

The Posting House at Crow's Ridge squatted at the intersection of two muddy roads like a toad. The stone walls needed repointing, the thatch roof sagged in the middle, and the sign hanging above the door depicted what might have been a crow or possibly a very unfortunate chicken. In the paddock behind the building, eight horses stood in various states of boredom, tails swishing at flies that had survived into autumn through sheer stubbornness.

Oenomaus and Cynthia approached from the tree line. Two guards lounged in the yard, cudgels hanging from their belts, from their posture, Oenomaus could tell they were not ready to fight if it came down to it. They straightened when they spotted the approaching pair, hands moving toward their weapons, but relaxed when they saw Cynthia's fine clothing. The Griffin medallion at Oenomaus's chest earned him a different reaction, narrowed eyes, hands staying near the cudgels.

The inn's door swung open as they crossed the yard. The innkeeper emerged, wiping his hands on a stained apron. He was balding, and the remaining hair looked like wet grass after rain. His gaze swept over Cynthia first, looking at her clothes, and he seemed to realise that she was not a simple customer.

Then his eyes found Oenomaus.

"Coin upfront, freak," the innkeeper said. "And your kind sleeps in the stable."

Oenomaus had heard variations of this speech in every inn from Kovir to Temeria. He glared at the man; he knew his kind was not like. A Witcher was a Witcher, but he would not sleep in the stables; he was no animal.

Cynthia spoke first.

"This witcher," she said with authority. She stepped forward, positioning herself between Oenomaus and the innkeeper. "Saved my life from a

manticore yesterday. He killed the beast with his bare hands while my entire escort lay dead on the road."

The man scoffed, but it seemed his hospitality didn't waver completely. "We are aware how powerful they are, my lady, I didn't mean-"

"This man saved my life from a manticore yesterday. He killed the beast while my entire escort lay dead on the road. Alone. With nothing but his blades and his Signs."

"Well," he said slowly, "a manticore's good work, I suppose. Dangerous beasts, those." He looked at Oenomaus with renewed assessment. "Still. Can't be too careful. Your kind has a reputation, my lady. I'm sure you understand."

"I understand perfectly. I understand that this man risked his life while professional soldiers died around him. I understand that he's asking to purchase horses, not charity. And I understand that the regional magistrate takes a keen interest in coaching inns along this route. Particularly their tax compliance. I'm certain he'd be fascinated to learn how much coin passes through Crow's Ridge without appearing in the ledgers."

The innkeeper's jaw tightened. His eyes flicked to Cynthia's fine cloak, the noble bearing she wore like armor, then back to Oenomaus.

"Of course, my lady. Of course." He gestured toward the paddock with exaggerated courtesy. "I wouldn't dream of inconveniencing you. Or your... companion." The man looked like he tasted something sour. "The horses are this way. I'm sure we can come to an arrangement. A fair arrangement." Another pause. "Though I should mention, prices have gone up recently. Bandit activity on the roads. Supply issues. I'm sure a lady of your station understands how business works."

He turned and walked toward the paddock.

"Lead the way," she said coolly. "And do remember-I'll be providing a full report of this transaction to my relatives in Oxenfurt. They have... extensive connections with the Merchants' Guild."

The innkeeper's back went even stiffer, but he said nothing. He led them to the paddock, his silence louder than any protest.

The guards followed at a respectful distance.

The eight horses ranged in quality from serviceable to adequate. Oenomaus walked the fence line, examining each animal with the same attention he'd given the manticore hide that morning. Conformation first. A horse's build told you what work it could handle. Then temperament. A skittish mount could get you killed when a drowner emerged from a riverbank.

Cynthia joined him at the fence. She vaulted over the rail with surprising grace, landing lightly in the mud, and approached the nearest horse, a grey mare with good bone structure and intelligent eyes. The mare snorted and sidestepped, ears flicking back, but Cynthia spoke to her in a low murmur. The mare settled.

Cynthia ran her hands along the mare's neck, down the shoulder, checking muscle tone. She lifted each hoof in turn, examining the frog and sole for signs of thrush or stone bruises. She checked the mare's teeth, pulling back the lips to assess age and dental health, then moved to the horse's flank and pressed her palm flat against the ribs, feeling for soundness in the breathing.

"Seven years old," she said. "Good feet, no lameness, clean wind. She's been worked but not abused. I'll take her."

Oenomaus raised an eyebrow. "You ride well?"

"I grew up in Cintra before Aretuza. Everyone in Cintra rides." She patted the mare's neck. "Cavalry culture. I was jumping courses at eight years old."

"Cintra." That explained her tone. Cintran nobility were known for two things: horsemanship and arrogance. The Nilfgaardian conquest hadn't bred out either trait.

He turned his attention to the remaining horses. The roan gelding caught his eye, stockier than the mare, built for endurance rather than speed. It stood placidly despite the commotion. He approached and the gelding turned its head to look at him, then lost interest.

Oenomaus checked the same points Cynthia had examined on the mare. The gelding passed inspection. Good feet, sound legs, no visible vices. Dull temperament. He liked that in a horse.

"This one," he said to the innkeeper.

"That's Russet. Solid animal." The innkeeper ran his hand along the fence rail. "Fourteen crowns for the pair, with saddles and tack included."

Twenty crowns was robbery, but arguing would waste time they couldn't spare. Oenomaus reached for his purse.

Cynthia held up a hand. "Twelve crowns. And you'll throw in saddlebags and three days' provisions."

The innkeeper's jaw worked for a moment. He glanced between Cynthia and Oenomaus, then back to his horses. "My lady, with all respect, and I do respect your position, these are quality animals. Well-trained, well-fed. Russet

carried a merchant to Oxenfurt and back just last week. The mare there's got Cintran bloodlines, you can see it in the build." He spread his hands in a gesture of reasonableness. "Eighteen crowns. Saddles, tack, and saddlebags. That's fair value. The provisions I can include, but I've got costs too. Feed isn't cheap with winter coming."

Cynthia's expression remained perfectly composed. "Fifteen crowns. Saddles, tack, saddlebags, and provisions for three days. Generous provisions, not traveler's rations."

"Seventeen," the innkeeper countered. "And the provisions will be good quality. You have my word."

"Fifteen," Cynthia repeated, her voice flat. "And a written receipt. Itemized. For the magistrate's records when I report this transaction to my relatives in Oxenfurt."

The innkeeper's face tightened. He looked at the horses, then back at Cynthia, weighing his options. The mention of magistrates and itemized receipts had clearly struck a nerve, but he wasn't folding entirely.

"Sixteen crowns," he said finally. "That's my final offer, my lady. Take it or leave it. I've got other customers coming through, and winter feed costs what it costs. I can't go lower without taking a loss."

Sixteen crowns was still expensive, but it was also arguably defensible if the man kept clean books.

Cynthia reached into her cloak and produced a small leather purse. She counted out sixteen crowns, stacking them on the fence post between them. "Sixteen crowns. Saddles, tack, saddlebags, and three days' provisions. Good quality. And the written receipt."

The innkeeper swept the coins into his palm and pocketed them. "You'll have everything ready in ten minutes. And your receipt." He turned toward the stable. "Jory! Get Russet and the grey mare saddled. Full tack, saddlebags, and pack three days' road provisions. Good ones."

He walked away, looking satisfied.

Twenty minutes later they rode south from Crow's Ridge, properly mounted and provisioned.

Oenomaus glanced back once. The innkeeper stood in the yard watching them go, arms crossed, his expression unreadable. The guards had already returned to their posts.

"You let him win the last round," Oenomaus said.

"I let him keep his dignity. Push a man too far and he starts thinking about revenge instead of profit. Let him feel like he held his ground, and he just wants you gone. Besides, sixteen crowns for two good horses, tack, and provisions? That's actually reasonable. Twelve was never realistic. I just wanted to see how far he'd bend before he broke."

"And the magistrate threat?"

"Real enough, vague enough that he can't disprove it." She patted the mare's neck. "The best leverage is the kind your target creates for themselves. I guarantee that man's ledgers won't survive close scrutiny. He knows it. I know it. That's enough."

Oenomaus was quiet for a moment. He thought about the innkeeper. The way the man had calculated his position, weighed his options, drawn a line he was

willing to defend. The way Cynthia had recognized that line and chosen not to cross it.

"Thank you," he said finally.

Cynthia turned her head, studying him with those green-gold eyes. "You're thinking about how easily I changed his behavior."

"Observant."

"You're thinking about the difference between us. How I can put on a disguise and the world treats me differently. How you can't."

He said nothing.

"You're right," she said. "It's not fair. But fairness is a luxury neither of us can afford right now." She urged the mare into a canter, pulling ahead on the road. "Come on. We have fifteen miles to cover and a cache to raid before dark."

Oenomaus nudged the gelding forward, following her into the afternoon.

The terrain changed as they rode northwest. Lowland marsh gave way to rocky hills. The soil went from heavy clay to limestone and sandstone. Birch and oak forests thinned into scrubland dotted with junipers. The air grew drier, carrying the mineral smell of exposed stone instead of wet rot.

They rode in silence for the first hour. Oenomaus catalogued the terrain the way he always did: sight lines, ambush points, a ravine that might hold water in the wet season. A decade off the Path hadn't changed that.

Cynthia broke the silence. "Tell me about the Griffin School. What was it like? What were the tenets?"

Oenomaus considered how much to share. The Griffin School had been his home for seventy years. He'd arrived as a frightened Ofieri boy. By the time he left, he could kill a griffin, treat a curse, and recite Dobromir's tenets in his sleep.

"Founded after the witcher schism," he said. "When the original witcher order fractured over philosophical differences. The Griffins believed in discipline, tactical thinking, Sign mastery. We were supposed to be the thinking witchers. The ones who used our heads instead of just our swords."

"And yet the school fell to an avalanche. That's ironic."

She wasn't mocking him, but it stung. "Natural disasters don't care about tactics."

"No. I suppose they don't." She adjusted her seat in the saddle, settling more comfortably. "What were the tenets? You mentioned them last night."

"Honor, discipline, measured force. Grand Master Dobromir believed witchers should be more than killers. We were supposed to be protectors. Knights, in the classical sense." The words tasted bitter. "It was a beautiful idea. Reality was less cooperative."

Cynthia was quiet for a moment. "You don't sound like you believe it anymore."

"I believed it when I was young. When the world seemed like something that could be protected through proper application of force and righteousness." He watched the horizon, where the limestone caves would appear in another hour's ride. "Then I learned what people do to witchers. How fast gratitude turns to violence. The tenets held. The world didn't."

"So you stopped being a witcher."

"I stopped walking the Path. There's a difference."

"Is there?"

"A witcher is what you are. The Path is what you do." He glanced at her. "You of all people should understand that distinction. You're a mage whether or not you're serving Nilfgaard."

"Fair point." She reached up to adjust her wig, tucking a loose strand back into place. The auburn curls gleamed copper in the afternoon light. "You wanted formal instruction in magic. We should start now."

He hadn't expected the pivot, but he understood it. She was steering them away from his history on purpose.

"Now? On horseback?"

"Theory first. Practice later." She held up one hand, palm facing the sky. "Tell me what you know about the fundamental difference between Signs and sorcery."

Oenomaus thought back to the texts he'd studied in Lan Exeter, the salvaged fragments of magical theory that Master Keldar had preserved. "Signs are pre-structured chaos manipulation. Fixed formulas burned into neural pathways during the mutations. They're fast, reliable, but limited in scope and power."

"Correct. And sorcery?"

"Pure chaos, shaped by will and knowledge in the moment. Infinitely more flexible. Vastly more powerful. But slower to cast and requiring extensive training."

"Almost correct." She drew her hand in a small circle, and flame appeared above her palm. A small sphere of fire, the size of an apple, floating without fuel or visible source. "Watch carefully."

Oenomaus focused his witcher senses on the flame. The fire burned clean, yet, there was no fuel for it.

Cynthia moved her fingers and the flame changed color. Orange to blue to white to a violet so intense it hurt to look at. Each shift took about a second.

"Try to sense the difference between this and your Igni," she said.

Oenomaus reached for the part of himself that connected to chaos. The mutations had carved channels through his nervous system, pathways that gave him access to raw magic without the years of training mages required. The channels were narrow and fixed, like irrigation ditches cut into stone. He poured his awareness through them, feeling for the texture of Cynthia's sorcery.

"I can feel it," he said. "Your fire is... fluid. Mine is static."

"Good." She closed her hand and the flame vanished. "Signs are like weapons. A sword cuts because it's been forged for cutting. You can't suddenly decide your sword should burn instead. Sorcery is like water. It takes whatever shape you pour it into. But controlling water requires knowledge, will, and practice."

"And the mutations that let me use Signs prevent me from learning sorcery."

"Not prevent. Complicate." She looked at him with a soft expression. "You've spent a century channeling chaos through fixed formulas. Your mind has grooves worn into it. Deep channels that magic flows through automatically. We need to teach you how to step outside those grooves. How to hold chaos in your mind without letting it snap into Sign structure."

"How long will that take?"

"For most mages? Months. For you?" She paused. "Longer. Your mutations fight the training. But you're also older, more disciplined, more patient than most apprentices. That might compensate."

Months. Maybe years. He'd spent thirty years pressing against this ceiling and now it looked higher than he'd thought.

"Try something for me," Cynthia said. "Hold out your hand."

He extended his left hand, palm up, reins in his right.

"Now reach for chaos. Not a Sign. Just the raw stuff. Try to gather it in your palm without shaping it into Igni or Aard."

Oenomaus closed his eyes and reached inward. He found the channels fast, the pathways carved by the Trials, humming with latent energy. He poured his will into them and tried to draw chaos without triggering the Sign structures.

Igni kept trying to snap into place. He pushed it down and held the formless chaos, refusing to let it crystallize.

Three seconds. Then he lost his grip, and the chaos dissipated. The ache behind his eyes was the only thing left.

He opened his eyes. "I lost it."

"You held it for three seconds. That's better than I expected for a first attempt." Cynthia looked pleased. "The fact that you can grasp it at all means you have the potential. We just need to strengthen it."

"How?"

"Practice. Every day. Multiple times per day." She adjusted her grip on the reins as the grey mare picked her way around a fallen log. "The goal is to build new channels in your mind. Pathways that bypass the Sign structures. It's like learning to write with your off hand. Possible, but awkward at first."

Oenomaus flexed his left hand. He could still feel the ghost of those three seconds. "I've spent thirty years trying to push past the ceiling the mutations imposed. You're telling me I was trying the wrong way."

"You were trying to force the Signs to do more than they're designed for. That's like trying to make a knife function as a saw. It might work, poorly, but you're fighting the tool's nature." She met his eyes. "What I'm teaching you is how to set down the knife and pick up something else entirely."

They rode in silence for a time. The limestone caves appeared on the horizon, a dark smudge against the rocky hillside.

"There," Oenomaus said, pointing.

Cynthia followed his gaze. "Your cache?"

"My cache." He thought about the Griffin sigil carved into the stone above the entrance. He hadn't seen it in years.

They urged the horses forward, toward the caves and whatever waited inside.

The Griffin sigil was still there, carved into the limestone above the cave entrance. Time and weather had worn the edges soft, but the shape remained clear: a griffin rampant, wings spread, talons extended. Oenomaus dismounted and approached the carving, reaching up to trace the lines with his fingers.

Eighty years since Kaer Seren fell. Eighty years since the last Griffin witcher walked this path with purpose and brotherhood. Now there was just him, touching a carving nobody else would recognize.

His medallion hummed against his chest. He turned, scanning the area.

Four horses stood tethered to a scraggly juniper thirty yards from the cave entrance. Good animals, well-fed, wearing decent tack. Mounts that cost money.

Cynthia dismounted beside him, her hand moving to the concealed dagger at her waist. She'd drawn the weapon from her boot and palmed it without thinking about it. "Company?"

"Four horses. Probably eight to ten men inside, if they're sharing mounts." He tilted his head, listening. His witcher hearing picked up voices from deep in the cave. Rough laughter. The clink of bottles. Under that, a woman crying out. The sound stopped. More laughter.

"Bandits," he said. "With prisoners."

Cynthia's expression went flat. "How many prisoners?"

"Two. Women." He closed his eyes, focusing his senses. Enhanced hearing filtered through the cave's acoustics, parsing individual heartbeats from the general noise. "One's breathing is controlled. The other is terrified."

"Can you tell their positions?"

"Bound near the back of the cave. Nine men around a campfire in the main chamber. They're drunk or getting there." He opened his eyes. "And they have no idea we're here."

Cynthia moved to her horse and retrieved something from her saddlebag. A length of dark cloth, which she used to cover the grey mare's white blaze. Then she led both horses deeper into the scrub, tethering them out of sight from the cave entrance.

When she came back, her face was different. The same look she'd worn during the manticore fight.

"Plan?" she asked.

"I go in first. Use Aard to blow out their campfire, create darkness and chaos. You follow with lightning strikes, targeted at the bandits furthest from the prisoners. I engage close quarters with steel. You provide support from range and make sure the prisoners don't catch a stray bolt."

"Coordination signal?"

"I'll count down from three with my fingers once we're in position."

"Works for me." She rolled her shoulders. "Any of them mages?"

"No magical signatures. Just regular bastards with steel."

"Those are my favorite kind."

They approached the cave entrance in silence. Oenomaus drew his steel sword. The blade came free without sound. Cynthia's hands began to glow with gathered chaos, faint blue-white light that she kept low against her body.

He paused at the threshold and listened one last time. The bandits' voices echoed from within, relaxed and confident.

He held up his left hand where Cynthia could see it. Three fingers extended.

Two.

One.

He released Aard into the cave entrance.