ready?"

"I have to be," she replied tentatively. "Eskel, I'm a little embarrassed, but ... I can not swim too well ...
"

Eskel raised his eyebrows in surprise. "You're from Kovir, from the coast. Have you never swum in the sea?"

Thalia looked embarrassed. "Well ... that's a longer story. I'll tell you later. I'll try my best but if the drift is too strong ..."

"I take care of you, don't worry."

Geralt approached the opening. "I'm going first. Eskel, you are more sturdily built than I am - no offense, but if the shaft is too narrow and you get stuck, then we’re lost. And besides ... if the shaft does not end in the Pontar and I hit a rock, you are warned at least."

He swung himself through the opening, his legs already on the slide. "See you down there. Hopefully." He pushed himself down and disappeared in the shaft.

Eskel stuck his head back into the opening, trying to make out the sound, length and angle of the slide. Seconds later he heard a good splash from below. Evidently Geralt had really landed in the
water.

Geralt's call came already up from below. "All's well. Follow me. The shaft is wide enough."

"You heard him. Let's go." Eskel reached for Thalia's hand. When she flinched, he glanced uncertainly until she showed him the etched spot on her hand. He frowned in concern. "What …"

"Also a long story." Thalia interrupted. "By the way, did I tell you that I'm also afraid of heights?" He saw clearly her fear-widened pupils, her breathing had accelerated.

Eskel helped her climb into the opening, gave her a quick kiss. "Don't worry, my heart. We'll make it."

Loud yelling from the corridor outside the morgue echoed in. Someone tried to open the door. Not for long, and their pursuers would invade the chamber. High time to run.

"Eskel ..."

Gently, he gave her a small push and she disappeared, suppressing a scream in the shaft. When he heard that she had reached the bottom, he first sent Laikos and Yonka onto the slide, then Keira followed. As they fled one after the other, the throbbing of the door to the morgue became more violent. Apparently, the Knights of the Order rammed their shoulders against it to blow open the door. When only he and Lambert were in the chamber, Eskel pushed his brother to the opening. "You first, Lambert."

The younger man hesitated for a moment, as if he had to fight himself to jump into the dark, narrow shaft. Then Lambert pulled himself together and disappeared from Eskel's view. Eskel waited for a moment before hearing the sound of Lambert's impact in the water, then jumped into the opening as well. The slide was steeper than expected – then again, why wouldn't it be? Corpses would not complain about a rapid descent and since the bodies should be disposed of anyway, their integrity was irrelevant.

As he broke the surface of the water and the coolness suddenly engulfed him, he felt the cold shock paralyzing his body. But as a witcher he was able to overcome this reaction much faster than a normal person. He plunged several feet into the water, swiftly swam up, and took a deep breath when his head was above the water again. Then he looked for Thalia. She was already stuck to Geralt, who apparently swam effortlessly against the drift. Everyone else also seemed to have arrived safely in the water.

Eskel swam over to them, handed Thalia his arm. The mist that Yennefer had created now swelled even closer to the water surface, making orientation impossible. From a distance he saw a small, yellowish light floating on them - not unlike a firefly. But Eskel recognized the magical glow - apparently the Dimeritium's radiation was not strong enough here, so Yennefer could send them a search light.

Now they knew in which direction to swim to get to the shore.

Thalia had not understated when she confessed that she was not the best swimmer. Without Eskel's help, she would have been mercilessly driven away by the drift. Yonka had apparently similar problems, but was supported by Laikos, who evidently was an excellent swimmer, and had his colleague safely under control, pulling him with him.

When the first crossbow bolts hit the water around them, it was clear that their escape route had not gone unnoticed. But the dense fog prevented not only that they could see their opponents themselves
- it also ensured that the shooters had to fire without any specific objectives at random. Nonetheless, some of the bolts came worryingly close. Apparently they were just at the level of the bridge from which the crossbowmen were trying to target them.

Out of the corner of his eye, Eskel noticed a bright blast approaching from the right side through the fog at high speed, accompanied by a whistling sound. Like a meteor, the magic bullet hit the bridge, sweeping it in the opposite direction of their escape. The debris crashed at a safe distance into the Pontar.

It was impossible for the guards, knights or witch hunters to follow them as soon as they reached the shore. Eskel decided to thank Yennefer for her support as soon as they were safe.

As before, single bolts went down into the water - on the remaining piece of the bridge, apparently still some crossbowmen tried to hit them. But the closer they got to the now visible shore, the less they had to worry about.

Eskel could see how Geralt and Lambert helped Keira ashore, who was at the end of her tether. The fog had turned into a light haze. He saw Yennefer and Shani running towards the arrivals. Laikos lend Yonka a hand as he pulled himself out of the water.

Occasionally the hissing of the bolts fired at them was still audible, but the gunner's sight was still obstructed by the fog.

Only a few more strokes, then he and Thalia would have finally arrived on the shore. Eskel felt Thalia flinch at his side - maybe she had a cramp in her leg. He tightened his grip on her body and pulled her along. Her powers had apparently left her. She was heavy in his arm, her swimming movements nearly powerless.

"Come on, Thalia. We're almost there!"

With one last vigorous stroke, Eskel brought them both ashore, grabbed one of the plants on the bank, and pulled himself and Thalia out of the water.

She stumbled beside him. Only his arm around her body prevented her from sinking to the ground.

"Thalia?" Eskel began to suspect that something was completely wrong. Gently, he let Thalia slide to the ground, putting a hand on her back. Her face was pale, her eyes half closed, looking into the distance. She coughed, her whole body trembling.

"Thalia!" The realization hit Eskel like a blow, but his mind refused to accept what he saw. Only when he pulled his hand out from under her body did he understand what had happened.

His palm was red with Thalia's blood.

Chapter End Notes

Hello readers,
I’m sorry for the cliffhanger … no, not really … ;-) This chapter got rather long with more than 6,000 words. Sorry for that, but I didn´t want to divide what happened in prison into two more chapters. I hope that it has not become too lengthy.
Praises for my wonderful beta-reader OpheliaTheMoth, who helped so much to improve this translation.

Yours,

the Lady
Thalia was heavy in his arms. She took a faltering breath, was immediately shaken by a cough. A thin trickle of blood flowed out of the corner of her mouth – a strong contrast to her pale skin in the moonlight. Her hair bun had loosened and the wet strands framed her face. She was shaking. Her blurry gaze searched for Eskel’s eyes.

The last few seconds seemed unreal, his mind refused to accept what had happened. He felt the crossbow bolt between his fingers, still in Thalia's back.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Shani and Yennefer hurrying towards them. Shani dropped to her knees next to her friend, lifted her eyelid and then felt her pulse on her neck. Carefully, she pushed Eskel's arm, holding Thalia up a little, to get a glimpse of the wound in Thalia's back. Her eyes widened briefly as she examined the injury.

The others, meanwhile, had noticed as well. When Eskel glanced up, he saw that Geralt, Lambert and Keira were looking over to them in dismay.

Laikos had dropped to his knees, stunned, Yonka's hand resting on his shoulder.

Shani’s expression had darkened. "The bolt broke through the scapula and apparently entered the lungs. She has already lost a lot of blood." Shani thought for a moment. "If we remove the bolt, the bleeding may increase. But if it stays where it is, she could suffocate."

The doctor looked at Yennefer. "We are in a hurry. Can you stop the bleeding with your abilities while I remove the bolt?"

Yennefer’s lips formed a thin line. "I can do that. But we have to get out of here quickly. I can get us all away from here by portal - to Kovir, where a colleague of mine can help us with Thalia’s treatment. Years ago, I placed an anchor next to her house so we can make it to her with just one single jump. But if I exhaust my powers too much, I can not stabilize the portal until we all have passed through. Keira? Can you support us?"

Keira took a step closer. "My magic is returning slowly, but I'll do what I can. I'll be assuaging her pain while you take care of the bleeding--"

Yennefer nodded briefly, apparently already thinking of choosing the most appropriate spell.

"Yen ..." Geralt sounded worried as he stepped behind the sorceress. "I know, Geralt. I'll be careful to not exhaust myself. Having gone through that experience once is enough for me."

Shani let out a deep sigh. "All right, we'll try to stabilize her and then bring her to Kovir." From her bag, she pulled clean bandages and a bottle, with the contents of which she drenched one of the strips of cloth. The fume of alcohol stung in Eskel’s eyes.

With a pair of scissors Shani enlarged the crack in Thalia's tunic around the bolt.

Eskel still held her in his arms, her head resting on his shoulder. He quietly whispered to her reassuring words while the other women were preparing the procedure. Thalia flinched and gasped as Shani touched the bolt.
The sorceresses dropped to their knees next to Thalia, each with one hand on her back. Yennefer and Keira began to intone different spells. A milk-white glimmer flowed into Thalia's body, emanating from Yennefer's fingers, while Keira's hands radiated a crimson glow.

Eskel pressed Thalia tightly against his chest. "It's alright, dear heart. You'll breath easier in a moment."

Keira's magic was already showing some effect, Thalia's trembling faded and her eyes cleared. Shani leaned over to Thalia's face. "Here, Thalia. I'll take the bolt out, but it will hurt." She slipped a strip of leather between Thalia's lips. "Bite on this." Thalia nodded weakly and pressed her teeth into the hard leather.

A pained moan escaped her as Shani removed the bolt. Eskel would have given anything to be in her place and to endure the pain for her.

The white glow of Yennefer's magic gained in intensity as she increased the spell to stop the flow of blood, which soaked Thalia's tunic more and more. Between the eyebrows of the sorceress, a steep crease had formed from concentration. Then finally, after many too long seconds, she seemed satisfied and let Shani know she could continue her treatment. Shani put on a pressure bandage, put the fabric around Thalia's body and fixed it. She took Eskel's hand, which lay on Thalia's back, and laid it on the wound. "Press lightly, that should prevent the bleeding from starting again."

The pain that had convulsed Thalia's body seemed to be easing. She breathed a little easier now. The sorceresses withdrew their hands - Keira seemed already at the end of her strength. Too much had the dimeritium, to which she had been constantly exposed in recent days, robbed her of her energy and magic.

Yennefer sighed and got up, turning to Geralt and nodding to him. "Let's get out of here."

"The sooner the better." Geralt and Lambert had kept watch in the last minutes. In the dense fog that covered the shore of the Pontar, they couldn't see any persuer. Since the bridge that connected the prison island with the rest of the city was destroyed, they weren't expecting enemies from this direction so soon. But the city guard was certainly already on their way to them. At the latest, after the magical projectile had smashed the bridge, every inhabitant of Oxenfurt was supposed to be woken up and be on their feet.

Eskel rose with Thalia in his arms. She wasn't breathing as painfully as before, but her skin was still terribly pale. Eskel tried in vain to convince himself that it was not the blood loss, but only the moonlight.

The familiar sound of an opening portal penetrated into Eskel's mind, but his gaze rested on Thalia's face. Her eyes, which she had closed exhausted, opened slightly. She was breathing shallowly, but he could still clearly hear her whisper.

"Eskel ... I ...

"Shh ... save your strength. We bring you to Kovir. We'll be safe there and the sorceresses and Shani will heal you. Everything will be fine."

"Eskel ... I ... love you." Her eyes closed, he felt her body slacken.

"Thalia!" Eskel felt icy fear forming a knot in his chest that tightened more and more.

Shani felt Thalia's pulse. "It's alright, Eskel. She's just unconscious."
"The portal is stable, you can go through!" Yennefer's request got through to Eskel’s mind and he entered the pulsating glow with Thalia in his arms. He heard Yennefer's voice for a moment. "I hope Triss isn't too surprised when we suddenly appear in her yard …"

* * *

The next few minutes Eskel perceived as through a veil. He found himself, with Thalia in his arms, in the courtyard of a small but well-kept townhouse. Triss Merigold, dressed only in a thin nightgown, ran to meet them and probed Thalia's condition while Shani next to him told the sorceress what had happened and what injuries Thalia had sustained.

He carried Thalia upstairs and put her unconscious body on the bed in the guest room. When the sorceresses discussed the best treatment, he held Thalia's hand. As if from afar, he heard Yennefer, frustrated, realize that her magical powers were exhausted. And he noticed how Shani's expression darkened as she released the makeshift bandage and a stream of blood spilled over her hands. As Triss immediately began to intone a spell, he felt Geralt's hand on his arm. He let his brother lead him out of the room. Together they settled on a bench in the hallway.

Eskel took a deep breath, slowly he awoke from his trance-like state.

"She's in the best hands, Eskel. Trust them." Geralt's voice was calm and confident. If only he could share some of his calm demeanor with Eskel ...

"So much blood, Geralt. She lost so much blood." Eskel hid his face in his hands. "I didn't even notice it when she got hit. How ... how could it come so far? Why didn’t I protect her better?"

He dropped his hands and turned his eyes away. "If she doesn't survive ..."

"She will survive, Eskel," Geralt interrupted.

"If not, it's my fault. I wish I had never met her ... she would be safe in her university, with her books and her lab. None of this would have happened to her and she would live a happy, fulfilling life. Instead, she's struggling against death."

"Don’t say that, Eskel. You can't know what would have been. Maybe she would have ended up in jail just like this Yonka."

Eskel shook his head slightly. "It's like a curse, Geralt. To any woman who means anything to me, I bring disaster. First, Isadora - back when I didn't have those scars. She wanted to rush to my aid in a fight against a Katakán - and was torn to pieces in front of my eyes. Then Deirdre, my child of surprise. I should have been there for her - instead I let her down and killed her. And now Thalia ..."

"Eskel! You’re only torturing yourself. Stop it!"

"Do you know what her last words were to me? She said she loves me. For over sixty years, I haven't heard those words. And I did not even get to tell her that I …" Eskel broke off and buried his face again with his head bowed in his hands.

"She knows, Eskel."

Footsteps on the stairs were announcing one of the other men. Vincent Laikos approached the two witchers, a questioning look on his face. "How is Thalia?", he asked hesitantly.

"The bleeding started again," explained Geralt. "The sorceresses and Shani take care of her. We can only wait and hope for the best."
Laikos nodded slowly, swallowed. "I wish I had persuaded her to let me go alone. If only I had ..."

"Blaming yourself doesn't help anyone," Geralt interrupted. "Sit down."

Laikos sat down beside Eskel on the bench. Both men stared at the wall, lost in their thoughts as the minutes passed.

After what seemed like an eternity, Keira opened the door to the guest room. Her expression did not promise any good news.

"Triss and Shani did everything they could, but ..." Eskel jumped up immediately and pushed past Keira into the room. "She's alive, Eskel. But ... she has lost a lot of blood and her lung is seriously injured. She's not responding well to any of Triss' spells. And Shani cannot do anything more without her instruments ..."

Beside the bed, Eskel fell to his knees, reaching for Thalia's hand. Her fingers were cool on his skin. Her tunic lay on the floor, along with the rest of her clothes. The fabric was soaked in blood, as well as numerous towels, which lay on the floorboards. The smell of fresh blood filled the air.

Thalia's pale face seemed waxy in the glow of the fire burning in the fireplace of the room. Her now-dried hair lay open like a fan over the pillow. Next to it lay a yellow-orange feather - the griffin feather he had given her three days ago.

Shani had noticed Eskel's look. "She wore the feather as a charm, in her undergarment."

Eskel swallowed. He smoothly brushed aside a strand of Thalia's hair that lay on her cheek. The warm flickering of the flames conjured reddish golden reflections into her hair again. A bitter smile stole on Eskel's lips. "It looks just as pretty as it did when we sat together by the fire. When she got me to teach her Aard and Igni. She tried again and again until it finally worked. When she made the first spark, she smiled so happily at me. If I could see her smile like that again ..."

Geralt put his hand on Eskel's shoulder.

Laikos remained in the doorway, his eyes fixed on Thalia.

The sorceresses stood together in one corner of the room. For a moment, when attending Eskel's painful memory, Triss looked away sympathetically. But when she understood the meaning of his words, she jerked her head up. "Thalia can cast signs?"

Eskel nodded, lost in thoughts. "Yes, but only very weak. She is slightly magically gifted. Not enough to become a sorceress."

Triss looked at Yennefer and Keira, searching their faces for confirmation of her realization. As Yennefer's eyes widened and Keira drew in a sharp breath, Triss walked quickly to the bed and searched the bag with amulets and healing stones on the floor. "Eskel, why didn´t you tell us earlier? If she is magically gifted, then ..."

"A catalyst stone!" Yennefer rushed at Triss' side as she pulled out a shiny, faceted gem in the firelight.

Keira joined Eskel and Geralt and gently pushed them both towards the door. "Gentlemen, if I may refer you to the waiting area again, please."

Eskel frowned in confusion. "What are you going to do?"

"Since Thalia is magically gifted, we can put a so-called catalyst stone in her wound. This strengthens the effect of magic and amulets and directs them directly into the body. If all goes well,
then it should be no longer a problem to stop the bleeding and to cure the lungs. So have some patience."

Eskel turned back to the bed. "I want to stay with her." He saw that Yennefer was already placing the stone deep in the wound while Triss was casting a spell. Thalia lay on her side, her skin still almost as pale as the sheets. The fear and grief that had kept Eskel firmly clenched until recently was replaced by upcoming hope. He pushed past Keira and settled down beside the bed again.

Triss now put various amulets on Thalia's body, which gradually radiated an amplifying glow. As the previously injured lung healed, Eskel heard Thalia inhale deeply despite her unconsciousness. Then Triss closed the wound with a spell that rejoined the shredded muscles and bones of the scapula. Triss's forehead was wrinkled with exertion, her eyes were closed. With a firm voice, she enacted one spell after the other. When the skin on Thalia's back had closed above the wound, Triss sank down exhausted on the edge of the bed.

Yennefer put a hand on her shoulder. "That was impressive, Triss."

"Thanks." The red-haired sorceress looked up at Eskel. "I think she made it, Eskel. She will sleep for a while while the amulets correspond to the stone. It's best to rest now too."

"You should follow this advice first, Triss." Yennefer pulled Triss to her feet and propped her up on her way to her bedroom.

Shani felt Thalia's pulse and seemed satisfied. "As much progress as we have made in medicine, but seeing healing spells in their effects still fills me with awe." She turned to the others in the room. "I suggest we give Thalia some rest now."

Together with Keira, Geralt and Laikos, who seemed visibly relieved, Shani left the room.

Suddenly Eskel was alone with Thalia. The tension of the last hours fell off of him and he felt greatly fatigued. All of a sudden, he also felt the side effects of the potions that had used up his last power reserves. And he became aware of his still wet clothes.

After getting rid of them, he lay down next to Thalia in the bed and pulled the big blanket over their bodies. Her skin was cool against his as he cautiously moved closer to her to warm her. Listening to her calm breath, he fell asleep beside her.

He was awakened by a gentle touch on his cheek. When he opened his eyes, sunlight was already shining into the room.

Thalia lay next to him, her hand brushing lightly through his hair. She smiled at him. "Did we make it, Eskel?"

Chapter End Notes

Yes, finally no cliffhanger ... ;-)  
Just three more chapters left and this story will be told. I'm a bit sad for reaching the end so soon but on the other hand I'm looking forward on working on my next story.  
I'm more than happy if you leave a comment. :-)  

Beta-read by the wonderful OpheliaTheMoth.
With little effort, Thalia closed the last hook of her bodice. Even though the injury had almost completely healed over the past week, her left shoulder was still somewhat stiff, and with some movements, a slight pain passed through her arm to the fingertips. The catalyst stone remaining in her body continued to enhance the effect of the healing amulet Triss had given her. The idea of hosting the stone inside her body for the rest of her life caused a slight discomfort in Thalia - but the magic-enhancing effect of the stone could prove useful later on. Once her recovery was complete, she would experiment a bit with signs and maybe even other spells - if one of the magically gifted ladies decided to teach her something. She'd never become a true sorceress, but it might be enough for small, everyday applications.

The green dress was one of the few pieces of clothing in her travel bag that was not only practical but also somewhat pretty. Triss had offered her to use her wardrobe. But although Thalia had become much slimmer since her expedition with Eskel, her body still had more curves than the sorceress's slender figure. That's why she needed the wardrobe she had packed for her trip to Toussaint. Before leaving for Corvo Bianco, Yennefer had already told her, in a slightly derogatory tone, that Thalia's style of dressing unpretentious wouldn't be as welcome in the Duchy. As soon as they got there, she would probably have to change her clothes according to local customs, to not attract attention in Beauclair.

The neckline of the dress was fortunately able to cover the scar, which was clearly visible below Thalia's collarbone. The bolt of the crossbow not only had punched her shoulder blade with force, but had completely pierced her body. Thalia shuddered at the thought of the pain and the fear she had felt before the unconsciousness had graciously embraced her.

The healing amulet lay like a piece of jewelry on a narrow chain on her chest. She had put her hair in a messy bun in her usual way. After a last glance in the mirror, she put on her short boots and left the guest room she had occupied with Eskel since their arrival at Triss's house.

On the way to the basement, she heard Keira and Lambert talking in the kitchen, obviously arguing over something. Although Lambert often displayed his usual cynical manner and was not stingy with taunts in Keira's direction, he seemed to be far more satisfied than Thalia had ever known him in Kaer Morhen. His injuries were healed even more quickly after treatment by the sorceresses and Shani than her own. But the time in the dungeon didn't seem to have passed him by without leaving a mark. During the evenings he had been unusually silent, and Thalia had often seen him looking thoughtfully, his gaze absentmindedly into the flames of the fireplace.

Thalia went on to the back door of the building, leaving Lambert and Keira to their apparently not quite serious dispute. In the courtyard, she inhaled the warm spring air deep into her lungs - grateful that she could breathe again without pain and enjoy the scent of flowering bushes.

Vincent Laikos and Marik Yonka talked with Triss, the packed duffel bags at their feet on the gravel path. Eskel was sitting on a bench on the other side of the yard, greasing one of his blades.

Thalia nodded in greeting to Triss and joined her colleagues.

"Vincent. Marik. So you're really gonna be leaving us today?"

Vincent Laikos smiled at her and brushed a restive strand of his blond hair from his forehead. "We join a group of merchants that sets off this morning. By ship, we’ll go first to Nazair and then on to
Nilfgaard. That's how we bypass Redania on a large scale and even see something of the world this way."

In the last few days he seemed to have flourished and looked a few years younger in Thalia's eyes. The dimples forming in his cheeks when he smiled were underlining the mischievous impression even more.

Marik Yonka had also recovered significantly. At least physically. The wounds the witch hunters had caused him in the days of his captivity were healed - also thanks to the sorceresses. But the psychological injuries caused by the "interrogations" would probably accompany him for a long time. Nonetheless, he seemed almost happy, eager for a fresh start. Thalia once again admired the strength of this inconspicuous man who had not betrayed Vincent and herself to his tormentors.

"Please send Geralt and Yennefer our gratitude if you see them," Yonka said in a gentle, calm voice. "Their relations with Empress Cirilla have opened the doors to the University of Nilfgaard for us."

"They have more than gladly put in a good word for you. And you really don't wanna join us in Toussaint? The university there is just gaining a proper foothold - we're depending on every good scientist who wants to join us there."

Laikos looked at Yonka, then at Thalia again. "Thank you for the offer. We will see how we like it in Nilfgaard. In any case, we will visit you in Beauclair."

"I'll take you at your word!" Thalia hugged first Laikos, smiling, then Yonka. "All the best, for the both of you!"

"And for you, Thalia. But I'm sure your witcher will take good care of you ... " Vincent gave her a mischievous wink and Thalia couldn't suppress a grin.

The two shouldered their bags, said goodbye to Triss and Eskel, and set off on foot for the harbor.

Thalia looked after them, waved Laikos once more as he turned around just before the bend and raised his hand in one last greeting. As the two disappeared from view behind a wall, Thalia sighed.

Now all her friends from Oxenfurt had gone their own way. Shani had left the day after their escape and had returned to the city on the Pontar via portal. Her disappearance would have raised questions and possibly aroused suspicions on her. Shani intended to continue working at the medical school and did not want to take any risks - something Thalia could fully understand. As soon as she was safely on the way to recovery, Shani had said goodbye to everyone - not without promising to visit them sometime in Toussaint. Thalia already missed her friend.

Triss went back to the house. Thalia stepped over to Eskel and sat beside him on the bench. He carefully stroked the steel blade with an oil-soaked cloth and wet the blade with a protective layer. While traveling through the wilderness, Eskel had always maintained his equipment well. Thalia smiled at the thought of always taking care of his horse first, then his weapons - even before he allowed himself something to eat.

Thalia sighed. "Now they're all gone."

Eskel looked at her from the side, his typical smile on his lips. How she had grown accustomed to that slightly crooked smile. "You gonna miss them?"

"A lot. The two accompanied me during my entire studies. And even after my graduation I could always count on them. But I'm also looking forward to Toussaint and the University there." She put her hand on Eskel's leg. "And I'm looking forward to spending time with you there. You have not
changed your mind, have you?"

"Well ... I have to think it over, Thalia ..."

She felt the fear of his next words crawl down her spine.

"Searching for drowners and waterhags alone in a swamp in Velen or living with you in Toussaint ... I really can't make up my mind."

Then she saw his big grin. Relieved, she gave him a gentle jab in the ribs.

"Stop fooling around. You know I'm worried about pushing you ..."

"You're not pushing me, Thalia. I'll find work in Toussaint just as well as anywhere else. I've spent enough time alone on the path." He put his sword back in his scabbard, put his arm around Thalia and pulled her close. She rested her head on his shoulder.

"Eskel ... I once told you that I came from here, from Pont Vanis."

"Hm. I had already wondered that you haven't visited your family yet. You haven't seen them for a while."

"Years, to be exact. We ... we did not necessarily part in a good way. They weren't fond of my ideas of studying in Oxenfurt. When I refused to marry the man they had chosen for me, they were very angry with me. And disappointed. I've often written letters about my life - I do not know if they've read them or not ... Only once did they send me an answer: when I wrote to them about my engagement with Gregor. They wrote that they were glad that I found a promising man and no longer rely on myself alone. They did not respond to the letter in which I told them about his death." Thalia took a deep breath. "I don't know what to expect when I face my parents. We didn't have a close relationship with each other for a long time, and when I left, they said, while they wished me well, they would no longer consider me as their daughter."

Eskel had listened to her explanation with a frown. "Why weren't they proud of you studying at a prestigious academy and achieving your dream of becoming an alchemist?"

"My parents place the family business above all else. They lead it in the tenth generation. It did not go well a few years ago. My marriage to the son of the shipowner would have solved all of their problems at once. They would have been able to ship their goods much cheaper and also gain new trading partners. I have a younger brother who will keep on the business when my parents get too old. But when I left, he was not nearly ready to follow in the footsteps of our father. They felt it was a betrayal to our family when I didn't do everything in my power to support the company."

Eskel snorted. "You should have married a man just to secure their business?"

Thalia nodded slowly. "Many families expect this from their children, Eskel. And most kids from Kovirian merchant families actually do that. I have disappointed my parents and they have never forgiven me. But ... I don't want them to learn what I did from the academy - and then think even worse of me than they already do. I want to explain to them why I left Oxenfurt. And that I'm safe and will start a new life in Toussaint." She looked hesitantly at Eskel. "Would you ... would you accompany me if I visit them? I don't know if I have the courage to face them alone."

Eskel swallowed. "I'm not really one for a good first impression, Thalia. Are you sure you want this?"

Thalia looked him straight in the eye, a confident smile on his face. "I am."
They walked arm in arm through the busy streets of the merchant district of Pont Vanis, which had barely changed in recent years. Thalia occasionally glimpsed one or the other familiar face.

Here, too, passers-by gave Eskel appraising glances - but far less than people did in Redania. The sun was shining and a warm spring breeze greeted them with the scent of fresh baked goods being blown into the alley from an open bakery. Two seagulls who had come here from the harbor sat on the gables, gazing down at the hustle and bustle.

The merchandise in the stores all provided outstanding quality. Pont Vanis was one of the most important trading cities of the Northern Kingdoms. The goods that reached the city by sea were either offered directly here for resale or transported to the more southern countries. Compared to Temeria or Redania, Kovir continued to enjoy a degree of prosperity based not least on the excellent trade relations of the Kovirian merchants.

Thalia and Eskel now approached the warehouse of one of these merchant families. "Van de Wintervoords" stood in golden letters above the open entrance gate, which revealed the view into a sales hall. Thalia took a deep breath and hesitated to enter the building, her eyes fixed on the inside of the house. Eskel briefly squeezed her hand. She looked up and gave him a short nod. Together they stepped through the gate.

It didn't seem very busy. Piled on the walls were wooden boxes with inscriptions in at least four different languages. A staircase led up to the store, where more goods were waiting to be resold.

When her eyes fell on an elderly man with receding hair, Thalia froze. Her father still looked almost exactly as she remembered him. He negotiated with a much younger, well-dressed gentleman. The older man held a clipboard and a pen in his hands and, with a casual gesture, pushed his glasses back onto the bridge of his nose and loudly added several columns of numbers in an expert manner. The final sum seemed to be still too high for the younger – they briefly haggled over possible discounts, then confirmed the trade by handshake.

As the young trader got ready to leave the warehouse, her father turned to the new visitors. And just like Thalia before him, he froze in the middle of the movement, as his eyes fell on the young woman he had not seen in years. A mixture of emotions moved across his face - astonishment, joy, concern, anger ... all of this was apparent within a few seconds on the man's face. He took a deep breath, seeming to prepare himself to face his daughter. As his eyes fell on the man at her side, his features hardened. Nevertheless, he approached them both.

Thalia smiled uncertainly at her father. "Hello, Vadder."

The older man pressed his lips together for a moment, nodding to his daughter quite reserved. "Thalia. I am surprised to see you here. And especially in the company of this ..." With a disparaging look he sized Eskel up.

"That's Eskel, father. He is a witcher from Kaedwen."

"Hm ... well then. Your mother is in the office. She would certainly be happy to see you."

With these words he turned away and went ahead in the back of the hall.

"Lydia? Come and look who found her way to us!"
The woman called rose from behind her desk - one could see the resemblance to Thalia more than plainly. The same red-brown, curly hair - in the case of the older one, interspersed with single gray strands. The same full lips, the same intelligent, big eyes. However, these eyes narrowed immediately after they were pointed at her daughter and her mouth appeared tight-lipped.

She stopped at a distance and made no move to meet her daughter. "Thalia. After all these years ... To what do we owe the honor of your visit? One would think that your esteemed university can hardly afford to give you up, right? Surely your research is too important to be interrupted just for a visit to us - Professor."

Lydia van de Wintervoord pronounced her daughter's title as if it were a dirty word. No trace of pride in her daughter's accomplishments, no joy to see her again was to be noted.

Thalia seemed to be preparing for the upcoming conversation. "Mother. I no longer work at the University of Oxenfurt. That's why I'm here. I wanted to tell you personally what happened there and why I'm going to Toussaint."

"Toussaint?" Thalia's mother seemed more than surprised. "What on earth do you want in Toussaint? And who is this ruffian accompanying you?"

Thalia sighed. "The man by my side is Eskel. He will accompany me to Toussaint. Please let me tell you what has happened in the last few weeks." In a nutshell and without debauchery, Thalia told her parents about the events after her return from the expedition, the mission of the Redanian King, her role in investigating the pathogen and her decision to thwart the project. She left unmentioned the jailbreak, also her wounding.

"... Anyway, I cannot stay in Redania any longer. The new university in Toussaint has offered me to research and teach there and I gladly accepted it. I wanted to tell you personally. So if you get a letter from Redania accusing me of high treason ... then you know what's behind it and that I'll be safe in Toussaint."

Thalia's parents had listened in silence, her father had looked more and more dismayed, while her mother seemed to be getting more and more bitter. It was she who spoke first. "So that's what has become of you - a traitor. Wasn't it enough that you disgraced us when you refused to become Gustav's wife? Now you drag our name even further into the dirt. Have you even thought about what will become of our trade relations with Redania? How many of our business partners will turn their backs on us, should that be publicized? Of course not!"

Her mouth twisted into a disgusted grimace. "Our educated daughter has only her own goals in mind. It has always been like that, right? While your brother does everything possible to support our business, you never gave a thought to what will become of us and the company."

"Mother, that's not fair," Thalia interrupted. "You wanted me to give up everything I've always dreamed of. You wanted me to marry this Gustav, who has the mind of a loaf of bread and the humor of a pickled herring. And when I told you I wasn't ready, you put so much pressure on me that I had no choice but to leave."

"Of course, we are the ones to blame. Tell me: Was it worth it? If only you had managed to become the wife of a respected scientist. Instead, now you move as a single woman in the south to work there at some backwater college. And probably spend your last coins to hire this butcher here as escort."

"Eskel is not my escort." Thalia, who had originally intended to reconcile with her parents, had become increasingly angry as the conversation progressed. During her mother's tirade, red spots appeared on her fair complexion. She sensed she could barely control her anger and disappointment.
"Eskel is the man with whom I will build a new life in Toussaint. And I do not care if you give me your blessing or not."

Thalia's parents got visibly pale. Her mother struggled for her composure, staring at Eskel with an uncomfortable horror in her eyes. "Thalia. Please say that was just a nasty joke. You will not throw away your life like that! Look for a good professor at your new university, but not ... such a ruffian! What has become of you?"

"What has become of me? Just a woman who has realized that she is wasting her time here. I was so naive to think that I should say goodbye to you personally, and we might let the past rest and reconcile. But I was wrong. Come on, Eskel. There's nothing left to say here!"

She turned on her heel and walked quickly to the exit. There was nothing for Eskel to do but nod at her astonished parents and then follow Thalia. When he caught up with her, she was already standing in the street outside the warehouse. The anger and disappointment broke free, she was trembling and tears were forming in her eyes. Eskel wanted to hold her close, but she wriggled out of his embrace. "Not here. Let's go."

But after a few steps a call stopped her. "Thalia! Wait!"

Thalia's father came hurrying toward her. When he caught up with her, he was already out of breath. "Just wait, please! This ... it all went a little different from how I had imagined our reunion ..."

"Yes, Vadder." Thalia's voice was little more than a whisper, she tried to suppress the trembling of her lower lip. "I had planned it differently as well."

"Your mother ... she is angry and ... and she is worried. Just like me. So ... I'm glad you managed to escape from Oxenfurt in time and you aren't alone." He gave Eskel an uncertain look. "No offense, Master Witcher. I am sure for Thalia has chosen you, there is more about you than meets the eye. So ... take good care of my daughter."

"I will. You don't need to worry about her safety, Mister van de Wintervoord."

Thalia's father smiled tentatively. "I gladly believe that." He grasped Thalia's hands with his and looked his daughter in the eye. "I wish you all the best, Thalia. Please write and tell us how you're doing. I'm proud of you, mijn Vosje."

Tears shimmered in Thalia's eyes as she embraced her father. "Thank you, Dad. I just wish Mom would see it that way."

"She does, my darling, she does. She's just too proud and too stubborn to admit that."

Thalia broke away from her father. "I would also like to say goodbye to Frederik. Is he here?"

"Your brother is currently in Poviss concluding contracts with new trading partners. I'll send him your greetings as soon as he gets back. And next time you come visit us, just let us know first. He will be glad to see you again."

"I'll do that, Vadder. I thank you. For everything."

"Take care of yourself, and travel safe, Vosje."

* * *

"Vosje?" Eskel smiled sideways at Thalia as they walked arm in arm back to Triss's house.
Thalia laughed. "That means 'little fox'. My dad used to call me that as a kid. On the one hand, because my hair was probably light red at the time, and on the other because I supposedly always tried to trick him and my brother into getting what I wanted."

Since the debate with her father, a burden seemed to have fallen from her. She felt relaxed, even happy.

"Well, then I better be on my guard with you ... I'm glad you've talked it out - at least your father and you."

"I am, too. And he'll change my mother’s opinion, I'm sure. It may just have been a bit much for her all of a sudden."

"That may be true. I can understand they wanted you to have a wealthy, respected husband. And not someone like me."

"Oh, Eskel ... believe me, if I had introduced them to a scholar from the university as the man by my side, they would not have loved it either."

"Maybe. But ... are you really sure that one of your colleagues would not suit you better?"

Thalia frowned in confusion. "What is this about, Eskel?"

"I just thought ... Laikos seems to like you very much. The farewell was not easy for him today, I could see that. And you ... Thalia, I don't want you to feel obliged to me. If you ..."

"Eskel!" Thalia laughed in disbelief and stopped. She looked up at Eskel, a mischievous grin on her lips. "Vincent really has many good qualities, but he and I are just friends, nothing more. And just like me ..." She grabbed Eskel's hand and squeezed it tight. "... he is already taken. And even if that weren't the case, he would probably be more interested in you than in me."

Her grin widened. She was amused by his confusion.

Eskel frowned. "You mean ..."

"Like me, Vincent dares to make a fresh start - together with his companion. He and Marik could not live out their relationship in Oxenfurt openly, and I hope that this hide and seek game now ends in Nilfgaard."

Eskel swallowed. "Well, I ... I feel pretty stupid right now."

"Rightly so, my love. Rightly so."

* * *

The following morning, it was time to say their goodbyes to their friends. Triss would open a portal and send them to Corvo Bianco, together with the horses, where Yennefer had positioned a teleportation anchor similar to the one in Triss's Garden.

Keira was to join Eskel and Thalia in Toussaint in a few days. Thalia had asked her if she wanted to continue researching the Catriona plague with her. The variant of the disease, which broke out among the non-humans in Redania, could bring them further information about the pathogen. Keira and Thalia had repeatedly exchanged their research during the past few days. Thalia was more than impressed by the advances Keira had made while researching the disease. Maybe the sorceress could even help her with her goal of putting an end to Cordoxia.
Keira hesitantly agreed. After packing her belongings from her home in Lan Exeter, she would also travel to the Duchy via portal. The prospect of being able to use the laboratories of the university there had evidently convinced her leaving her current home, at least for the time being.

Lambert had decided against Eskel’s - and probably also Keira’s - offer to accompany them as well. Thalia guessed that the quarrels of the last few days with the sorceress were perhaps not entirely irrelevant. However, the witcher had declared that he would come to Toussaint before the winter to spend the cold months there. Until then, he would return to the path.

After having breakfast together in Triss’ dining room, Keira and Lambert said goodbye to them.

Lambert shook hands with Thalia and hugged her briefly. "Take care of our big boy, Professor. Wouldn't want him to get all lazy."

Thalia laughed. "Don't worry, I'll make sure he stays busy."

Keira hugged her too. "See you in a few days, Thalia. And you're absolutely sure I am wanted at the university?"

"The Dean, with whom I happen to be well-known, has emphasized how happy he is for other scientists who enrich the college. I'm sure that includes investigative sorceresses."

When she broke away from Keira and said goodbye to Triss, Thalia saw Eskel and Lambert hugging each other for a moment. Farewells were clearly not pleasant to the younger witcher. The two men spoke briefly, but Thalia could not understand the words.

After saying goodbye to Triss, Lambert and Keira disappeared into the shimmering portal that would take them to Keira’s house in Lan Exeter.

Triss turned to Eskel and Thalia. "Well then ... since you want to leave me today too - when do you want to go?"

Thalia looked at Eskel. "I have already packed everything. Whenever you are ready …"

"One thing I'd like to do before." If Thalia had not known better, she would have thought Eskel was embarrassed. "It won't take long," he hurried to say. "As soon as I'm back, we can leave."

"No hurry." She smiled at him. "Are you telling me what it's about?"

Eskel swallowed, then smiled his wry smile. "You will know. At a given time."

"Alright, then. I won't pry …"

When Eskel left, Triss glanced after him for a moment, a pensive smile on her face. Thalia realized once again how gorgeous looking the sorceress was. And how lucky she was that Eskel had decided for her anyway.

When Triss spoke to her, there was a touch of melancholy in her voice. "He leaves his old life behind to start over with you. You're lucky such a loyal man wants to spend his life with you."

"I am, Triss. I love him. And that's why I'm scared sometimes. I fear of how we will change." She hesitated a moment. Should she really spread her worries before Triss? Even if they were not the best friends, the sorceress would still understand what moved her ...
"I'm not an ageless sorceress. In thirty years' time I will be an old woman - but Eskel will hardly appear older than now. Will he still love me when I become frail? Do I want that? Do I want him to feel bound to me even when I'm old and he's still a man in his best years? How will our relationship change in the meantime? And how will it be for him if he will be alone again after I ..."

She looked at Triss. The sorceress frowned, her gaze understanding and compassionate.

Thalia forced a smile, the words were suddenly embarrassing. "I'm sorry about it. I'm already worried about things that are still far in the future. Who knows what will happen until then?"

Triss smiled, but her eyes still showed compassion. "Who knows, indeed …"

Chapter End Notes

Only two more chapters left ... they are already written in German, translation is in progress. Again I thank OpheliaTheMoth for her beta-reading!
Using a soft cloth, Eskel wiped the blade of his silver sword one last time until the afternoon sun reflected in it. The charred remains of the Archespore gave off a sweet and biting smell, but Eskel had endured far worse. After slipping his sword back into the scabbard, he went back to the hill where Scorpion grazed peacefully. He, too, was obviously used to worse things - the monstrous plants that his master had killed just recently could not impress him much.

"We should hurry up a bit, my boy," Eskel whispered to the black stallion as he swung himself on his back. "Otherwise I'll be late to squeezing myself into this monkey suit."

He would probably pick up his reward for cleansing the vineyard tomorrow. Otherwise he would really be too late to prepare for the evening levee in Beauclair. Guests at court, like Geralt and Yennefer, of course had received an invitation. As the founder of the new university, the Duchess had also invited the future professors of the university, which included Thalia. With him as her plus one.

For a week now they lived in the guest area of Corvo Bianco. Until they found their own home in the Duchy, they would accept Geralt's hospitality. He emphasized again and again that the winery offered enough space and he and Yennefer would be glad about their presence. Eskel did not doubt that Geralt was really happy - but if the same was true of Yennefer, was another story...

Yesterday Keira had arrived via portal - along with extensive travel luggage. It was then when the black-haired sorceress seemed to regret their consent to all their accommodation. But so far she had only sent a few harmless sidelobs in Gerard's direction.

Eskel's last visit to the Duchy was a few years back, but Toussaint was still exactly as he remembered it. Even now, in spring, the climate was pleasantly warm. The orchards were in full bloom, and the settlements and towns, with their colorful facades and bustling markets, testified to the prosperity of the nilfgaarder vassal state. The people here were also much friendlier than in the northern kingdoms - even facing a witcher. No one spat out in front of him or gazed at him with disgust.

Quite the contrary, the winegrowers and merchants appreciated the services of a witcher. The clearing of the vineyard from the Archespores had already been Eskel's second contract this week. He was starting to wonder why he hadn't tried his luck here in all these years. But better late than never ...

As he entered the courtyard of Corvo Bianco and brought Scorpion to the stable, one of the servants was already running to meet him to take the reins of the stallion and take care of him. Eskel had not yet grown accustomed to the large number of staff Geralt employed at his estate. Always wanting to be at your service, asking for your wishes or said that they had already done this or that, hopefully to your full satisfaction.

On the way to the guest wing he met the majordomo Barnabas Basilius - as always friendly, but formally greeting. Thalia briefly froze when she heard his surname the first time, but luckily it turned out that Gerald's "best man," as his brother used to call the majordomo, was not in any way related to Thalia's former superior.
Eskel opened the door to the bedroom he occupied with Thalia - and drew in a sharp breath at the sight of her. Thalia stood in one of her new clothes - apparently the most magnificent, made of shimmering, green silk - in front of the large mirror and examined the fit of the corsage. Duchy fashion was apt to highlight the virtues of female curves. It took Eskel a moment to pull away from the view of Thalia's back.

She smiled as she turned to him. According to the local customs and Yennefer's advice, she had slightly emphasized her eyes with kohl and ink, but she did not look vulgar, but radiant. Her hair fell in curls around her shoulders and caught the rays of the afternoon sun shining through the window in reddish reflections.

"Good, you're back. I thought your assignment would make you forget about time."
"I know how important the levee is for you. After all, it's not every day you'll get to meet the Duchess personally."

Smiling, she came up to him and stretched out her arms to hug him, then grimaced as she got aware of the smell of the Archespores. Instead of embracing him, she pushed him gently but firmly toward the bathroom. "As if I had known ..."

Eskel smiled at her mock indignation.

"I've already had given orders to prepare you a bath. The water should still be warm enough. Your clothes are lying on the bed. I hope everything fits."
Her nervousness in anticipation of the ducal levee was clearly noticeable. "Yennefer is waiting for me in her rooms. She has specially invited a so-called "coiffeur" from Beauclair, who is to dress the hair of her, Keira and me. Unbelievable ..."

"Then don't let them wait. I'll be fine, Thalia." He began to get rid of his shirt and trousers.
"Yes, of course. I'm a bit nervous, Eskel ..."
"You will make a good impression, dear heart. And I will try not to ruin it."
He was rewarded with a smile and a fleeting kiss before she left him alone with the steaming bath.

Even though the remark had been meant jokingly - Eskel hoped inwardly that he really would not make a bad impression that could rub off on Thalia. For her work at the new University in Beauclair, it was important that she seemed serious and cultivated. As the founder of the university, the Duchess had a considerable influence on the allocation of research assignments. It was beyond doubt that Thalia had more than earned the position of professor. But if he as her companion was acting like a terrifying monster slayer, it could have a negative effect on her.

He had asked her if she would rather go to the levee without him. In Toussaint, there was much less moral resentment concerning a man and woman living together outside the state of marriage, but nevertheless unmarried women living with men of dubious reputation were not highly respected. But Thalia didn't want to hear anything about it and insisted that he accompany her.

And so he stood there, freshly bathed and dressed in black pants, a white shirt and a jerkin - here it was called "Doublet" - made of black velvet and black leather.
Thalia had chosen the clothes for him at the tailor's that Yennefer had recommended. He had just let the man take his measurements and left everything else to Thalia. Eskel was amazed at how well the clothes fit and, above all, how they looked on him. He had never made anything out of fashion or fine fabrics during his lifetime - he left that to dudes like the Bard Dandelion. But Eskel had to admit that despite his scars and stature, he did not look ridiculous in this wardrobe, as he had feared, but made a more sophisticated appearance than he had ever done before. Maybe he would not do Thalia any disservice tonight ...

A knock on the door tore him out of his thoughts. At his request, Geralt entered the room - he, too,
was already outfitted for the levee. But in contrast to Eskel's wardrobe, Geralt's was clearly ... more noticeable, to put it in a neutral way. The white-haired witcher's jerkin was made of the finest, dark red velvet - but his sleeves bulged voluminously around his shoulders, exposing a white shirt of shimmering silk through slits in the fabric. Around his hips lay a wide belt with a decorative golden buckle, and in contrast to Eskel, who wore tight, smooth boots, his shoes were adorned with large, black bows.

The white hair was held together in the neck by a similar loop. Undoubtedly everything according to the latest fashion in the Duchy.

Eskel tried to suppress a grin at the sight of his brother. And he thanked the gods Thalia had evidently displayed a much more minimalistic taste in choosing his own wardrobe than Yennefer. Geralt's eyes narrowed to slits as he eyed Eskel in his simple but elegant wardrobe. Then he sighed. "Maybe I should go to the tailor myself from now on, instead of leaving it to Yennefer ..."

"I admit, I had expected my wardrobe to fit me worse," confessed Eskel. "But I still do not feel well at this levee. I have always stayed away from royal courts - for good reason. I just don't fit in this genteel society in which everyone says something different than they actually mean. Why couldn't Thalia just ask me to kill her a Royal Griffin, or something like that? That's the stuff I'm really good at, not this..."

He pointed to his neatly dressed mirror image.

Geralt laughed. "I got used to it, so you will too. Besides, it won't be that bad. I know the Duchess and am often a guest at their levees. She and her court value etiquette, but they appreciate the unusual and like to decorate themselves with illustrious guests. Give 'em few interesting stories of the hunt and you will fascinate them. No one expects you to make a pointed conversation about politics. Who knows, maybe you'll even like it."

* * *

When the curricle, who had brought them to Beauclair, drove up the palace hill, Eskel was still certain that he would not like it at all.

On the way to the gate, it was already busy. Eskel looked at the passengers of the other curricks - dandies dressed exclusively, in the company of ladies, who displayed their wealth with expensive robes and jewels. Yennefer had insisted on the carriage ride, as the arrival of the invited guests was already critically eyed by the noble and high society. Traveling by teleport would have drawn all eyes on them, but this display of otherness would probably not have met with goodwill. And Geralt hated portals anyway.

So their coachman lined up in the column of the carriages, which gradually carried the guests to the entrance gate.

When it was their turn, Geralt and Eskel got out first, then handed the women a supporting hand to help them get out of the car. Because of the long, wide-swinging skirts, it was difficult for the ladies to get out without stumbling.

Eskel offered Thalia his arm and together they walked behind Geralt, Yennefer and Keira along the red carpet that led them to the entrance of the ducal gardens.

Staff received the guests and compared the presented invitations with the guest list, a laudator then loudly proclaimed the names of the entrants. Not a small number of guests lingered in the reception area to inspect the newcomers.

Eskel handed the invitation to the receptionist. The man only flinched in shock as his gaze fell on Eskel's scars, but then went straight to the normal procedure. He wished them a merry evening and
led them on to the line of those waiting for their announcement. Eskel felt the attentions of those present - no wonder, Geralt and he stood out of the other men despite their fine clothes. Thalia beside him tried not to show her excitement.

Finally they had reached the laudator, who knocked his wand loudly on the marble floor before each announcement. "Geralt of Riva, accompanied by the Sorceresses Yennefer of Vengerberg and Keira Metz of Wyzima." Eskel noticed the appreciative looks the two ladies received. With a steady step, Geralt led the two sorceresses forward.

The laudator frowned for a moment as he studied the invitation card he had received. "Your last name is missing, Mr. Eskel ..." When he raised his eyes and saw Eskel, his eyes widened, but he quickly overcame his scare. "Just Eskel," Eskel hurried to say. "Witcher from Kaedwen." The laudator swallowed briefly, then pushed his wand on the floor. "The witcher Eskel of Kaedwen accompanied by Professor Thalia van de Wintervoord." Their entrance was accompanied by barely concealed whispering.

The splendor of the palace gardens unfolded before them in the evening sun as they walked along the path. Keira obviously enjoyed her performance. Provocatively, she returned the looks the courtiers threw to her. She also wore a dress that corresponded to the Beauclairian fashion - but much more permissively cut than Thalias robe. Eskel had to admit that the dark blue silk stood her perfectly. Too bad Lambert could not see her like that. Although maybe it was better that way. His brother would surely have seen any lecherous gaze that wandered over Keira's body - and there were not a few of them - as an affront.

More eyes than on Keira laid only on Yennefer, who walked beautiful and aloof next to Geralt's side along the way.

Thalia drew much less attention, even though she looked more enchanting in his eyes than the sorceresses - simply because despite the dress and the elaborate hairstyle, she was still genuine. She looked a little shyly through the ranks of the guests, who stood in small groups, tasting the snacks, that waiters were offering them and drinking precious wine. There was laughter here and there. In a pavilion played musicians, accompanying the guests conversations with gentle sounds.

"Over there is Karel, a friend of mine," Thalia said. She pointed inconspicuously to a slender man with distinctive features talking to three other guests.

They apologized to Geralt and the sorceresses and went to the man Eskel estimated to be in his late thirties. He had envisioned the future director of the University of Beauclair much older. Before they reached him, Karel already noticed them. "Thalia! You look fabulous! And now I finally get to know your companion. Karel Oldan. Professor of Medicine." He handed Eskel his hand, which he squeezed - maybe a bit too strong. "Eskel. Witcher."

"Thalia has already told me a lot about you. I have to say that I'm glad you were on her side to bring her safely out of Oxenfurt. Unbelievable what's going on at this university. Thalia, may I introduce you to three of our future colleagues?"

While Thalia was excited about the upcoming assignments at the college, Eskel listened with half attention. Only when one of the men uttered a name that made Thalia wince, he turned to the conversation. "He's terribly disfigured since the accident. One side of his face was almost completely corroded by acid. Unbelievable that he'd survived. But as far as I'm told, he's on the way to recovery."

One of the other professors looked dismayed. "I'm sure the Efferens will do their utmost to bring those responsible to justice ...

Eskel saw that Thalia was pale. Apparently, the scientists did not know what role she had played in
Alric Efferen's "accident".
"Would you like something to drink, my love?", he asked her softly.
"Please." Thalia seemed grateful for the opportunity to quietly withdraw from the conversation.

After Eskel had apologized and they had gone along the path, Thalia seemed to regain her composure. "I've often wondered what happened to him in the last two weeks ... on the one hand, I'm kind of relieved that he survived. On the other hand ... His family has a lot of influence, even beyond the borders of Redania. As some of my colleagues here are in contact with the University of Oxenfurt, it is only a matter of time before he learns where I am."

"Maybe you should talk to your colleagues. Explain to them that it was self-defense. But sooner or later it will be known in Oxenfurt that you are in Beauclair."

"I know. Officially, they cannot harm me here. But who knows what they will do."

Eskel put his arm around Thalia's shoulders. "Don't worry about it now. We will think about it another day ..."

"Here you are!" Geralt approached them from behind. "The Duchess asked me to bring Thalia to her. And you too, my friend. As I said, she has a weakness for exceptional guests."

Duchess Anna Henrietta, surrounded by a crowd of ladies of the court, was talking animatedly to Yennerfer and Keira. The latter already turned on all her charms with Karel Oldan, who had also joined the ladies. "I am already looking forward to continuing my research at your university, Professor. Thalia showed me the labs yesterday - you did a great job in such a short time."

Oldan smiled visibly flattered. Apparently, the blonde beauty had effortlessly wrapped him around her finger. "I'm sure your research will be a great asset to my university." Keira gave him a beaming smile.

Eskel had to stifle a disapproving groan with so much sweet-talk - but that's how sorceresses were. He was once again glad that Lambert wasn't present. And that Thalia relied on other qualities than Keira.

Geralt introduced her to the Duchess. Anna Henrietta greeted Thalia in a friendly way, then candidly examined Eskel. "We are very happy to know another witcher in Beauclair. Even though it's been several years since this night of terror, it's reassuring to know that besides Geralt of Riva, someone else is able to fight these creatures. Nothing against you, my dear Damien."

She gave the bald-headed man standing behind her an apologetic smile. He nodded briefly and then approached Eskel. "Damien de la Tour, Captain of the Ducal Guard," the man introduced himself. "Master Witcher, let us talk, if you please."

Eskel was more than surprised, but did not want to refuse the captain's request. The Duchess had meanwhile turned to Thalia, who told her about her development of the crab spider antidote. Now that she was in her element, Thalia's tension seemed to have fallen away. The Duchess listened to her with interest, as did Karel Oldan. She did not seem to need his support anymore, so Eskel and de la Tour took a few steps aside.

"I understand you want to settle in Toussaint. Are you also planning, like Geralt, to hang up your profession or do you want to continue working as a witcher?"

"Well, unlike Geralt, I don't call a winery my own and I have not saved up any fortune to retire. So I will probably work as a witcher in the future. I was able to do a few jobs this week, so the demand for my services seems to be there."
"Without a doubt." Damien de la Tour pursed his lips under his mustache. "I'll get straight to the point, Master Eskel. We are currently forming a unit of the Ducal Guard, which is to ensure beyond Beauclair for the safety of the citizens of our Duchess. Many farmers and traders try to take their problems with disagreeable creatures into their own hands. It often comes to tragic accidents. Our men are well-trained fighters, but none of them has the special skills you possess as a witcher. If you are interested, I would be glad if you passed on your knowledge and skills to our recruits - as an instructor. What do you say, Master Witcher?"

Eskel took a deep breath to bring into line what he heard. So far, he had never thought about accepting a permanent employment. His life had always been the path. Well, since he would have a permanent residence with Thalia, nothing actually spoke against it. Except for the fact that he was used to being his own master.

"I ... would like to think about your offer, captain."

De la Tour nodded. "I understand that. What do you think about visiting our training ground in the next few days? Then we could discuss everything else. The Duchess would be more than pleased if you would accept my offer. But of course it is up to you to decide that. Enjoy the evening, Master Eskel."

"Thank you." Eskel nodded to the captain, trying to conceal his surprise. He would never have expected he would ever be offered an employment at court. He would talk about it with Geralt. After all, his brother knew the captain. And he should also talk to Thalia. Eskel still had to get used to the fact that he now had to include her in his plans.

She turned to him and waved him over. Apparently the ladies and gentlemen with whom she talked had come to speak of him. When he approached them, the duchess smiled at him with interest, and the other participants in the conversation gave him an appreciative look. "Tell us, Master Eskel," the duchess invited him. "How did you manage to cull this Royal Griffin all by yourself?"

Eskel was embarrassed for a moment. He was not used to bragging about his fights. However, all bystanders looked at him expectantly. "So, to hunt a Griffin requires good preparation ..."

* * *

By the time they returned to Corvo Bianco, it was already late. Even after retiring to their guest quarters, Thalia was still fond of her conversation with Anna Henrietta. "The Duchess is really an enthusiastic patron of the sciences. Over the years, she wants to develop the university into one of the continent's leading academies. A high goal, but with the financial resources she provides, we should be able to purchase first-class equipment. And that, in turn, attracts capable scientists."

Eskel was amused by the enthusiasm she showed. "For the fact that you were so nervous before, it went really well."

"I'm so glad I didn't embarrass myself. I'm just not used to dealing with such high-ranking personalities."

He watched her as she opened the lacing of her corsage and got rid of the robe.

"Maybe we both get used to it in the future." Eskel sat down on the bed and took off his boots. "The captain of the Ducal Guard has made me an offer."

Thalia paused to open the underdress and gave Eskel a surprised look. "An offer?"

"He asked me if I would like to become an Instructor of a Special Forces Unit they founded to do more or less witcher's work."

Thalia had moved closer to the bed and sat next to him. "And what did you answer?"
Eskel sighed. "I said I would think it over." He looked at Thalia. "What do you think about it?"

Thalia pursed her lips. "You know that I would never urge you to give up your profession. I fell in love with a witcher and I knew from the beginning that you constantly put yourself in danger. But... It'd be a lie if I said that I don't mind worrying about your life. Whenever you accept a contract, I'm afraid you will not get home safely. The idea that you will go back on the path and I will not know for weeks whether you're okay or..." She swallowed and looked at him apologetically. "I'm sorry, I'm starting to persuade you."

Eskel looked at her with a crooked smile. "Maybe it's not necessary to persuade me. I was on the path long enough. Maybe it's time to change my life. After all, I'm already here with you... I used to train the young witchers in Kaer Morhen. And I was pretty good at it. The time of the witchers is over, even if I did not want to believe it for a long time. If I can pass on my knowledge to the guardsmen, except for the signs and potions, of course, something of the Wolf School would survive."

A relieved smile spread on Thalia's face. She put her hand to his unscathed cheek. "Then the Guard could be lucky. With you they would get a better instructor than they ever dared to hope for." She swung her leg over his and climbed onto his lap. When her face was close to his, she looked at him with veiled eyes. "And I have a better man than I ever dared to hope for."

Later, with her head resting on his shoulder and her hand on his chest, fingers buried in his chest hair, he realized she was still awake. "Can't sleep, love?"

The scent of lavender that emanated from her hair mingled with the scent of her body, which had just lolled hungry against his. She was as passionate as him, and Eskel loved the feeling of being desired by her. Being with her was not comparable to the meaningless sex he had experienced before her.

She sighed softly. "I'm thinking about too much..."

"Do you want to talk about it?" He gently stroked her hair.

"Oh... it's just... I'm worried if and how Alric Efferen could take revenge on me, but actually... I'm glad he survived. I am glad that I have no life on my conscience. I do not know if I could handle it - even if he's a terrible person."

"You would've come to terms with it. Some day."

He had almost whispered the last words, which made Thalia look up to him. "Some day?"

"Thalia... I'm not a noble knight who always does good. Do you remember... do you remember what I told you about Deidre Ademeyn back then? My child of surprise?"

"She hurt you when you tried to help her escape."

"She felt betrayed by me. She had hoped that I would stand by her side and fight for her. For her it was as if I let her down. And maybe that's exactly what I did. But... I had to realize later that it had been a mistake to allow her to escape. She then moved murderously across the country and killed many innocents. Too many. All these lives... And then I took hers... to prevent her from doing any more mischief. I killed my own child of surprise, Thalia. The person who should have been closest to me. If I had stood and defended her at the time, would she still have become the monster she was last? I've been wondering about that for decades."

Thalia hesitated for a moment, then gently brushed a finger over the long, ridged scar that ran
through the side of his face. "You wanted to do the right thing. No matter how you decided, it would never have been all right."

He kissed her palm. "You know ... right now I feel like everything is going to be all right. We can build a good life together here."
An almost sad smile stole to her lips. She ran her hand through the hair on his temple. "Even if I'll never see your hair turn gray."

"What do you mean, Thalia?"

She met him with a gentle smile in her eyes, leaned up to him and kissed him. "It's nothing. Tell me, are you really serious with the Guard's offer?"
Eskel nodded slowly. "I'll visit de la Tour tomorrow and discuss the details with him." The more he thought about it, the more he liked the thought. Training the young witchers had always been the most enjoyable experience in Kaer Morhen for decades.

The guardsmen would never become true witchers, but he could pass on the fighting techniques and knowledge of beasts and how to fight them. And at least a part of what the Wolf School had stood for would last. Truly, the more he thought about it, the more he was sure he'd found a new task.

Chapter End Notes

Now this story has nearly reached its end. Only one chapter - the epilogue - is left. I cannod thank my wonderful beta-reader OpheliaTheMoth enough for her support and her great work. When I asked her a year ago if she would correct my weird English sentences she didn’t hesitate and took the job, although she hardly knew me at this time. So thank you so much. I’m so glad I learned to know you.
Epilogue

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Three months later …

Thalia lit the burner with a precise gesture. Since the catalyst stone stuck in her shoulder, it was much easier for her to cast a sign than before. Now she barely noticed the feeling the foreign object emanated.

At one of the other lab tables, Keira dripped a nutrient solution into a shallow bowl containing fungal spores. A few weeks ago, Thalia and her had encountered the spores in their research and the previous attempts had shown promising. Whether only the variant of Catriona disease, which attacked only non-humans, reacted to the spore treatment, or even the variant of the human version of the pathogen, would show in the coming days.

Thalia joined Keira at the table. "The distillate should be ready in an hour."
Keira looked up at her. "Then why don’t you go home? I need to complete my records anyway. I'll join you later."
"Alright, but don’t stay in the lab for too long. Otherwise you'll make me feel guilty." Thalia smiled apologetically at Keira.
She got rid of the lab coat and took her bag.

The sun's bright glow greeted her as she went outside. After the weaker lighting in the lab she had to spuint briefly to get used to the sunlight. Then she made her way to the Garrison of the Guard.
The guardsman at the gate already knew her and greeted her as she entered the yard.
A familiar sound quickly showed her the way. The clinking noise of two blades meeting came from the practice site.

"Watch your cover!" Eskel thurst. The recruit, who served as his training partner, parried at the last moment. A group of twelve men stood around the fighters at a safe distance, watching their every move.
Apparently, the training fight had already went on for a while, because the young guardsman was visibly out of breath.
Eskel made a smooth turn and attacked the younger from the left flank. Dodging, the recruit stumbled, struggling for a moment, giving Eskel the opportunity to end the fight. Eskel only indicated the blow that would have meant the death of his opponent. Then he shook hands with the young man. "Well fought. Pay more attention to your foothold during the parades, it has to become even more stable."
He turned to the bystanders. "That’s it for today. Tomorrow we’ll be dealing with crab spiders in study of beasts. In training, we will practice ripostes, so get ready for a busy day. See you tomorrow."
The recruits nodded to him, the circle of bystanders broke up.

Thalia approached Eskel with a smile. The dark uniform in brown and gray suited him well, as she once again discovered.
"Good evening, Professor," he jokingly greeted her. "Would you mind accompanying me on the way home?"
"To ensure your safety? With great pleasure, Master Eskel."

After he had changed, they went together to the stable of the garrison, in which not only Scorpion, but also Arenaria were waiting for them.
The road to Corvo Bianco led them past picturesque vineyards. The summer in Toussaint lived up to its reputation. Thalia noticed that despite her light dress, she was already sweating as they passed the small estate on the outskirts of Beauclair, to which they had paid a daily visit for a few weeks. The craftsmen had apparently begun today with the painting of the facade. The garden in front of the house would need some extra care, but Thalia was already looking forward to planting beds of medicinal herbs there.

She had applied for a patent in Beauclair a few weeks ago, for her invention of the fire crossbows and the time fuse. For the rights of use she had received a not insignificant sum from the ducal guard - enough to buy the property and to have the house renovated. In a few weeks, Eskel and her would be able to move in there. Thalia was glad that they would no longer need the hospitality of Geralt and Yennefer.

One of her colleagues had plainly asked her if she – as an unmarried woman - really intended to live with a man. Although social practices in Toussaint were more tolerant than in the rest of the world, some people still had reservations when it came to relationships outside the state of marriage - especially when they were lived openly. As soon as they moved into their house, they would likely face more derogatory or sharp comments. But it didn't bother her - as long as she did valuable work at the university, her reputation would not suffer much. And living with Eskel was out of the question. "Do you want to go hunting with Geralt later?" She glanced over at Eskel, who was riding beside her on Scorpion as they passed the city limits.

"Don't think so. We'd have to wait until it's cooling down, and tomorrow's a busy day. In addition, Geralt wanted to get his supposedly best vintage from the cellar today."
Thalia smiled mischievously at him. "You know that you should lead by example as an instructor? We wouldn't want your recruits to get a bad impression of you."
Eskel laughed. "They won't. I have yet to get used to the fact that some of them freeze in awe when I show them the fighting techniques of the Wolf School. Of course they lack the reflexes of witchers, but they are making good progress, given the short time. And some are also very zealous when it comes to study of beasts. They can’t wait for us going on our first expedition and test their new knowledge in practice."
"But you won't jump directly to crabspider hunting, are you? I've heard that the beasts can sometimes be dangerous even for experienced witchers …" She winked provocatively at him.
Eskel snorted. "And I've heard that there should be an antidote by now. Which would not be the case without the fearless dedication of an experienced witcher."
Thalia gave him a big grin.

As they entered the courtyard of the winery, it was busy as always. Geralt's employees took care of their last chores for the day. Marlene, the cook, was on her way to the manor's kitchen, holding a basket of fresh herbs in her arms. Thalia was already looking forward to the dinner. Marlene's cooking skills had more than honored her in recent weeks. In their own home, Eskel and she would probably have to cook for themselves. Thalia decided to ask Marlene for a few recipes before leaving.

Arriving in the entrance hall, Thalia paused briefly. Had she just heard right? Eskel, with his much finer ear, of course, immediately recognized the snarling voice that sounded in the main living room. Astonished, Eskel glanced at Thalia and walked quickly into the parlour. When Thalia hurried after him, she saw that her hearing had not mislead her.

Lambert sat with Geralt at the table and talked to him about his experiences on the path. On the sofa
sat Triss, who seemed engaged in a conversation with Yennefer. When Eskel and Thalia entered the room, everyone looked up.
"Lambert!" Eskel hugged the younger witcher who had risen from his chair. "What are you doing here? We hadn't expected you until fall."

"Oh ..." Lambert waved a little sheepishly. "The contract situation in Kovir and Poviss is getting lousy. In addition, it is already starting to get cold in the middle of summer. I figured I could spend the rest of the season just as well here in Toussaint. After all, my cock doesn't freeze to an icicle here."
"A hot-blooded sorceress will know how to prevent that."

"Geralt!" Yennefer glared disapprovingly at the white-haired witcher. He shrugged his shoulders apologetically, smiling. "Behave yourself," Yennefer said, shaking her head.

Lambert acknowledged Geralt's comment with a wry grin. "Since Triss wanted to pay you a visit anyway, I thought I'd take the opportunity and save my way south. My new horse is not the fastest, on this crock it would probably have taken until winter to arrive here."

"You've changed your horse again?" Eskel, who had formed a solid unit with Scorpion for many years, could not understand Lambert's habit of frequently changing his mount. Thalia worried once in a while how Eskel would cope with the loss of his warhorse when the now quite old animal died.

"Because of this whole mess in Oxenfurt, I couldn't pick up my horse in time from the rental barn in Pont Vanis. When the advance I paid had run out, those pricks sold it. At least my saddle was still there. And I got a proper compensation. The jerk was reluctant at first, but after a few well-placed arguments, he then turned in."
Thalia saw Eskel's mouth twist in disapproval. His brother had a different way of dealing with people. Thalia was glad that Eskel had a more peaceful mind.

"Hello, Thalia." Triss approached her and Thalia hugged the sorceress. "It's nice to see you, Triss." Since her forced stay in Kovir, the relationship between Thalia and Triss had improved a lot. Thalia was really glad to meet the sorceress again so soon.

"I see you have already settled in very well." Triss smiled at her. "I heard you and Keira are already working in the university and Eskel has also found a new job. I'm glad you have met it here so well."
Her eyes fell on Thalia's hand, as if she was looking for something there. She noticed Thalia's questioning look. "The acid spot on your hand is barely visible. I was afraid the scar would remind you every day of the terrible experiences in prison. It's good that you held onto your courage when it came down to it, Thalia." Triss turned half to Eskel and gave him a quick wink.

He pressed his lips together for a moment and looked down. Thalia could not figure out what the sorceress was alluding to - probably an old story she did not know about. But before she could think about it, Triss pulled something out of her bag. An amulet of purple stone shimmered in the sorceress' hand. "I thought you didn't need the healing amulet anymore, Thalia. So I brought you this."
Thalia accepted the amulet with a questioning look. "Uh ... thank you ..."

Triss smiled at her. Her eyes flashed with anticipation - apparently she couldn't wait to explain herself.
"Do you remember what you told me just before you left, Thalia? The things you were so worried about? Well ... this amulet should delay these worries for at least thirty to forty years."
Thalia swallowed, barely comprehending what Triss had just told her. Should that really be possible?

"We sorcerers use magic to slow our aging. Since you are just a little magically gifted, the spell will
not last for several centuries, but the catalyst in your body enhances the effect of the amulet so much that you should have a long life ahead of you. And grow old with Eskel."

Thalia felt tears of relief and gratitude rise to her eyes. With a barely suppressed sob, she hugged the sorceress. "Thanks, Triss. I cannot tell you how grateful I am ... "

Eskel joined them. Thalia broke away from Triss and he hugged her tight. Thalia smiled, head against his shoulder, tears running down her cheeks. "Now maybe I'll see how you look with gray hair."

Eskel looked over Thalia's head at Triss. "Thank you, Triss."

She smiled knowingly at him. "I'm glad you found your luck, Eskel. And I wish for it to last."

The sound of an opening portal in the courtyard, followed by hasty steps, made her look at the door through which Keira was furiously rushing into the room. "Thalia, can you imagine what insolence this Laurence presumed again? I …" In the middle of a sentence she paused as her eyes fell on the newcomers. For a moment she froze when she saw Lambert.

"Hello, Keira." Lambert seemed a little embarrassed, unsure how she would react to his unexpected arrival. But the doubt in his eyes vanished as she hurried toward him, hugging him.

Geralt rose from his chair. "I think I'll get some bottles out of the cellar. The evening seems perfect for a good vintage."

* * *

Six bottles of "White Wolf" later, they were still sitting together. Thalia told about the renovation of their house, which was almost completed. "Finally our own home. I cannot wait. Although we are of course very grateful to have been able to stay with you for so long," she turned to Geralt and Yennefer. "And you could stay even longer, if you want." Geralt poured himself some wine.

"Having an own household is something different than our guest wing, Geralt." Yennefer smiled coolly. "I'm glad you found such a pretty property, Thalia. The way to the university and the garrison is also much shorter from there."

"Doesn't it cause offense if an unmarried woman lives with a man?" Triss gave Eskel a questioning look. "In most areas this doesn't contribute to a lady's reputation."

Thalia shook her head. "Moral standards in Toussaint are fortunately a bit more liberal. And I don't mind if some people chat about us."

Eskel felt the need for fresh air. He apologized to the others and went out to the porch. He sat down on one of the benches and inhaled deeply the cool evening air. It was already dark and the stars were twinkling in the cloudless sky.

Eskel sighed. He had understood the allusions of Triss. She was apparently surprised that he still had not put his plan into action. Just like him.

He had always waited for the perfect moment, had been a few times already close to telling Thalia what he had already formulated tens of times in his mind. But each time he had hesitated, felt ridiculous, and decided to wait for a better moment.

He heard the door open and how heavy footsteps approached him. Geralt.
"May I sit?"
"Go ahead. It's your porch."
"True." Geralt dropped heavily beside Eskel on the bench. The wine was apparently effective despite his witcher constitution.

"Well, Eskel. What's wrong?"
Eskel hesitated. "Oh ... it's just ... it's changed so much lately. It's all for the better, and I'm happy with how everything developed, but ... You know, sometimes I think back to Vesemir's words. No witcher ever died in his bed. Will you and I be the first, Geralt?" Eskel shook his head bitterly.
"What would Vesemir say if he saw us here now?"

Geralt took a deep breath. "I think he would be happy for us. I think he would not want us, the last of a dying species, to desperately cling to our old way of life when another path is open to us. Anyway, I make myself believe it." He sighed. "Would you have thought that possible ten, fifteen years ago? Both of us, settled in Toussaint, a woman by our side?"

Eskel snorted with a smile. "I can hardly believe it now." He became more serious. "I'm afraid I'll screw it up, Geralt. That in the long run I cannot offer her what she wants. I've been alone all my life, always caring for myself, never having to look after anyone. What if I'm not up to it, Geralt?"
"Well, you never know that before, Eskel. But if you don't try, you will never know. She loves you, you know that."
"I do. And I love her. But what if that's not enough?"
"It's definitely more than just the path, my friend. But Thalia and you, you'll get it right. So do what you're planning to do for months."

"He should finally throw away his old, holey jerkin?" Lambert had followed them onto the porch and sat now unasked to Eskel and Geralt on the bench. Eskel sighed. "Thank you, Lambert, but I already have a new wardrobe, if you haven't noticed."
"I have. And if you finally make Thalia a respectable woman, don't forget that I helped you with good advice back then. Otherwise you might never have got it right."
"I'll think of you when I ask her. How do you know about it?"

"Triss told me. She thought that you were probably already in the middle of preparing for the big day. But I see that she overestimated you. By the way, she's got over you if you're interested. She has been meeting for some time with a mischievous sorcerer who has settled in Kovir."
"I'm happy for her. What about you and Keira?"
"You can stay here anytime, my friend," Geralt interjected.

Lambert snorted with a grin. "I don't know yet how it goes on, to be honest. First, I stay in Toussaint, do what you apparently have no more desire for and everything else we'll see. But I already know I won't return to Kaer Morhen. I'm not sitting in this shitty ruin in winter alone."

Geralt nodded slowly. "I have often thought about what we should do with Kaer Morhen. Yennefer says she could pull a magical veil around the fortress with Keira's and maybe Triss's help. Then it stays hidden from everyone's eyes and also the weather no longer eats on the walls."
Eskel looked thoughtfully into the sky, then sighed. "We should get the books from the library first. I could use the beastiaries well for teaching the cadets. And I would like to take some of the weapons with me from the hall. For nostalgic reasons."

Lambert nodded. "Then it's probably decided. We leave Kaer Morhen. For good."

* * *

"Do we really have to scramble up here? It's so hot, Eskel. What is so special up there?"
"Be patient. It's not far anymore."
"I hope so. No matter what's up there, I want to go into the shade and have a drink."
"That can be arranged."

Though slightly out of breath as she climbed, Thalia kept chatting. "Did you find anything interesting here? Any creatures that breed here? Or mushrooms? Keira and I are working on mushroom spores, you know? I've never been much into mushrooms, but they're more interesting than you'd think."
"Certainly."

Eskel pushed a branch aside with his arm, revealing the goal of their small climb. He had picked up Thalia from the university and invited her to a trip to the mountains around Beauclair. That her enthusiasm was limited - it was really warm today - he had noticed, but with the hint that he wanted to show her something, he had aroused her curiosity. Since then she was trying to figure out what the goal of their little hike was. When her eyes fell on his surprise, her flow of speech ended abruptly.

On the plateau on the slope of the mountain lay a blanket spread, in the shade of a tree stood on a tray a wine decanter, cups and a bowl of fruit. From up here, the view was right across Beauclair, which showed all its glory in the afternoon sun - and one could even see their house on the outskirts.

"Oh, Eskel!" Thalia was completely captivated by the view. "How did you discover this beautiful spot?"
"During a hunting trip a few days ago, I happened to pass by."
"And by coincidence, even wine is ready for us." She smiled brightly at him. Eskel presumed she might be suspicious.

When they had settled on the blanket, he poured the wine and handed her a mug, she looked at him almost expectantly. There would be no turning back now. He had been waiting too long anyway. The right moment, the right mood, the courage that had left him several times when he was about to get the ring out of his pocket and ask her.

Again and again he had doubts as to whether he really was the right one for her. Wouldn't she be happier with a cultured, well-situated academic by her side? Someone who might be able to give her children - even though she had often hinted that she did not need a family to lead a fulfilling life. He hoped that was true. Because he wouldn't be able to fulfill this wish. He took a deep breath.

"Thalia ..." The words he had prepared in his mind broke up. He knew exactly what he had to do when he faced a fiend. But this was much more difficult ...
He looked Thalia in the eye. "You know, I've always been alone all my life. Well ... not always, but ... after the fall of Kaer Morhen I followed the path alone. I thought that was my destiny, as a witcher. But ..." Why was it so difficult for him to think clearly? He felt ridiculous, silly with his stammer.

Thalia still looked at him with a slight smile. She had to know what he wanted to say by now. But he didn't expect help from her side. He took a deep breath and started again.
"I ... I didn't know all those years that I was missing something. Until I met you. Since then, my only wish was to be with you. I love you, my heart. And ... if you can imagine spending your life with me ..."

His mouth was getting drier. He had never been good with words, only with deeds. He pulled a small, velvet bundle out of his pocket and pulled the cloth apart. On his palm was the ring he had already bought from a jeweler in Kovir.
Two intertwined strands, one of red gold, the other of white gold - similar to the ring that Thalia had to trade for his rescue. A classic Kovirian engagement ring.

At the sight of the jewel Thalia drew in a sharp breath. Perhaps it had been a mistake to offer her a ring like the one she had received from Gregor? He had thought this a good idea, but perhaps the memory of the man who had asked her before now clouded the moment. Or was it not the ring – was it just him?

"If you ... I mean I'd understand it, if you would ..."
Thalia's eyes were moist, then she smiled brightly at him. "Yes, Eskel. Of course I do."

As he kissed her, the tension and uncertainty fell away. It felt right. Right, to be here with her. Right, to say goodbye to his old life.
Even in a witcher's life, it took more than the path. And Eskel was glad to have found it.

The End

Chapter End Notes

Finally this story reached its end. I hope you liked it - even in the dark and dirty Witcher-world we sometimes need a happy ending ...
I cannot thank my wonderful beta-reader OpheliaTheMoth enough - without you, this English version of my story would not have been possible.

I already miss Eskel and Thalia and I plan to visit them someday for one or two short sequels.
But for now I’m happy that I brought this story to an end.
If you liked it I would be glad if you leave a comment or a kudo for me.

And if you’d like to accompany me while I write my first novel you can check out my Instagram account melissa_martin_autorin.
I’m ready with plotting, creating the world and the characters and will post a few facts about it soon.
Please wish me luck for my big new project.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!