



Juraj Poništ

THE WINGS  
OF VIRTUE

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**The Wings of Virtue**

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## **Dedication**

To my Love, Zuzka Ľuptáková. Thank you for waiting for me.

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## Leaving Home

*There is no way back. I came too far.* Agal took a deep breath and knocked on the door. No answer. *Tobias is relaxing in the back near the trophies. I will not stand here as a fool and wait till I get drenched to skin.* “Agal, is that you?” the question could be heard behind the door. “Who else would it be?” Tobias peeked out of the door, smiling. “I thought some frightened little bird fled into the door.” Agal stepped into the spacious room where he finally met Tobias.

“Your father is still not back?” asked Agal. “No. But because I know him well, I suppose that he and Martinez must be getting drunk somewhere,” said Tobias and approached a fireplace that was burning with flames. Agal took off his coat and sat by the fireplace. “That’s right. When it comes to his duty as a mayor, he is all thumbs, but he is good at making booze,” Tobias carried on speaking and licked the spoon. “Amazing! It’s evident that it is me who cooked the meal,” he praised himself and started serving a dish.

“It’s great that you have somebody to compliment you,” mocked him Agal. “You will compliment me too, just wait.” Tobias handed bean soup to Agal. “But I...”, “What you? Stop stalling as a fool and eat. God knows when father comes back, and more importantly, in what condition.”

“I thought that we are going to have a kind of a meeting,” remarked Agal and started eating the soup. “But I didn’t mention that there will be no talk, did I?” said Tobias and sat down across Agal with his own bowl of soup. “Trust me, father would have to be extremely wasted not to be able to speak with us.” And suddenly, one could hear heavy rain pouring from

the sky onto the roof of a hunters' cabin. "Great, papa will at least sober up a bit," said Tobias with a furtive smile on his face.

"And what about you? Are you excited for your first adventure?" he asked. "To speak frankly, I am terribly afraid," whispered the boy. "There is nothing to be afraid of. You are going with the best hunters in Higar." "That is the only thing keeping me afloat." "I think it is best to ask now," said Tobias slowly. "You want to know why?" whispered Agal and looked at him. "For the allowance, as everybody else. My mother is ill. It's hard to tell what can happen without decent doctors. However, such doctors take decent money. The medication is not cheap as well. I also thought about joining Richard's regiment but that I see as a last resort. I'd rather wander through the Dead Woods in pursuit of a unicorn than to serve to that pig of a man." "You are reading my mind, dear friend. Even my own self would rather have my own legs cut off than to murder people for that greedy man."

"Want some more?" asked Tobias. Agal nodded in agreement. "Well, the first thing that came to my mind, of course, was that you're doing it for your mother. I was just curious if there isn't some other reason as well." "You're right," said Agal. "I am not doing that only for her..." He was just about to explain what he wants to do with the rest of the money, when the door suddenly swung open and Leonard stepped into the cabin. "For God's sake," said the old hunter with excitement, hanged his hat and his cloak on a peg in the hall and walked quickly towards the fireplace. "Agal, you are finally here! I don't know if I would be able to stay awake for much longer tonight," continued Leonard.

“Tobias, how many times do I have to tell you that I hate beans?” growled Leonard. “Does that mean you won’t be eating?” asked Tobias with a grin on his face. Leonard’s fatigued stare spoke volumes. He took out three yellowish bundles of parchment out of his haversack. “Three golden coins. Each for one permission,” said Leonard. “That bastard was not to bargain with even though the competition is already running.”





“Well, you know, he has to act exemplary so that the beloved king would praise him,” said Tobias sarcastically. “However, he keeps forgetting one simple thing: there are already enough mayors licking Richard’s ass. In fact, there are so many of them that he cannot tell who is who,” remarked Agal. “You’re right,” agreed Leonard and started eating the soup. “Did you at least swap that horse of yours?” “Yes, Storm is gone,” agreed Leonard. “I led her to Abater. He prowls on the West Ridge. Storm is on her last legs. She can be at least used as a prey.” “Poor girl, she has been carrying somebody on her back her whole life and what she gets? She is thrown to the wolves,” Agal became sad.

“That’s life,” said Leonard calmly. “Maybe we ourselves will once carry somebody on our back and then, just for fun, will be thrown to the wolves.” “So you’ve got new blood,” said Tobias. “For unholy money, but yes, I do,” said Leonard. “Do not even ask me how much Lukas wanted. But enough of these unimportant chit-chats.” Leonard moved his plate and crossed his arms across his chest.

“The night has advanced and a long journey is expecting us tomorrow. I believe that the safest way to Last Camp would be a detour around the Silent Pass.” “But that will take too much time!” blurted out Tobias. “Till we get to the North Gate someone from Higar will have already managed to hunt down that unicorn and we won’t get any reward!” Leonard mistrustfully raised his eyebrow. “Tobias, that competition has been running for three months now and still nothing. There is no sign of a lucky person that would return from the Dead Woods successfully. And trust me, if somebody as such existed, whole Higar would have known about him. If there was no success for the whole three months, it is highly

probable that there will be no luck even when it will take us longer to slowly get to the North Gate.”

“That road isn’t even safe,” objected Tobias and quickly carried on talking: “The Silent Pass washes over Ice Hill, which is full of bandits. Even a child in Higar knows that The Bleak Mountains are where those bastards hide.” “Yes, you’re right: they have their hideouts there, however, the position of the hideouts is not as important as the position of the bandits,” glibly answered Leonard. Agal knew that the old hunter expected these kinds of arguments so he prepared accordingly. “Just think, Tobias, why would bandits stack around the Bleak Mountains when they can get pretty rich robbing packed wagons travelling to the Dead Woods?”

“You’ve got a good point there,” agreed Agal, taking sides with Leonard. “Last week, I was at the markets in White Fort. There was nothing else that people discussed but robberies of the wagons going to Last Camp.” “Just as I was saying,” said Leonard. “Only a few bandits wouldn’t succumb to such an alluring opportunity.” Leonard quickly pulled out a long dagger from a scabbard hanging on his belt. “It won’t be the first time that I swapped my own life for one of those monsters.”

“I think it would be cleverer to go by Crow’s Hill and keep a respectful distance from the Red Shores, where bandits won’t be waiting for us,” said Tobias. “Burglars probably assume that everybody follows the main roads. It’s the fastest way. We can fool them into thinking that we will do the same. That will gain us time. Let us not forget that they are good with weapons but they don’t know shit about tracking.” Tobias’ arguments clearly fell on a fertile ground. “You’re right about the tracking,” admitted

Leonard. "It was just a suggestion. Nevertheless, I think that we have to move towards the Ice Mountain right from the beginning to avoid the undesirable meeting. What do you think Agal?" "Tobias' idea seems to be happy medium," said Agal. "It's decided then," said Leonard. "Agal, you will sleep in a hunters' hall. If you want to chat, feel free, but you have to excuse an old man. That Martinez' booze was stronger than me. In fact, it is getting stronger every year. Well, never mind: there is at least something he is getting better in." "I would also like to lie down already," promptly responded Agal when the old hunter walked out the door. "I've had enough for today. I am a potter but I often feel as if I was working in a mine." "I understand, my friend," responded Tobias to Agal's lie. They both knew that Agal is just stalling for time before revealing his secret to Tobias. Agal curled up underneath the trophies where restless dreams awaited him.

By dawn, Tobias whispered carefully into Agal's ear: "Let's go, buddy." Agal would have given up all his money to turn back time. Agal joined Leonard and Tobias harnessing two black horses to a carriage. Even though Agal adored his own horses, he had to admit that he has never seen a more beautiful animal than Thunder.

"Don't think that I have forgotten our talk," whispered Tobias into Agal's ear. In the meantime, Leonard was checking the inventory of the carriage. "That makes us two," responded Agal and jumped onto the carriage.

"Well, it's safe to say that there is nobody more ready for the Dead Woods than us," declared Leonard and joined Tobias and Agal to dash out towards the unknown. "You were too tired yesterday so I didn't want to bring this up..." spoke up Tobias when they reached a wide road leading

across a dense forest towards the West Ridge. “What did you learn from Nomar?” “Did you manage to find Virnov’s servant?” blurted out Agal.

“Yes,” contently nodded Leonard. “And there was no need to search for him in Mark’s chambers. That man decided to live together with his wife in the White Fort,” continued and took out his pipe. “My effort was worth it. I have found out some interesting news about unicorns that can be beneficial for us.” “If you are pointing out to twilight, forget it,” brushed off his father Tobias. “Even small kids know that twilight is alluring to them.” “Yes, but there are things that are even more attractive to them,” said Leonard. A wide plain surrounded by wooden houses of craftsmen from Long Shadows appeared before the travelers. The rocky peak of the West Ridge rose above the village. “And above all, twilight will be useless in the Dead Woods. Nomar strictly suggested not leaving the camp after the sunset. There are so many beasts in the woods, even Chiruos have respect for some of them, that leaving the camp would be a suicide. No, no. Waterfalls, dear boys. The waterfalls are for those white animals irresistible. And why? Well, that’s something Magnus hasn’t explained to me yet.”

“Hey Leonard, where are you and your son going?” exclaimed an old muscular blacksmith Lumer from his workshop. “To Dead Shadows, buddy,” answered Leonard. “You aren’t going to chase after the unicorn, are you?” blurted out the blacksmith and looked at Agal. “At least you have some sense and don’t participate in such crazy activities. Work in clay can be poorly paid but at least it’s safe.” “I’ll keep this on my mind”, cried Agal nervously. “I hope we manage to find some waterfall,” remarked Tobias. “Nomar confirmed that there are quite a few waterfalls

but it's questionable how far our camp will be from them," said Leonard, gave reins to Tobias and started to rummage through rugs behind his back. "And in case that the waterfalls won't work, I have an assurance." Leonard took out a whistle that up to now rested below one of the blankets.

"it's yours, a gift from the old hunter." "But I've never..." "None of us have," said calmly Leonard. "Just take it." "Nomar convinced me that the sound of whistle is even more alluring to unicorns than the sound of waterfall," said Agal. He saw that his father is standing in front of the workshop. The look at the man in a dirty apron made him sad. "Hi Tom, have you ever been afraid of your son?" shouted Leonard at the potter. "And why would I be afraid when I know he is with you?" answered Tom. "You're right," nodded Leonard and jumped onto the carriage.

"Is mother in bed?" asked Agal. "Where else would she be?" said Tom sadly. Leonard took initiative straight away. "Agal, go and kiss your mother goodbye and you, Tom, show me what you can give me as a farewell gift?" "Let's go to the workshop as I have something inducing relief in there." Meanwhile, Laura was lying in a tiny bedroom. She had sweat all over her bony face.

"Tom, your booze is great, but the mess you have here... you have done nothing with it, I can see that," said Leonard in the workshop. "Mother, I am here," whispered Agal and began promising what he couldn't possibly fulfill. He promised that he will come back, that they will hunt down the unicorn and he will be able to find the best doctors for his mother. "I don't matter, my son," said Laura. "What matters is that you will come back. Please, come back." "It's hard to leave home and go into the unknown,"

said Agal when he was again sitting in the carriage. "You never leave home," said Leonard and pointed his finger to the boy's chest: "You always carry your home here."

### **Student without a Teacher**

“Tobias and Agal, you will take care of the horses. I will build a fire. There is a river not far away from here. Take Thunder and Chimera there so that they can drink,” commanded Leonard. The day was coming towards its end. One could see a stony edge of the Crow’s Hill rising above the trees. “I was thinking that we could stop by Dular on the Crow’s Hill,” said Leonard by the fire. “I assumed that the old man is wandering through the Ice Mountain,” said Tobias.

“You live in past. He came back,” said Leonard. “Dular knows every tiny rock on the Crow’s Hill. He will be able to give us advice concerning the safest way. I really don’t want to meet any thief on the way to the Red Shores.”

“Yes, Dular has mapped the Crow’s Hill completely, however, I am not sure he will be any helpful due to his madness and progressed reclusion,” proceeded Tobias.

“Agal, Agal....” The young man suddenly realized that the eyes of both hunters are watching him. “What do you think about stopping by Dular tomorrow?” asked Tobias. “I’ve got nothing against it,” murmured Agal. “It’s decided then,” announced Leonard excitedly and started eating dried meat. According to the look on his face, it was clear that Tobias is not very happy about the decision. A tension unknown to Agal could be felt in the atmosphere, colliding with the smoke from the fire. The faces of the hunters suddenly seemed bleak. *Do they hear something I don’t?* Tense atmosphere was even strengthened by a nervous poking of horses. “And I thought that the first day will be calm. Such a naïve wish,” murmured

Leonard, took up his rifle and nodded on a bush behind his back. "Hid! When needed, don't spare the bullets."

Tobias stood up quickly and went towards the bushes. "Go boy. There is a first time for everything," said Leonard and looked sadly at the rifle near Agal's feet. *If I at least knew how to load it*, thought Agal and squatted down next to Tobias.



"Don't worry about father," whispered Tobias and one could see an evil sparkle in his eyes. "Just try not to hit the horses. We will need them." All of a sudden, the boy could hear a silent neigh coming from a meadow underneath them. The sound was immediately followed by an



unexpected appearance of an old horseman. Leonard stayed sitting near the fire and didn't move whatsoever.

"For God's sake, Orner! What are you doing here?" blurted out Leonard. "I am going home, my friend," answered the old man. "Agal, Tobi, come out. Everything's all right," shouted Leonard over his shoulder. "Do you happen to have one free place near the fire?" asked Orner exhaustedly. "Of course, buddy," nodded Leonard. "Orner, this is my son Tobias and my nephew Agal."

"I can see that you do not leave anything to chance," amusedly said Orner when the two young men appeared. "No, I don't," nodded Leonard. "Boys, this is my friend from the times before you were born" continued Leonard. "Tobias, don't be just sitting and waiting. Go and fetch some booze. Agal, you take care of the horse."

"Here you go, eat a bit of the dried meat, don't waste your own supplies," Agal heard Leonard's welcoming voice. "Thank you, my friend." "You don't have to thank your friends and above all, I am beyond glad that you surprised us like this. At least, we can finally taste this beauty."

"Very well, no fire can warm man up as this can," Orner expressed his praise. "Tell me friend, what brings you here? Especially without your student Jacob?" asked Leo. Orner's expression suddenly darkened. "Jacob doesn't need a teacher anymore. He was torn apart by wild animals in a forest." "I am very sorry, friend, I really am," said Leonard and patted Orner dearly on his shoulder. "He was like a son to me. However, his ambition was stronger than him. He could not have been helped." "One can really do nothing in case like that," agreed Leonard. "Even I have been almost ruined by my own ambition."

“The pursuit of a unicorn was too big an attraction for him,” said Orner. “He really didn’t want to be under his father’s shadow. We knew that one should not wander alone in the woods away from the camp. However, the time went fast, and we were still with no success. Jacob was slowly becoming restless. I could teach him many things: from herbs to using swords, but I couldn’t teach patience. He always wanted everything immediately. I made it my priority to tell his parents about his death. I let them down because I couldn’t protect him.”

“You didn’t let anybody down,” said Leonard. “It was Jacob’s decision only. You were his teacher, nevertheless, that doesn’t mean that you were responsible for everything he did.” “Maybe. But say that to my nightmares,” said Orner bitterly. “Sometimes I think if I can ever run away from those shadows. At least for one night. I would give up everything not to feel such wicked remorse. My Jacob, what will I do without you...” sobbed Orner.

“If there is a teacher, there is a student,” said Leonard. Old man resolutely shook his head. “No, my friend, quite the opposite, in fact. If there is a student, there is a teacher. I am not sure if it works vice versa.” “I am sure it does,” said Agal. That night Agal slept in the carriage while Orner and Leonard stayed up and drank. Tobias volunteered to be a night guard. Even though Tobias managed to secure their camp from thieves, he didn’t manage to protect Orner from his nightmares. At dawn, Agal was woken up by a loud gunshot. *You have finally found a place where no nightmares can disturb you.*

“I am extremely glad for having taken the shovel,” said Tobias and wiped away beads of sweat from his forehead. “It’s your turn,” said Tobias,

threw the shovel to Agal and sat down at the edge of the pit. "If somebody walked by, he would think that you force me to dig my own grave," Agal couldn't resist to make such a remark.

"Did you see how Orner... well, you know," asked Agal. "Yes, I did. I thought that he is going to the forest to take a leak," said Tobias. "How desperate a person must be to take his own life," pondered Agal and brushed against a stone. "I hope we will never find out," Leo added earnestly. "Okay, that will do," said the old hunter and nodded at the dead body. "Throw him in and come and help me with the horses."

"We should stop by the Red Shores and send a message about those two to Jacob's parents," said Agal when they were on the road again. Tobias lied down and snored loudly. "That's a waste of time," opposed Leonard. "How soon Roland and Irena find out about Jacob's death and Orner's suicide does not matter: it will not bring back their son."

"Why did you introduce me as your nephew to Orner? Asked Agal. "Your father is like brother to me. We know each other since we were kids and he was always willing to help me when I felt terrible."

"Dular has built a cottage right underneath Crow's hill," spoke out Leonard when they set out on a golden meadow. "I need to warn you, boy. Even though I will never admit this to Tobi. He is right about Dular's rather disturbing judgment. The long solitude, putting it mildly, estranged him from reality. In other words, he thinks that he is always right."

Looking at the old bony man sitting in front of the cottage, Agal comprehended Leonard's term "estranged from reality". Leo stopped the horses right in front of him, but the old man didn't move a bit. "Is this how

you welcome your guests, Dular?" shouted Leonard. "Leonard?!" Dular immediately stood up. "I wasn't expecting you," the hunter excused himself. "I came here for advice?" "Advice?" excitedly repeated Dular. "What advice does an experienced hunter like you need from an old fool like me?" "I am sorry. Come inside and tell me where your son is."

"He is sleeping in a carriage. He was night guarding. You have to excuse us, my friend, but we won't be staying long. I really came just for advice and nothing else." "And what's the rush? You have never declined my hospitality. I hope you are not participating in that stupid thing concerning the unicorn. Are you mad, Leo? It's a nonsense!" called Dular: "Was it you who argued him into it?" he irritably asked Agal. "We persuaded him," Tobias spoke from the carriage. "I would expect that from two young and naïve boys but you, Leonard? I have known you for years now and I've never thought that you would participate in such a stupid thing. Quite the opposite. In fact, I thought you a man who stays reasonable even when everybody around him loses his mind." "What can I say?" shrank his shoulders Leonard. "I guess I am getting young." "There is nothing but death expecting you in that forest," said Dular. "Orner stopped by yesterday, you know him, right? He is a teacher of that old aristocrat. Well, he was, Jacob is dead. Something ripped him to pieces in those wicked forests. Poor boy, he was totally crushed because of it. Right now, he is on his way to Mark's Chambers. He wants to personally deliver a message about Jacob's death to his parents."

"Dular, Orner won't deliver the message. He shot himself this morning," said Leonard. "Shot himself," repeated Dular. "That's precisely what I am